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THE AROMA OF THE LAND. MAḤMŪD DARWĪSH'S GEOPOETICS OF COFFEE

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*They used to smell the herbs in the walls that commenced their spring
and their wounds, the herbs that brought them back from every exile.
The honeycomb sting resembles a snakebite, and the basil scent
is the coffee of exile... a walkway for emotions in their homes...*¹

Maḥmūd Darwīsh (1941-2008), the most celebrated Arab poet of our times, had a special relationship with coffee, as he has never ceased to celebrate his gusto - or better to say - his obsession for it in his writings as well as in public speeches and interviews.² The importance of coffee in his lifetime is clearly reflected in his wide literary work. Yet, while being a remarkably recurring element within his entire literary output, coffee is yet to be seen as a textual sign worthy of scholarly study. Different scholars have mostly regarded it as an important element of Arab tradition and a deeply rooted habit in the Palestinian culinary culture as well as in the poet's everyday life; nevertheless, they have not provided further critical assessment of this phenomenon.

Symbols attached to agricultural or natural environment, land products, such as olive trees, almonds, thyme, citrus fruits, pomegranates, prickly pear cactus and others, are widely present in the Palestinian cultural and artistic field. Many of these have been extensively examined as stable landmarks in the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of narratives and discourses, as well as "acts of memory" in the political mapping of a contested area.³ In Darwīsh's work we can notice an extensive

1 M. DARWISH, "The Tragedy of Narcissus, the Comedy of Silver", in M. Darwish, *If I Were Another*, transl. Fady Joudah, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009, pp. 23-41, here p. 36.

2 In this regard, see the interview released by his driver Nihād al-Ḥājj Muḥammad here: Dūnyā al-Waṭan, *Nihād al-Ḥājj Muḥammad sā'iq Maḥmūd Darwīsh li-itḥnatay 'asharat sana yakshif kbafāyā fi ḥayāt al-shā'ir al-rāḥil*, 09.08.2010, available on: <http://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2010/08/09/152629.html> (last accessed on 01/05/2016).

3 For further insight see C. BARDENSTEIN, "Trees, Forests and the Shaping of Palestinian and Israeli Collective Memory", in M. Bal - J.V. Crewe - L. Spitzer (eds.), *Acts of Memory. Cultural Recall in the Present*, Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999, pp. 148-71; C. BARDENSTEIN, "Threads of Memory and Discourses of Rootedness. Of Trees, Oranges and the Prickly-Pear Cactus in Israel/Palestine", *Edebiyat* 8 (1998), pp. 1-36.

recurrence of these references. These can be interpreted as 'geo-factors' signaling longing for the Palestinian natural environment prior to the 1948 Nakba, its agricultural setting, and the consequent need for affirming an indigenous Palestinian presence. In most cases, land products are employed, romantically, to testify the mystical identification of the poet with earth and its elements. This clearly appears in the noteworthy *Qaṣīdat al-ard* (Poem of the Land): *Usammī al-turāb imtidādan li-rūḥī* ('I call the soil an extension of my soul').⁴

Darwīsh's poetic land is both the Palestine homeland – a geopolitical and symbolic space within which most of these tropes come to be inscribed and analyzed as references endowed with a peculiar semiotic range – and an imagined literary space, encompassing elements, symbols, myths, references which shape his poetic texts and illuminate his aesthetics. But, there is also a deeper strata, if we look at the poetic land in its more physical and concrete dimension: as a tangible surface, the soil that human beings used to tread, walk upon, feel, belong to. In this latter perspective, such geo-factors become part of the intimate landscape of the poet. This is the reason why I prefer, in this article, not to use the widely accepted definition of 'poetics of homeland'. I consider such definition as a restrictive label for the multilayered and manifold spatial dimensions permeating his writing experience.

Coffee is a pervasive trope in Maḥmūd Darwīsh's work and emerges as a constellated image in his charged poetic landscape. By looking at this symbol as a spatial and identity marker, this article aims to record its hermeneutical movement from a mere daily personal habit to a cultural sign that opens up to the claims of memory and attachment to the place. As a constitutive aspect of a well-grounded poetics of the land, central to Darwīsh's *weltanschauung*, coffee will be explored in its multiple trajectories within the selected parts of the poet's oeuvre. The texts under analysis are poems of different periods and collections, except the poetic prose of his masterpiece *Dhākira li-l-nisyān* (Memory for the Forgetfulness, 1985) where his praise for coffee peaks in terms of lyrical expression and vision.

☛ *Methodological Premises*

Poetics/Geo/Coffee: Cultural Trajectories and Interaction Patterns

Methodologically, in order to critically evaluate the sources used that might suit the theoretical assumptions of a spatial perspective, firstly, it is necessary to explain the choice of the approach in use and the definition of "geopoetics of coffee". In order to clarify this point, we need to start from the notion of poetics itself as related to the prefix 'geo-'.

4 M. DARWĪSH, "Qaṣīdat al-ard", in M. Darwīsh, *Dīwān Maḥmūd Darwīsh*, Bayrūt: Dār al-'Awda, XIV ed., 1994, p. 636.

The poetics, in contemporary language of literary criticism, defines the nature and laws which regulate the literary work of an author, in the modalities of their own artistic production and for the effects it produces on its readers. Poetics presupposes a relationship between poetry and thought that leads to an interaction between the self and the other, as Adūnis pointed out.⁵ The prefix ‘geo’ suggests the geographical implication of the experience of negotiation in poetic production. Geopoetics, as an interdisciplinary approach put forward by the Scottish poet Kenneth White, concentrates on the intermingling of the biosphere, poetry, and poetics, in the process questioning the very presence of men on earth.⁶ Hence, while the central preoccupation in White’s geopoetics is the earth’s biosphere,⁷ here geopoetics is understood in a much broader and flexible perspective: we see it in relation to Darwīsh’s “portion of earth”, that is the Palestinian land, taking into account the poignantly evident political implications of this assumption. This is because it would not be correct not to interpret the nexus between geography and history in Darwīsh’s poetry, as a significant part of a more articulated discourse on land, and in light of his highly relevant intellectual contribution to the Palestinian collective experience of loss and dispossession.

Once we set – albeit synthetically – these theoretical premises, we ought to frame as consistently as possible the symbol of coffee in Darwīsh’s texts, on the basis of the selected examples. From a geopoetic perspective, we will try to read

5 ADŪNĪS, *Siyāsāt al-shi‘r. Dirāsāt fi-l shi‘riyya al-‘arabiyya al-mu‘āšira*, II ed., Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb, 1996, p. 5.

6 In the inaugural text for the International Institute of Geopoetics, White recalls the origins of geopoetics as a new critical approach: “If, around 1978, I began to talk of ‘geopoetics’, it was for two reasons. On the one hand, it was becoming more and more obvious that the earth (the biosphere) was in danger and that ways, both deep and efficient, would have to be worked out in order to protect it. On the other hand, I had always been of the persuasion that the richest poetics came from contact with the earth, from a plunge into biospheric space, from an attempt to read the lines of the world”. See <http://www.geopoetics.org.uk/welcome/what-is-geopoetics> (last accessed on 01/06/2016).

7 Several ‘spatial turn’ scholars have questioned the scientific validity of White’s critical proposal. B. Westphal argues that “frequently, geopoetics offers a hodgepodge of ideas, without the systematic theoretical framework it might have aspired to provide”. See B. WESTPHAL, “Foreword” in R. Tally (ed.), *Geocritical Explorations. Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. XI. According to the Italian scholar Federico Italiano, “White professes Geopoetics with the tunes and emphasis of a manifesto, vividly expressing his wish for an ecological, an Earth-oriented literature”. See F. ITALIANO, “Defining Geopoetics”, *Trans* 6 (2008), also available online <https://trans.revues.org/299> (last accessed on 12/27/2015).

the symbol of coffee as a botanical reference within the “geo-eco poetic system”,⁸ loaded with significance according to the context and in relation to the other elements in the text. Our task is, nevertheless, to account for the interdependent network of relationships between the different layers of the text, without neglecting the infra-textual, stylistic, and semantic interrelationships.

A further important remark is required on the linguistic and cultural aspects. Coffee, along with tea, is the main hot beverage in Arab culinary tradition and culture, and coffee drinking is still one of the favorite daily habits in many Arab countries. The long voyage of coffee began in Ethiopia in the 14th century, from there it spread rapidly to Yemen. By the early 17th century, the best coffee bean, still known as Arabica, was already being traded from the Yemeni port of Mocha by the Dutch, French and English.⁹ The Arabic term *qabwā*, of uncertain origin, initially in the ancient poetry designated wine. Afterwards, this meaning extended to Yemen where coffee was consumed in Sufi circles since it helped in the mystical prayers.¹⁰ It is interesting to note that in Ethiopia, coffee is called *buna* (from the term *būn*); the term designates both the tree and the beverage. From here derives the Arabic term *bunn*, (which represents the plant and the fruit), while the beverage is called *qabwā* in all Arab Countries. In Darwīsh's texts we detect the presence of both the words according to semantic, phonological, and prosodic nuances the poet aspires to provide: we have *qabwā*, but also *bunn*. This is an important distinction we need to consider in our analysis. In the Palestinian area we can distinguish between two different types of coffee: the *gabwā sāda* (plain coffee), consumed in Bedouin contexts and characterized by its strong bitter taste; and the more common *qabwā 'arabiyya* (Arabic coffee), distinguished for its usage of cardamom and the meticulous and sophisticated method of its preparation.¹¹ In this regard, different narrative passages of *Memory for the Forgetfulness* are devoted to the detailed exposition of the coffee preparation method by the poet.

In addition, the place where coffee is consumed appears as a relevant reference in Darwīsh's work. The *maqḥā* (coffeehouse) embodies a site of encounter and human exchange: where actions and events occur in public, outside institutional and

8 F. ITALIANO, *Tra miele e pietra. Aspetti di geopoetica tra Montale e Celan*, Milano: Mimesis, 2009, p. 55.

9 Yemen is one of the countries with the longest history in the world in terms of commercialization and consumption of coffee beans. For a more comprehensive history of coffee see: F.L. WELLMAN, *Coffee: Botany, Cultivation and Utilization*, London: L. Hill, 1961; M.N. CLIFFORD – K.C. WILLSON (eds.), *Coffee: Botany, Biochemistry and Production of Beans and Beverage*, London and Sidney: Croom Helms, 1985.

10 K.N. CHAUDHURI – C. VAN ARENDONK, “Kahwa”, in *L'Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, K, IV, 1978, Leiden: Brill, p. 469.

11 A. SHIHAB, *A Taste of Palestine: Menus and Memories*, foreword by Y. Yehoshua, introd. by N. Shihab Nye, San Antonio: Corona Publishing Co., 1993, pp. 5-6.

religious control, where political debates and social trends take place. It can be considered as a polyvalent symbol in his poems, a site of privileged outlook on the surrounding society, as well as a place of serene meditation and rest.

But, above all, it is the place where the poet awaits his beloved, who may come or may not.¹² Such a peculiar vision is vividly expressed in one of his last poems, *Ka-maqbā ṣaghīr huwa al-ḥubb*¹³ (Like a small café, That's love), in which Darwīsh compares love to a cozy *maqbā*, an intimate cradle of the most powerful human hospitality: "Like a small café on the street of strangers – that's love....its doors open to all".¹⁴

☛ *The Selected Texts: Reading Coffee "Geopoetically". The Aroma of the Land.*

It is worth reiterating that reading coffee geopoetically does not amount to neglecting its linkage with the poet's daily life, taste, social habit, and experience, and hence, of his poetry. Darwīsh's obsession for coffee and cafés testifies to its high presence in his writings.¹⁵ Attention to little things and details in everyday life and activities pervades his poetry. Coffee, as well as many other elements and traces of the quotidian, are matters of poetic creativity.

In his initial collections, we can notice how the trope of coffee is commonly used as one of the several elements that dot the domestic landscape. We usually find it within descriptions of domestic habits or family environment. Moreover, Darwīsh's earlier works fall within the *Adab al-muqāwama* (resistance literature) movement, a militant trend which started to flourish at the turn of the 50s and 60s and spread across the whole Arab world. Poetry played an active role in support of the Palestinian political struggle against Israeli occupation; most of Darwīsh's earlier poems rely on images, metaphors and symbols that seek to revitalize the hopes and dreams of his people and assert their cultural identity and collective memory.

The popular poem *Ilā Ummī* (To My Mother), a delicate homage to the mother figure, so much celebrated in the Arabic poetry and particularly recurrent in the Palestinian one, displays the specific use of this textual element as an integral part of a geopoetics of memory. The poem opens with one of the most

12 H. KHADIR, "Maḥmūd. Ṣūra ulā li-sayyid al-kalām", *Al-Karmil* 90 (2009), pp. 196-227, here p. 215.

13 M. DARWĪSH, *Ka-zabr al-lawz aw ab'ad*, Bayrūt: Riyāḍ al-Rayyis li-l-Kutub wa-l-Nashr, 2005, pp. 75-76.

14 M. DARWĪSH, *Almond Blossoms and Beyond*, transl. by M. Shaheen, Northampton: Interlink Books, 2009, p. 32.

15 It is not a goal of this article to provide statistical data analysis on the frequency of occurrence of this word in Darwīsh's work.

popular and beloved verses in the Arab world: "I yearn for my mother's bread / my mother's coffee / my mother's touch".¹⁶

أُحِنُّ إِلَى خَبِزِ أُمِّي
 وَفَهْوَةِ أُمِّي
 وَلَمْسَةِ أُمِّي ..
 وَتَكْبِيرِ فِيِّ الطَّفُولَةِ
 يَوْمًا عَلَى صَدْرِ يَوْمٍ
 وَأَعَشَقْتُ عَمْرِي لِأَنِّي
 إِذَا مُتُّ
 أُحْجَلُ مِنْ دَمْعِ أُمِّي !
 خَذِينِي إِذَا عَدْتُ يَوْمًا
 وَشَاحًا لِهُدْبِكَ
 وَعَظْمِي عِظَامِي بِعَشْبٍ
 تَعَمَّدُ مِنْ طَهْرِ كَعْبِكَ
 وَشُدِّي وَثَاقِي ..
 بِخَصْلَةِ شَعْرٍ ..
 بِخَبِطِ يَلْوَحُ فِي ذَيْلِ ثَوْبِكَ ..
 عَسَانِي أَصِيرُ إِلَهًا
 إِلَهًا أَصِيرُ ..
 إِذَا مَا لَمَسْتُ قَرَارَةَ قَلْبِكَ !
 ضَعِينِي , إِذَا مَا رَجَعْتُ
 وَقَوْدًا بَتَنُورِ نَارِكَ ..
 وَحَبْلِ غَسِيلِ عَلَى سَطْحِ دَارِكَ
 لِأَنِّي فَقَدْتُ الْوَقُوفَ
 بِدُونِ صَلَاةِ نَهَارِكَ
 هَرَمْتُ فَرْدِي نَجُومِ الطَّفُولَةِ
 حَتَّى أَشَارَكَ صِغَارَ الْعَصَافِيرِ

16 The poem, put to music by Lebanese composer Marsil Khalifa, has become a very popular song among the Palestinians and in the Arab World.

درب الرجوع .. لعش انتظارك!!¹⁷

I yearn for my mother's bread / My mother's coffee / My mother's touch / Childhood is growing inside me / Day after day / And I love my life / Because If I died / I'd feel ashamed of my mother's tears. / Take me, if one day I come back, / As a veil for your eyelashes / And cover my bones with the grass / Blessed by the purity of your footsteps / Fasten my bonds / With a lock of your hair / With a thread that trails from the back of your dress. / Maybe I'd become a god. / A god I'd become / If I touched the depths of your heart! / Put me, if I come back, / As fuel to feed your fire, / As the clothesline on the roof of your house / For I cannot stand / Without your daily prayer. / I am old, give me back the stars of childhood / So that I may share / With the young birds / The path of return / To your waiting nest! (Translation is mine).

To My Mother is included in his third recollection *'Ashbiq min Filasṭīn* (A Lover from Palestine), published in 1966, one year before the Six Day defeat. This latter can be considered as a very declaration of self-identification with his homeland, an assertion of physical and spiritual belonging to his land and people, to its landscape and fruits, *ṭa'am al-arḍ wa-l-waṭan*, the 'taste of the land and the homeland'.¹⁸ Beginning from those years, this lyrical pattern, articulated in different forms and styles, will constitute the aesthetic mainstay of the poet's epos that will win him recognition as the most representative national poet. *To My Mother* reflects the youth experience of the poet, his uprooting from his native land, the exile and the 'clandestine' return to Israel where he was jailed several times. The poem opens an intimate glimpse on the poet's relationship with his mother. This can be viewed in the context of the sudden change in their lives, following the 1948 Nakba. On several occasions he had mentioned the complex relationship with his mother and the lack of affection he suffered as a child.¹⁹ In this poem he recalls the mother figure who takes care of him bringing fruit, bread, and coffee during one of his detentions.²⁰ That poetic image of love and reunification between mother and son soon came to symbolize the nostalgic paradigm of any Palestinian under detention, or separated from his loved ones. Thus, the sublimation of life under siege has been tied to the mother figure and

17 M. DARWĪSH, *Ilā Ummī*, in Darwīsh, *Dīwān*, pp. 93-94.

18 'A.R. YĀGHĪ, *Dirāsāt fī shi'r al-arḍ al-muḥtalla*, al-Qāhira: Ma'had al-Buḥūth wa-l-Dirāsāt al-'Arabiyya, 1969, p. 192.

19 For further reading see K. JIHĀD, "Uzlat al-shāhid. Maḥmūd Darwīsh fī majmū'ātihi al-shi'riyya al-ūlā wa-qaṣā'idihī al-akhīra", *al-Karmīl* 90 (2009), pp. 75-103, here p. 90.

20 A more detailed account of his relationship with his mother is available in the interview released to the Lebanese poet 'Abbās Bayḍūn, included in the volume M. DARWĪSH, *La Palestine comme métaphore*, Paris: Sindbad Actes Sud, 1997, p. 11.

is recalled through images and details drawn from ordinary life. The frame of nostalgia (*banīn*) for home and childhood is a memory topic which recurs in his poetic writings. Here, the pursuit of the smell of his mother's coffee, as a palliative for his pain, is a form of resistance which leads to his attempts to recover through memory the intimate family space marked by figural stabilizing elements. The house image as intimate "corner of the world"²¹ enables the poet to rehabilitate through childhood memory his ties with an idealized past, charged with salvific meaning. Past memory represents a form of struggle for survival in the long darkness of his imprisonment. The symbol of coffee in the first stanza is a central reference within the eco-geopoetic system, reactivating the bright memory of that intimate lost space.

