

Homeland in Memoriam

Memory and the Palestinian physical environment in selected poems by
Mahmoud Darwish

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Abstract

Mahmoud Darwish's poetry is strongly influenced by the displacement and subsequent state of exile he has lived in for a large part of his life. This is illustrated by the clear focus in his work on the relationship between the Palestinian people and the physical environment of their homeland. Darwish's poetry presents these two as deeply connected, despite the separating forces of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This connection between the Palestinian people and the Palestinian physical environment is constituted in relation to the motif of memory in three particular ways: (1) the physical environment is represented as an indispensable element in the process of remembering the lost homeland; (2) the father is put forward as a mnemonic figure to express the durable and interdependent relationship Palestinians have with the physical environment; and (3) in several instances the importance of remembering the distinctiveness of the Palestinian/environment relation is stressed. Ultimately, the physical environment is represented in the context of memory and remembering in order to preserve the relationship between Palestinians and the environment and thereby avoid complete exclusion from their homeland.

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Introduction

For a large part of his life the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish lived in exile, separated from his homeland. This separation has left a strong mark on the way he has written about Palestine (Jayyusi 1992)¹. In his poetry the trees and plants, the mountains and valleys, but also the houses and cities in Palestine, are represented as being deeply connected to the Palestinian people. However, for many Palestinians who endured the hardships of displacement, separation and exile, this connection is something of the past, something that exists mostly in their memories.

Darwish was eight years old when he experienced the uprooting forces of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the first time. As a result of the first Arab-Israeli war the Darwish family had to flee from their native village Berweh to Lebanon. On their return a year later they found their hometown razed by Israeli forces. The family settled in another village, but was not allowed to travel within Israel/Palestine without Israeli permission. Darwish lived 'illegally' in Israel until he left the country in 1970.

This forced rupture between the poet and his homeland resulted in a poetry characterized by a strong focus on the relationship between people and their physical environment. As translator Fady Joudah states, 'Darwish was a "green" poet' and his work is often about 'the bond between the individual and the earth, place, and nature' (2009, xi, xii). This thematic focus serves a clear function. In absence of a place that Darwish could call his homeland, poetry became a textual alternative. For Darwish Palestine was not only a physical reality, but much more a 'country of words' (2003, 11). He saw the 'construction of Palestine first and foremost [as] an imaginative endeavour' (Hamdi 2017, 241). Therefore, it is often said that his poems can be read as an attempt to construct a 'textual homeland' (Joudah 2009, xi, Antoon 2011).

In two recent articles Tahrir Hamdi has explored this idea of Darwish's work as a textual homeland. He argues that this poetic construction functions in the first place to create a substitute for the unreachable land and thereby to counter the loss of memory of Palestine (2014, 2017). However, Hamdi speaks very little about the way Darwish writes on the physical environment. He explains how Darwish tries to preserve the memory of Palestine by building a Palestinian national and geographical identity, but does not define

¹ Poet and critic Salma Khadra Jayyusi points out how Palestinian poetry developed according to 'a dynamism within [this] art itself', however the influence of external, political factors was inevitable. For Palestinian writers '[t]here is no escape ... they are compromised by the events of contemporary history even before they are born' (3). Darwish is no exception to this.

what role the physical environment and its natural elements play in this literary construction. Hamdi tries to 'decipher' Darwish's 'poetics of space' (2017, 238), but by not specifying how Darwish represents nature he misses a crucial aspect of this poetics. At the same time, Hamdi does acknowledge that in Darwish's textual homeland the natural should not be overlooked. 'The ant and its ant food' for instance, are part of the Palestinian homeland just as much as grand mythical figures and narratives are (2014, 104).

With this paper I wish to emphasise the role of the physical environment in Darwish's poetry. I will argue that this environment stands central in remembering the relationship between Palestinians and their homeland. Thus, the representation of the physical environment needs to be understood in connection to the motif of memory. