

# Poetic Licence

## **Self Centricity and Out of Body Experience** in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry

By Ali Darwish

In a television interview in 1997, Palestinian poet laureate Mahmoud Darwish had a wish to become a jackass! Pointing to an old haggard donkey standing on a hill in the distance in the occupied territories in Ramallah, Darwish, odd as it might sound, explained why he wanted to be a jackass. It stands oblivious of everything around it; time, space and events.

“The best spectator is the jackass” confirms controversial Mahmoud. “A peaceful, wise animal that pretends to be stupid. Yet he is patient, and smarter than we are in the cool and calm manner he watches on as history unfolds. He looks on as armies change, flags change, and even the crests on these flags change. Look how cute he is; watching on sarcastically...I wish I were a jackass!”

Such out of body experience is not unusual in patients with a mental illness such as psychosis, where reality and fantasy are confused. Yet for the main part of his poetic experience, Mahmoud Darwish is self-centred—like the jackass he describes, he is self-contained, and like the jackass he admires, he looks on sarcastically, cynically, oftentimes angrily and sometimes with hurt, pain and disdain.

In such self-centricity, the poet is always the centre of his poetic experience. It is almost always that he is doing something or something is being done to him. In *My Mother*, the poet chants:

I yearn for my mother's bread;  
My mother's coffee;  
And my mother's touch!  
The child in me one day grows up one early morning.  
And I love my life too much  
Because I would be shy of my mother's tears should I die!

Take me, mother, if I should ever come back one day;  
And make me into a scarf for your eyelashes!  
Cover my bones with grass baptised by your pure heels!  
And fasten my shroud with a lock from your hair;  
A thread of lint hanging from the tail of your dress!  
So perhaps I might become a god—  
A god, if I touched the cockles of your heart.

Place me as wood in the fire of your bread baking oven  
Should I ever return!  
And turn me into a clothesline on the rooftop of your house!  
Because I have forgotten how to stand up on my own without your daily prayers!  
I have aged; so bring me back the stars of my childhood,  
So I could join the baby birds on the way to your waiting nest.

Characteristically, in this poem, which has become a popular song in the Arab world, and in which Darwish impersonates the Palestinian martyr fighter, or perhaps the exiled Palestinian refugee, the first thing he yearns for is his mother's bread, her coffee and last her touch, thus satisfying his physical needs; filling his stomach, getting his dose of caffeine, and then finally seeking physical comfort. Here we see a picture of a male-dominant, macho culture that confines women to house chores, baking bread and making good coffee, and providing on-demand physical comfort—a daily pattern and sequence that repeats itself. Any other poet outside this kind of indoctrination would have said it in this order:

I yearn for my mother,  
My mother's touch,  
My mother's bread,  
And my mother's coffee.

and would have probably added, my mother's scent, my mother's hug etc. Instead, the poet hankers after the tangible and postpones the intimate relationship. In his confused childhood, the poet drinks coffee and suddenly grows up one early morning. And just when he is about to connect with his mother on the emotional level, he graces her with a scarf made of *him* to protect her eyelashes and so on. One might argue however that the original order was chosen for its climactic effect. But this view cannot be sustained here as there is no real dramatic transition from the bread to the coffee to the touch. At such an early age it seems, the poet, like many children of his environment, sees his mother as a quasi one-dimensional character in this order: bread maker, coffee maker, and comforter, and as he grows up, he transfers the model unto his other relationships with the opposite sex. "Where is my lunch, and my coffee, wife?" (not even sweetheart, darling or love, as these are seen as taboo words that can only be found in love poems and satellite television movies). Yet it is this kind of subliminal rehash of the same indoctrinatory paradigm that seems to strike a chord with most readers of his poetry.

The *I* and centrality of the self takes centre stage here and in other works. Other people, objects and events are exploited to further enhance the poet's own experience of himself outside his own self. In *It's me, Dad! It's Joseph*, the poet reincarnates the Prophet Joseph to tell his story and ask innocent and perhaps naïve questions:

It's me, Dad! It's Joseph!  
My brothers do not like me!  
They do not want me among them, Dad!  
They attack me and hurl stones and words at me!  
They want me to die so they could praise me!  
They locked me out of your house,  
And chased me away from the field!  
They poisoned my grapes,  
And broke my toys, Dad!  
When the breeze whiffed and touched my hair,  
They became jealous and outraged, revolting against you and me!  
What have I done to them, Dad?  
The butterflies landed on my shoulder,  
The wheatears leaned over me!  
And the birds landed on my palm.  
So, what have I done to them, Dad!  
And why me, why?

You named me Joseph,  
And they threw me into the well and accused the wolf!  
The wolf is more merciful than my brothers!  
Dad! Did I cause someone harm when I said I saw eleven planets, the sun and the moon all bowing to me?