If we analyze the structure of the first stanza in the original text, we notice the wise use of rhyme repetition, in particular the pervasive presence of the first person singular possessive pronoun. The movement of the lyrical self always depends on the agency of the third person, his mother, which appears four times in the position of *mudāf ilaybi*, 'possessor'. It seems clear that the construct *ummī* in the poem appears as loaded with an enhanced sense of possession, both for syntactical (the grammar function of the expression), and semantic reasons (her status of mother), nonetheless her poetic role of possessor of signs/objects belonging to the affective microcosm of the poet: coffee, bread, caresses and tears. In the framework of this well outlined semiotic apparatus, we can note how the first two elements are material references linked to the sphere of food or domestic life in order to reconnect to the lost childhood; the following two are signs of intimate recollections linked to the corporal sphere. Caresses indicate the mother's taking care, tears are sign of sorrow as it appears from the use of hypothetical period in which fear of a possible loss is expressed ("If I died / I'd feel ashamed of my mother's tears!"). In conclusion, coffee and bread are signs which reactivate a lively memory articulated around three pivotal components of his poetry: spatial (home); affective (mother); temporal (childhood). These are poetic images which nourish his hope to reconnect to his mother and to an idyllic past. Also stylistically, we can appreciate his effort to 'recover' the beloved mother by means of change in the textual structure, starting from the second stanza, characterized by the irruption of a lively dialogue form (note the recurrent use of the second person singular possessive pronoun) in place of the nostalgic meditative mode. The poet, in this regard, draws the corporal space for the so longed embrace, by representing the perfect symbiosis between bodily and natural elements, as well as the elements of earth and fire: "Take me as a veil for your

21 This expression has been used by Gaston Bachelard in his seminal essay on the poetics of space. See G. BACHELARD, *The Poetics of Space. The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, foreword by J. Stilgoe, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 (I ed. 1964), p. 4.

eyelashes”; “Cover my bones with the grass blessed by the purity of your footsteps”; “Fasten my bonds with a lock of your hair”. By the verse “Put me, if I come back, as fuel to feed your fire”, the interdependence relationship between materials and images linked to the dichotomy earth/fire is fully attained: the poet asks his mother to be ‘employed’ as a fuel to feed the same fire used for cooking bread, coffee, and in heating the house.

The topical feeling of longing or nostalgia, through the filter of memory and the vast array of symbols, recurs repeatedly in Darwīsh’s poetry. In the following excerpt drawn from the poem *Arba’at ‘anāwīn shakhṣiyya – Mitr murabba’ fi-l sijn* (Four Personal Addresses - One Square Meter of Prison), included in the collection *Hiya ughniya, hiya ughniya* (It is a song, it is a song, 1986), he deploys the symbol of the coffee aroma in order to reconstruct the lost childhood scenery, plainly located in the space of the native village and the peasants’ life environment. From his prison cell he dreams to reunite with his mother and his beloved. He writes: “My freedom is not to be as they want me to be, but to enlarge my prison cell, and carry on my song of the door”. He dreams of freedom and requires reassuring images. Therefore, he employs the powerful symbol of the door, a metaphor of transit, of possibility of life:

أُحِبُّ فُتَاتَ السَّمَاءِ الَّتِي تَتَسَلَّلُ مِنْ كُوَّةِ السَّجْنِ مَتْرًا مِنَ الضَّوِّءِ تَسْبَحُ فِيهِ الْخَيُْولُ،
وَأَشْيَاءَ أُمِّي الصَّغِيرَةِ ..
رَائِحَةَ البُنِّ فِي ثَوْبِهَا حِينَ تَفْتَحُ بَابَ النَّهَارِ لِسَرْبِ الدَّجَاجِ .²²

I love the particles of sky that slip through the skylight—a meter of light where horses swim. / And I love my mother’s little things,²³ / The aroma of coffee in her dress when she opens the door of day to her flocks of hens.

The writer confirms the spatio-temporal significance of the symbol of coffee in an interview released after his return to Palestine in 1995 where he had the chance to visit his mother after a long time:

J’ai pris le café avec ma mère, dans sa chambre, mais je ne sais plus qui l’a préparé, moi, elle, ou l’une de ses belles petites-filles. Et cette foi le parfum du café ne m’a pas

22 M. DARWĪSH, “Arba’at ‘anāwīn shakhṣiyya – Mitr murabba’ fi-l-sijn”, in Darwīsh, *Hiya ughniya, hiya ughniya*, Bayrūt: Dār al-Kalima li-l-Nashr, 1986, p. 37.

23 M. DARWĪSH, “Four Personal Addresses” in M. Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, transl. and edit. by M. Akash and C. Forché, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 2003, p. 179.

emporté comme à l'accoutumée vers des lieux lointains. Il m'a porté vers un autre temps, quand j'étais là-bas, ici.²⁴

In his attempt to remap the family's memory space and recall his homeland he frequently relies on the aroma of coffee. In the poem *Qarawiyyūn, min ḡbayr sū'* (The Kindhearted Villagers) included in the collection *Limādhā tarakta al-ḥiṣān waḥīdan* (Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone, 1995), Darwīsh goes back to the trauma of the Nakba, delivering his meditations evoked by the exodus experienced with his family:

لم أكن بعد أعرف عادات أمي، ولا أهلها
عندما جاءت الشاحنات من البحر. لكنني
كنت أعرف رائحة التبغ حول عباءة جدي
ورائحة القهوة الأبدية، منذ ولدت
كما يولد الحيوان الأليف هنا
دفعَةً واحدة! ²⁵

I did not yet know my mother's way of life, nor her family's, / When the ships came in from the sea. / I knew the scent of tobacco in my grandfather's *aba*, / And ever since I was born here, all at once, like a domestic animal, / I knew the eternal smell of coffee.²⁶

As explored elsewhere, in this collection the Nakba memory is the core of his poetic research. History and memory, space and identity, permanence and exile, and the pervasive dichotomy between absence and presence are the thematic axes around which the work is structured.²⁷ The aroma of the land is here denoted by the penetrating scent of tobacco in his grandfather's traditional garment as well as by the 'eternal' smell of coffee. Both the elements here are mnemonic markers which reactivate the trauma of the exodus and map the affective experience. They prove to be stabilizing geo-factors 'at the origin of human knowledge'. Here Darwīsh uses the prose poem to convey a crystallized image of the founding trauma that must be told - just like family stories are told - and handed down to the future generations. Coffee takes on the symbolic

24 DARWICH, *La Palestine*, p. 174.

25 M. DARWĪSH, *Limādhā tarakta al-ḥiṣān waḥīdan*, Bayrut: Riyāḍ al-Rayyis li-l-Kutub wa-l-Nashr, III ed., 2001 (I ed. 1995), p. 24.

26 DARWISH, *Unfortunately*, p. 61.

27 Some of these issues have also been addressed in S. SIBILIO, *Nakba. La memoria letteraria della catastrofe palestinese*, Roma: Edizioni Q, II ed., 2015, pp. 145-151.

value of being the primary essence of life, a trace of origin and knowledge which resists the threat of oblivion.

Darwīsh had already employed the trope of coffee with a poetic intention which would leave room for a spatial reading in the controversial poem *Jundī yaḥlum bi-l-zanābiq al-bayḍā'* included in *Ākhir al-layl* (The End of the Night, 1967), and centered on the evocative encounter with an Israeli soldier, who decided to leave the country after returning home from the front. Written in the aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War, the poem was inspired by a true story. Darwīsh had known the soldier at the Israeli Communist party. He draws on that human experience to critically probe the deep convictions of those who fight for the ideal of a homeland that they neither feel for nor adhere to.

