

Mahmoud darwish and power



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Power exists in many forms: weapons, threats, size, and even words. Amidst the violence and volatile power that exists between Israel and Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish attempts to influence people's feelings through his poetry. In Darwish's politically charged poems, he utilizes a combination of common symbols familiar to both Jewish and Arab peoples, and carefully chosen language and diction. The content of his work allows him to cross the proverbial bridge between the Jewish and Arabic audiences, nearly always successfully making his message palpable to both. He does walk the line between wisdom and condescending superiority, however. The end result is that Darwish's poetry has a power of its own, and Darwish attempts to use this power to steer his readers away from the violence of war. Although there is a historically long conflict between the Jewish and Arab peoples, they share such a close parentage that the two cultures have many cultural similarities. Darwish isolates these similarities, such as common religious symbols, and uses them in his work. The symbols share common messages of peace, brotherhood, and coexistence, as well as invoking utter destruction. It is with these symbols that Darwish makes his poems resonate with people from both cultures. To convey peace, Darwish alludes to a place of historical relevance, " If only I could go to Damascus as an echo / Damascus, my woman, / I will love and I will survive" (" The Flute Cried" 1, 8). Darwish references Damascus because of its history as a city that existed with multiple religions. In " The Flute Cried", Darwish puts forth images of two weeping women, embodying the division of such a place. He writes, " The flute cried and tore the sky into two women" (3), which represent Israel and Palestine. The image of Damascus forces the reader of the poem to see the coexistence of the two peoples. Darwish's goal is to show the reader that

as the two groups lived together peacefully in the past, it can and should be that way again. Darwish embraces the similarity between his culture and that of the Jewish people with a symbol of cordiality and brotherhood. "...I see my friends bearing the evening mail-wine, bread, a few novels and records" (I See My Ghost Coming From Afar, 2-3). The image of bread and wine is a scriptural reference. It symbolizes friendship and neighborhood. It is Darwish's intention that as the reader sees an image that is so commonly associated with meetings of positivity and love, they will see the possibility of associating such an image with the enemy one day. A symbol of true versatility is the olive branch. It represents many things, not the least of which is peace. Darwish incorporates this symbol in the context of desire. He writes, " I gaze upon the trunk of the olive tree that hid..." (I See My Ghost Coming From Afar). Just as the symbol of the olive tree has a plethora of meanings, Darwish has just as many reasons to utilize it in his poems. Religiously, the branch symbolizes life and purity from sin, as it was what the dove brought Noah in the Ark to show that the flood had ended and life had resumed. Colloquially, to extend an olive branch means to extend the will for peace, which is Darwish's goal for his readers. To add to the impact of his writing, Darwish also incorporates symbols with less positive connotations. Adding to his symbolic arsenal, Darwish utilizes the symbol of ashes, which symbolize the religious journey that human bodies make from ashes to ashes. " I gaze upon the unseen: What will come - what will come after the ashes? (I See My Ghost Coming From Afar). It is with this symbol that Darwish shows the reader the rearing doom that could come, if the premise of peace and coexistence is ignored. Darwish adeptly uses this technique to show the negativity of hostility, which has the potential to be more

convincing than the symbols of peace and happiness. Darwish's extensive use of such symbols, especially those with significance in both cultures, shows his intent. He wants his poems to influence his readers' view on the fighting, but also on their view of the opposite culture. While these symbols bring the readers the specific ideas of peace and coexistence, Darwish continues to build power in his words through his carefully chosen language and a familiar diction. Because Darwish is Arab, it is necessary that his vernacular employs such devices to ensure that his message is clear to Jewish readers as well without perceived biases or blame focused on either party. The only partiality that Darwish displays through his poems is that of peace, and to keep that a constant, his language and word choice reflect the hardships experienced by both Jewish and Hebrew peoples. Earlier examples of the olive branch reinforce the neutrality of his poetry, further reducing any perceived bias. Darwish's diplomatic style of writing begins when he gives the poem a neutral voice. His works are in the first person, and if one were to assume that Darwish himself is not the narrator of the poem, it is not obvious as to whether the narrator is Arab or Hebrew. This benefits the readability of his poems, as there are those who would simply disregard his poems before reading them because Darwish is Arab. In this particular case, in lines like, " I will follow the path of the song, even though my roses are fewer" (The Night There), the narrator expresses the despair of the bloody conflict, without showing any affiliation or association with either side. This makes Darwish's poems more readable, and his message more acceptable to those who do not necessarily agree with him due to his ethnicity.

Darwish's language and diction also reflects that of a teacher, which can, however, be seen negatively. The narrator in Darwish's poems speaks in a

manner that he has superior knowledge, so some readers might assume that Darwish is inferring that he knows the way the conflict should be solved. He specifically writes, “ We could be what we should be,” (The Dreamers Pass from One Sky to Another), actively stating how people should act. While his message neither conveys negativity nor provokes violence, it is a call to action. Such a statement has the potential to imply wrongdoing, and many opinionated readers do not like being told they are wrong, it is less likely that those kinds of people will be open to his message. Darwish’s intent is to convey the idea of peace and coexistence between the two feuding peoples, it is less effective for him to preach to his readers than it is for him to use subtle symbolism and rhetoric. Darwish’s use of calm, unassuming language is the most effective way for him to convey his message. He writes, “...I ask: will there be a new prophet for this new time?” (I See My Ghost Coming From Afar). As opposed to his didactic tone, Darwish instead declares ignorance, using the narrator’s character to ask the reader what will happen. In this context, he successfully instantiates the reader’s thoughts, such as: ‘ how will we be saved from this conflict’, and ‘ is fighting effective?’ The ability to involve the reader in this conversation is the essence of the power Darwish has as an author. Hindered by all of the violence and hatred that exists between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the conflict in the Middle East is far from a solution, and because of the powerful weapons and armaments each side uses, the future seems grim. It is not in weapons and armaments that Mahmoud Darwish finds power, but rather, in his literary prowess. He takes it upon himself to bring the people of Israel and Palestine back together through his words. However, because he is Arab, half of his target audience has the potential to turn away from his message. However, because he

engages familiar symbols and common language that his poetry has the ability to appeal to both cultures. While Darwish's methods do not always convey his ideas effectively, his works shine because of the wisdom of his peaceful and meaningful ideals.