In this recount of the Biblical and Koranic story of Joseph and his brothers, Darwish is the baby brother and favourite son Joseph, taking a swipe at his brothers, and drawing parallels with the Palestinians and the rest of the Arabs. Palestine, the Jewel in the crown, and the Palestinians, the favourite people in the Arab land, the chosen people to suffer and endure, have been betrayed by the other Arabs, and like Joseph, were left to die.

In *Roses and the Dictionary*, a title probably inspired by Guns and Roses, Darwish once again takes the spotlight:

Let it be,  
I have to,  
A poet must have a new toast!  
And new songs!  
I carry the key to the legends and the vestiges of slaves.  
As I pass through the gallery of oblivion, the peppers and the old summer!  
I see history as an old man  
Playing backgammon and sucking on the stars!

Let it be,  
I have to refuse death  
Even if my legends will die!  
In the debris I look for the light and for new poems!  
O! Have you ever realized, my love, that the letter in the dictionary is dull?  
How can all of these words survive?  
How do they grow up and evolve?  
We are still feeding them with tears of memories, metaphor and sugar!

Let it be,  
I must refuse the roses that come from a dictionary or a book of poems,  
Roses grow on the forearm of a farmer and in the fist of a worker!  
Roses grow in the wound of a fighter  
And on the face of a rock!

The *me, me, me* is always self-absorbing, untiringly self-adoring, always willing to receive, and in receiving giving generously. Here he is again, in *Rita and the Rifle*.

Between Rita and my eyes there is a rifle!  
And those who know Rita bow and pray  
To a god in her honey eyes;  
I kissed Rita when she was young  
And still remember how she clung  
To me, and how the most beautiful braid of hair covered my forearm<sup>1</sup>,  
I still remember Rita  
The way a sweet bird remembers its brook!

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<sup>1</sup> Most translations of this verse fail to parse the Arabic sentence correctly and render it as "my arm covered the most beautiful braid of hair", perhaps in keeping with the undercurrent theme of giving while receiving.

O Rita!  
Between us are a million birds, a photo and many dates;<sup>2</sup>  
Shot with a rifle!

Rita's name was honey in my mouth!  
Rita's body was sweet joy in my blood!  
And I was lost in Rita for two years;  
And for two years she slept in my arms!  
We made vows over the prettiest toasting glass  
and got burned in the wine of the lips — we were reborn twice.

Oh Rita!  
Nothing did take my eyes off your eyes except two winks  
And honey clouds!  
Before this rifle there was what there was  
Once upon a time in the silence of the evening!  
My sweetheart moon migrated far away in the morn  
In honey eyes,  
And the city swept away all the singers and Rita!  
Between Rita and my eyes there is a rifle!

In *A Stranger in a Faraway City*, Mahmoud Darwish goes back to his childhood. Here he talks to a female companion about himself, his eternal youth and beauty and virility.

When I was young  
And beautiful,  
The rose was my house [boat],  
And the springs were my seas!  
[Now] the rose has turned into a wound  
And the springs into thirst,  
Have you changed a lot as I have?  
When we return to our home as wind  
Stare in my face.  
You will find the roses are palm trees  
And the springs are sweat,  
And you will find me as I once was:  
Young and beautiful!

What is unusual about Darwish's poems is the poet's voice. It is always a male voice. Mahmoud seems to be unable to separate himself from his subject matter, his ego from the cause he is fighting for—inseparable, indistinguishable, merging and blending in the colours and hues and coalescing in spilt blood that turns into manna dew, "because the blood smears the purity of imagined modernity", as he once put it.

The poetic experience is one of engaging oneself in the subject matter of the poem, to become one with things, people, words, symbols, imagery and metaphor and the cause for which the poet is absolving himself of the sins and follies of others, and to become one with the poem, to be invisible: there but not seen, felt but not touched, present but unperceivable, intense but imperceptible. Yet for Mahmoud Darwish, visibility of the self is one constant, consistent feature of his poems—always looking in the mirror, grooming and combing—adjusting one's appearance and indulging in one's own prowess and elegance. However, despite this eternal euphoric self-love,

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<sup>2</sup> Here again, in most translations "a photo" is erroneously rendered as "a million pictures".

Darwish declares: "The hardest thing for one is to visit oneself". Nonetheless, for the most part of his poetic journey, Darwish has never left himself. For many people who are forced to leave their homeland, their point of reference remains anchored in their homeland, while physically living in exile, and for displaced people, living in the twilight zone, neither here nor there, the point of reference becomes oneself. In this bipolarity of existence, wishing to be a jackass reconciles the dissonance of exile.

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