Looking at the poem from our critical perspective, it is useful to observe how Darwīsh recalls the image of the mother's coffee, yet places it in a blatantly sharp contrast to the one previously examined in *To My Mother*. The symbol of coffee maintains his energy as vector of discourse on identity and memory, nevertheless, extending to the Other's semiotic and cultural perspective. This time, Darwīsh's look meets the gaze, the experience and the sensitive world of the Other. In the beginning of the poem we read:

يحلُّمُ بالزنايق البيضاءً
 ..بغصن زيتونٍ
 بصدرها المورق في المساء
 يحلُّمُ ، قال لي ، بطائر
 بزهر ليمون
 و لم يفلسف حلمه لم يفهم الأشياء
 إلا كما يحسّها .. يشمّها
 يفهم ، قال لي ، إنَّ الوطنَ
 أن أحسِّي قهوة أُمِّي
 .. أن أعود في المساء
 سألتُه : و الأرض؟ قال : لا أعرفها
 و لا أحس أنها جلدي و نبضي
 مثلما يُقال في القصائد. (...)²⁸

28 M. DARWĪSH, "Jundī yaḥlum bi-l-zanābiq al-bayḍā'", in Darwīsh, *Dīwān*, p. 189.

He dreams of white lilies, / An olive branch, / With her breast in evening blossom. / He dreams of a bird - he told me - / Of lemon flowers. / He does not intellectualize about his dream. / He understands things as he senses and smells them. / Homeland for him, he told me, / Is 'to drink my mother's coffee, to return at nightfall'. / And the Land? I asked him. / I don't know the land, he answered. / I don't feel it in my flesh, in my pulse, as they used to chant in the poems.²⁹

These lines disclose a gap between the Zionist project of massive territorial expansion sustained by discourse practices grounded in the hyper-saturated concept of an exclusive Jewish homeland and the intimate and sensible Israeli soldier's claim. The soldier, represented as a pawn at the mercy of power and ideology, seeks his homeland inside the comforting portrait of his mother's coffee. Darwish questions the feeling of true attachment to land, "the sentiment of absence of roots"³⁰ in the young Israeli society in the aftermath of 1967 war in opposition to the Zionist propaganda discourse of Jewish rootedness in the promised land.³¹

The core refrain "Homeland for him - he told me - is 'to drink my mother's coffee, to return at nightfall'" will be repeated at the end as a statement of highly rhetorical effect. It denies the national discourse founded on identity, forasmuch as the aroma of his mother's coffee imposes the visionary idea of a human geography that leaves no room for national signposts nor flags. Yet, there is another significant element which sheds light on the intense intermingling of poetics, geography, and politics and displays how the disputation between the two

29 Translation is mine. An English version is also available here under the title *A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips* in DARWISH, *Unfortunately*, pp. 165-168.

30 DARWICH, *La Palestine*, p. 144.

31 The poet challenges the Zionist ideology which, since its inception, had relied on the argument that the European Jews, as direct descendants of the ancient Hebrews, had to cling to the land and strengthen their ancestral inherited ties to it. It is interesting, in this regard, to look at the gender-based reading offered by Joseph Massad and inspired by Paul Breines' definition of 'tough Jews'. Following Massad, the Israeli soldier who dreams of white lilies may represent the alter-ego of the 'Masada Jewish Man' model, constructed and promoted by Zionism: "As Breines has explained, 'statelessness, according to Zionism, is the cause of meekness, frailty, passivity, humiliation, pogroms, futile appeals to reason and dialogue - in short, Jewish weakness and gentleness'. These views characterizing European Jews as 'feminine' are derived from the then dominant anti-Semitic discourse that posited Jews as the racial/feminine other. The Masada Jewish man (in reference to the anti-Roman Jewish revolt at Masada in 73 AD) thus becomes the Israeli colonist-explorer in touch with the land/nature and is able to defend himself - an image that is ubiquitous in early Israeli films. The Masada Jewish man becomes, in fact, the model for the Mossad agent, the Israeli soldier, the very essence of the militarized and masculine Israeli Sabra, thus realizing Zionist plans of rendering post-diasporic Jews as settle-soldiers". See J.A. MASSAD, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Questions. Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 27.

sides extends to symbols and their negotiating energy. The soldier returns from the experience of a war he would rather not be engaged in. His longing for peace on a supposedly shared land is manifestly expressed through the use of some common 'Palestinian tropes', along with his unvarnished refusal of devastation and death. He dreams of all the constitutive elements of the natural landscape recurrently employed in the Palestinian poetry: he dreams of white lilies, an olive branch, a bird, and lemon flowers, but he does not "feel" the land in his body and pulse. Genuine identification of Palestinians with the land is the differential factor once again. Instead, the redeemed soldier feels and knows the Home-without-land, since the land is something he has been taught to love. For him, the very meaning of homeland is in sipping slowly his mother's coffee, and returning home safe and sound at night. It is in the sublimation of genuine and intimate things, in the little gestures of everyday life.³² Drinking coffee, in the words of the Israeli soldier, is a desire of normality, a 'quest for safety'. As the poet explains: "Son rapport au sol natal est une quête de sécurité, boire tranquillement son café le matin. C'est mon rêve palestinien d'aujourd'hui".³³

☛ *Memory for Forgetfulness. For a Geopoetics of Coffee.*

The trope of coffee, as seen before, has a 'high-frequency rate' in Darwish's poetry; however it is in the extended prose-poem, *Memory for Forgetfulness* that we can pinpoint a 'poetics of coffee', articulated on three peculiar and interrelated levels: geographical, identitarian, and existential. In this work we find 90 occurrences of the term *qahwā*, most of which are at the beginning of the text.

As an autobiographical work, *Memory for Forgetfulness* is a visionary memoir of his traumatic experience in an agonizing Beirut under Israeli bombardment, on 6 August 1982. Amid reflections and memories evoked in his stream of consciousness like narrative cadence, the writer devotes several passages to the vital importance of coffee, for him, as a medium of survival. The dream-like opening scene, built on a surrealistic dialogue on the meaning of survival under shelling, is abruptly interrupted by a shocking barrage of bombings which drives the author to a frenzied cogitation to the safest place in the house to seek shelter.

In the midst of military operations, Darwish describes how it feels living "on the eighth floor of a building that might tempt any sniper, to say nothing of a

32 S. BOUSTANI, "La poésie de Mahmoud Darwich et le quotidien sublimé" in S. Boustani et M. H. Avril-Hilal (dir.), *Poétique et politique: la poésie de Mahmoud Darwich*, Bordeaux : Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2010, p. 16.

33 DARWICH, *La Palestine*, p. 145.

fleet now transforming the sea into one of the fountainheads of hell".³⁴ While bombing intensifies, the poet expresses the compelling need to reach the kitchen and have his coffee. In the apartment, where he lived during that time, there was a glass separator between the bedroom and the kitchen. As the kitchen was exposed to firing by bombers and snipers, anytime he wanted to go there to make a cup of coffee he had to account for the risks to his life:³⁵

But how to reach the kitchen?

I want the aroma of coffee. I want nothing more than the aroma of coffee. And I want nothing more from the passing days than the aroma of coffee. The aroma of coffee so I can hold myself together, stand on my feet, and be transformed from something that crawls, into a human being. The aroma of coffee so I can stand my share of this dawn up on its feet. So that we can go together, this day and I, down into the street in search of another place.

How can I diffuse the aroma of coffee into my cells, while shells from the sea rain down on the sea-facing kitchen, spreading the stink of gunpowder and the taste of nothingness? I measure the period between two shells. One second. One second: shorter than the time between breathing in and breathing out, between two heartbeats. One second is not long enough for me to stand before the stove by the glass facade that overlooks the sea. One second is not long enough to open the water bottle or pour the water into the coffee pot. One second³⁶ is not long enough to light a match. But one second is long enough for me to burn.

This paranoiac scene helps to better frame the representation of the loss of temporality under war through the literary expedient of coffee, which seems to be the only spatio-temporal reference unit in his tremendous dismay. As a stimulant of the awakening and thought, it beats the time of the day, in his words, it is "the sister of time".³⁷ If, clinically speaking, excess of caffeine intake may cause, apart from anxiety and sleep disorders, a feeling of restlessness and excitement, psychological dependence on coffee, here represented, is to be seen as something more than a mere need for ordinariness as a reaction to the outward tragedy.

Incontestably, as the English translation editor Ibrahim Muhawi confirms, the act of making coffee under siege is paradigmatic of the heroic struggle for Life, as "the heroic consists in living every moment to the full. With shells exploding everywhere, the effort to maintain the primacy of the quotidian becomes a

34 M. DARWISH, *Memory for Forgetfulness. August, Beirut, 1982*, ed. by I. Muhawi, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995, p. 6.

35 A detailed account of that experience is available on Mahmoud Darwish Foundation website. See <http://www.darwishfoundation.org/eprintnews.php?id=23> (last accessed on 11/17/2015).

36 DARWISH, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, p. 6.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

challenge to the bombs”.³⁸ Therefore, the coffee aroma he has been seeking so insistently and for so long symbolizes life. His mad addiction to coffee ‘within the madness’ of a civil war is a clear metaphor of his addiction to life.

The topic of time suspension recurs once again; drinking coffee is suspension of the chaos and fighting, for five minutes:

I want the aroma of coffee. I need five minutes. I want a five-minute truce for the sake of coffee. I have no personal wish other than to make a cup of coffee. With this madness, I define my task and my aim. All my senses are on their mark, ready at the call to propel my thirst in the direction of the one and only goal: coffee. Coffee, for an addict like me, is the key to the day.³⁹

Then, once again, he reiterates the impelling need for coffee and reinforces its vital value, addressing the invaders with promising steadfastness. Coffee is here employed as an identity marker thanks to its aroma, which is depicted as the last shield or defense against the Other’s domination.

Conquerors can do anything. They can aim sea, sky, and earth at me, but they cannot root the aroma of coffee out of me. I shall make my coffee now. I will drink the coffee now. Right now, I will be satiated with the aroma of coffee, that I may at least distinguish myself from a sheep and live one more day, or die, with the aroma of coffee all around me.⁴⁰

Geopoetically, his relevant stance is confirmed by the use of the expression “root out” (in Arabic we find *iqṭala’*: to pluck out, uproot). The aroma of coffee cannot be, like the land, “rooted out of him”. The geographical evidence of this value is contained in the use of this polysemic verb which recalls, at a collective level of analysis, both the historical uprooting of the Palestinian people and the identity claim of being enrooted in the natural environment, without neglecting, at an individual level, the more basic reading according to which the coffee-plant has taken root inside the poet.

His meditation on the importance of coffee reaches its climax when the poet takes on it as a starting point for a research on the origins and the essence of life. He brings to fore once again the aroma of his mother’s coffee, overlapping that nostalgic memory with that of an imaginatively reconstructed land. At a visual level, the “spatialization” of the metaphor of coffee becomes a pivotal artistic device. His struggle for survival appeals to the active presence of all the five senses: on this sensory battlefield olfaction is predominant. The geography of his land is enlivened by the sense of smell. It is the scent of coffee that produces

38 I. MUHAWI, “Introduction”, in Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, p. XXV.

39 DARWISH, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, p. 7.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

meaning and purpose. The aroma is the driving force of his resistance, accomplished through the act of writing. For Darwīsh a hand cannot write if it doesn't know how to "be creative in making coffee".⁴¹

The sliding hermeneutical movement from a simple everyday habit to a geo-poetical trope achieves completion when he defines coffee as a "place", the symbol of a memory that breaks free from the concerns of the present and lightens the way to the first things:

The aroma of coffee is a return to and a bringing back of first things because it is the offspring of the primordial. It's a journey, begun thousands of years ago, that still goes on. Coffee is a place. Coffee is pores that let the inside seep through to the outside. A separation that unites what can't be united except through its aroma. Coffee is not for weaning. On the contrary, coffee is a breast that nourishes men deeply. A morning born of a bitter taste. The milk of manhood. Coffee is geography.⁴²

So, the symbol of coffee leads to a reiterated reflection on the issues of origins and geographical space. The smell of coffee, to Darwīsh, is a return to the origins, to the primordial, through an ancestral journey, repeated over time. "Coffee is geography" is an assertion that, at first sight, recalls the journey of the coffee from Africa to Arabian Peninsula, from the South to the North of the Mediterranean Sea before spreading worldwide; yet, on a metaphorical level, it recalls the Palestinian experience of displacement and uprooting. Therefore, it evokes the memory of the land and nourishes hope for return. Coffee is a place and a tree planted on the territory of memory and exile.

In the passage above, there are three key-elements in sharp tension: the movement of the 'journey', paradigm of the diasporic condition, the permanence in the 'place', and the possibility of 'return' to the 'land of origins' through memory. For the exiles, the aroma of coffee is a breast that nourishes, sign of an ancestral voyage, a pathway to the origins. Coffee, as a textual geo-factor, restores the memory of a lost geography and becomes a symbol of the land itself, or rather, a surrogate homeland. As the poet reveals,

Comme la terre m'a été enlevée et que j'en ai été exilé, elle s'est transformée en origine et en adresse de mon esprit et de mes rêves. Ce sont des circonstances extérieures au lieu que la terre occupe dans mon travail. Le symbole de la patrie. Elle est toute la nostalgie et les rêves de retour. Mais on ne doit pas la considérer seulement comme un lieu circonscrit. Elle est aussi la terre du monde, et cela aussi est à la base de mon travail. La terre est une synthèse : elle est à l'origine de la poésie, et elle en est aussi la

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

matière et le langage. Parfois la terre et la langue sont inséparables. La terre est l'existence physique de la poésie.⁴³

☛ *Sirhān in the Cafeteria. The Scent of Coffee...in Exile.*

The trope of coffee in relation to the Palestinian condition of alienation and dislocation of exile had previously appeared in the long poem *Sirhān yasrab al-qahwā fī-l-kafātīriyā* (Sirhan Drinks Coffee in the Cafeteria), first published in Al-Ahrām newspaper, and later included in the collection *Uḥibbukī aw lā uḥibbukī* (I Love You, I Love You Not, 1972). In the following extract, we can find new and interesting elements for our analysis:

(...) و سرحان يضحك في مطبخ الباخرة
يعانق سائحة، والطريق بعيد عن القدس والناصره
وسرحان متهم بالضياح وبالعدمية.
.....
وكلّ البلاد بعيده.
شوارع أخرى اختفت من مدينته (أخبرته الأغاني وعزلته ليلة العيد
أن له غرفة في مكان).
ورائحة البنّ جغرافيا.
وما شردوك.. وما قتلوك .
أبوك احتمي بالنصوص، وجاء اللصوص
ولست شريداً.. ولست شهيداً.. وأمك باعت ضفائرها
للسنابل والأمنيات: وفوق سواعدنا فارس لا يسلم (وشم عميق).
وفوق أصابعنا كرمة لا تهاجر (وشم عميق)
خطى الشهداء تبيد الغزاة (نشيد قديم)
ونافذتان على البحر يا وطني تحذفان المنافي. وأرجع
(حلم قديم - جديد)
شوارع أخرى اختفت من مدينته (أخبرته الأغاني وعزلته ليلة
العيد أن له غرفة في مكان).
ورائحة البنّ جغرافيا

43 DARWICH, *La Palestine*, p. 117.

ورائحة البن يدُ
ورائحة البن صوت ينادي .. يأخذ..
ورائحة البن صوت و مئذنة (ذات يوم تعود).
ورائحة البن ناي تزغرد فيه مياه المزاريب ينكمش الماء
يوماً و يبقى الصدى. (...)
ولست شريداً.. و لست شهيداً
ورائحةُ البن جغرافيا.
و سرحان يشرب قهوته...
ويضيع.⁴⁴

Sirḥān laughs in the kitchen of the ship / He holds a woman tourist / And the road is far away from Jerusalem and Nazareth / Sirḥān is convicted of nihilism and loss. / All the countries are far away. / And other streets disappeared from his city (songs and loneliness, in the holiday night, spoke to him about a room for him somewhere). / The smell of coffee is geography. / And they did not exile you, they did not kill you. / Your father hid behind the texts / And came the thieves. / You are not an exiled, you are not a martyr, / Your mother sold her braids to spikes and wishes: upon our forearms a knight does not surrender (a deep tattoo). / Upon our fingers a grapevine does not leave (a deep tattoo). / The martyrs' steps annihilate the invaders (an old hymn). / Two windows on the sea, my homeland, eliminate the exiles...I'll return (old-new dream). / And other streets disappeared from his city (songs and loneliness, in the holiday night, spoke to him of a room left somewhere). / The smell of coffee is geography / The smell of coffee is a hand / The smell of coffee is a voice that calls and takes / The smell of coffee is a voice and a minaret (One day you will return) / The smell of coffee is a flute which resounds like rainwater gurgling in the gutter. / One day, water will be absorbed and the echo will remain.(...)/ You are not an exiled, you are not a martyr. / The smell of coffee is geography. / Sirḥān drinks his coffee and gets lost.⁴⁵

The poem drew inspiration from the story of Sirḥān Bishāra Sirḥān, a Palestinian with Jordanian citizenship, who in 1968 was convicted of the murder of US Senator and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, as a revenge for his support of Israel. The poet transposes the real Sirḥān into a literary character upon whom he confers highly charged symbolic features. His application of a

44 M. DARWĪSH, *Sirḥān yasrab al-qahwā fi-l-kafātīriyā*, in Darwīsh, *Dīwān*, pp. 449-450.

45 Translation is mine. A slightly reduced English version of the poem edited by Rana Kabbani can be found in M. DARWĪSH, *Sand and Other Poems*, transl. by R. Kabbani, London: Kegan Paul, 1986.

fictitious character to a real one engenders a dense dialectics within the text with the aim to deconstruct hastily acquired beliefs and the predominant logic of the public discourse, and plumb into the depth and complexity of multifaceted aspects of reality.

The criminal figure is humanized and critically contextualized in order to explore key issues of Palestinian collective identity and shed light on their conditions in the wake of the 1967 war. Sirḥān represents, in Darwīsh's words, a "prisoner of war and peace", a hopeless Palestinian, lost and banished from the world, bound to nothing but a tragic end. He is the epitome, *par excellence*, of the exile, disconnected from space and time. With no past, present or future, he is among the outcasts of History and can only enter it through crime. Darwīsh's critical insight questions the otherness of Palestinian exiles, banished from their land and condemned to nothingness. They embody perennial victimhood of History, a burden that seems to inhibit any possibility of rescue. According to Iliyās Khūrī, Sirḥān bears in himself an unavoidable twofold character: *al-qātil* (the murderer) and *al-shahīd* (the martyr). This oxymoronic status is due to the fact that the murder itself is built inside another death: that of the Palestinian collective.⁴⁶

As it emerges from the poetic excerpt above, the symbolism of coffee constitutes an aesthetic device that seems to inform a reconnection to past in the context of denial and loss experienced by the subject. The reiterative use of the phrase 'The smell of coffee is geography' makes it an obsessive refrain pinpointed as a key-point within the text. Also, in Arabic we find the use of the word *bunn* as a poetic geo-factor marking reference to the soil, plant, and its beans. The smell of coffee is 'geography', 'a hand', 'a voice and a minaret', 'a flute': all these metaphors testify Sirḥān's journey into memory, his return to the land of denial. It is a land he can no longer find, because he himself is no longer able to draw or visualize it on the map. As he gets lost, in drawing the map he imagines a land with no face, with blurred borders. "I am the martyr of the map", the poet himself would write later in his *Poem of the Land*, bestowing, through individual experience, the status of 'victims of a map' to every Palestinian exile.

According to Khūrī, within this poignant poetic sequence, relationship to land is given by the particular use of the two *kbabars* (nominal predicates): *Jugbrāfiyā* (geography) and *yad* (hand). Such a relationship between coffee and homeland is built up by the action of the hand, the coffee itself turns into a symbol of the homeland.⁴⁷ Hands that seed the soil are the same ones that make coffee, but are also the same that kill. So, Darwīsh skillfully plays with images in sharp contrast, which convey the tension between the literary character's will for rescue and the

46 I. KHŪRĪ, *Dirāsāt fī naqd al-shi'r*, Bayrūt: Dār Ibn Rushd, 1979, p. 134.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

awareness of the sentence inflicted on him. Furthermore, the act of drinking coffee is expressed in the present tense as an affirmative action, apparently stabilizing. On the contrary, it is made unstable by the following paradigmatic closing action “Sirḥān drinks his coffee and gets lost”, as well as by the identity of the place in which the action occurs: a *kafātīriyā* (cafeteria), a loanword designating Western-style coffee houses, rather than a *maqḥā*, a traditional Arab café. This is not a casual choice, as this latter factor contributes to alienate the character’s perception of bonding and his place-related social identity.

☛ Coffee as... a Peace Proposal?

Lastly, a further attempt at interpretation of the geopoetics of coffee in Darwīsh’s work can be provided if we look carefully at the presence of this symbol in one of the poems included in the work *Ḥālat ḥiṣār* (State of Siege, 2002). This was written in 2002 in Ramallah, under siege by Israeli Defense Forces, commanded by Ariel Sharon, during the course of the second Intifāda.

Darwīsh, who was living in Ramallah at that time, did not merely aspire to describe the state of siege befallen on him and his people, but tried to “shape the words in order to express the *ḥāla*”, the ‘condition’ of the besieged, from both an aesthetic and a mystical point of view.⁴⁸ We have previously noted that one of the most common used terms in his poetry is café, a place of encounter and human exchange. In *State of Siege* we can see the apparent provocative invitation to drink coffee in a paradoxical setting which mitigates the features of the conflict, by highlighting the key image of the threshold.

أَيُّهَا الْوَاقِفُونَ عَلَى الْعَتَبَاتِ ادْخُلُوا،
 وَاشْرَبُوا مَعَنَا الْقَهْوَةَ الْعَرَبِيَّةَ
 قَدْ تَشْعُرُونَ بِأَنْكُمْ بَشَرٌ مِثْلَنَا
 أَيُّهَا الْوَاقِفُونَ عَلَى عَتَبَاتِ الْبُيُوتِ
 أُخْرِجُوا مِنْ صَبَاحَاتِنَا،
 نَطْمِئِنُّ إِلَى أَنْنَا
 بَشَرٌ مِثْلَكُمْ!⁴⁹

48 M. DARWISH, *Stato d’assedio*, a cura di W. Dahmash, Roma: Edizioni Q, 2014, p. 5.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

You, standing at our thresholds, / Come in, sip some Arab coffee with us! / You may feel you're as human as we are. / You! At the thresholds of our houses, / Vacate our mornings, / So we may be certain. / We're as human as you are.⁵⁰

Here, in a surrealistic setting, the besieged Palestinians invite the Israeli besiegers to sit at their tables and share Arab coffee with them. This fragment, by means of the poetic image of the threshold, recalls the Bakhtinian notion of chronotope that is the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”.⁵¹ In fact, the threshold could be considered as a highly charged space-time marker of cultural significance. As a spatial marker, here it represents the boundary between outward and inward space, as well as the demarcation line between the oppressors and the oppressed. As a temporal marker, it suggests the lack of movement and temporality of siege and, consequently, the potentially permanent control over the besieged by the besieger (it reads: “You, standing at our threshold”).

Accordingly, threshold represents a poetic site where action leads to crisis: a crisis of given assumptions and constructed discourses. How to break the siege other than through an invitation to sit and drink coffee together? How to break the siege if not by means of culture? (In another fragment Darwish writes: “the siege won't end until we teach our enemies a few odes from our Pre-Islamic days”).⁵² Threshold, as an unstable site of negotiation, is a literary sign of a potentially disruptive in-betweenness: a crucial sign which allows to circumvent any polarity.

For Darwish, threshold is the liminal space for a new kind of humanism to take shape. In this fragment we see, on one hand, a claim of mutual understanding by an invitation to overcome that line and to lay down the arms; while on the other it hides a moral lesson, subliming the far reaching and overwhelming humanity of the oppressed. Darwish is likely to use the powerful symbol of coffee as “a location of culture”,⁵³ in the words of Homi Bhabha: a possibility of going beyond hierarchies, identities, differences or discourses, even among people in conflict.

50 M. DARWISH, *State of Siege*, transl. by M. Akash and D. Abdal-Hayy Moore, introd. by M. Akash, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010, p. 21.

51 M.M. BAKHTIN, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. by M. Holquist, transl. by C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 84.

52 DARWISH, *State of Siege*, p. 7.

53 H.K. BHABHA, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

❦ Conclusion

As we have seen, the symbolism of coffee is strongly related to poetics of land in the work of Maḥmūd Darwīsh; the latter intended both as a homeland and a “space” hyper-saturated with identitarian and mnemotopic dimensions. The high frequency of this literary trope in his writing and the manifold uses the writer makes of it demonstrate its centrality in Darwīsh’s poetics. These aspects could provide a stimulus for further research.

Coffee, here, is seen as a multiple signifier that requires a deeper hermeneutical activity to investigate its relevance to the central reference of the land. As a decidedly powerful autobiographical element in his writing, coffee proves to be a highly charged temporal and spatial reference. In fact, it represents a literary trace of individual experience as well as an identity trope loaded with a peculiar geo-cultural significance. In both cases, its function as a spatial reminder that reactivates the memory of the land and symbolizes connection with it has been highlighted.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the presence of the symbol of coffee in the work of Maḥmūd Darwīsh from a spatial perspective. As a constitutive aspect of a well-grounded poetics of the land, central to Darwīsh’s *weltanschauung*, coffee is explored in its multiple trajectories within the selected parts of the poet’s oeuvre. The texts under analysis are poems of different periods and collections, except the poetic prose of his masterpiece *Memory for the Forgetfulness*, where his praise for coffee peaks in terms of lyrical expression and vision.

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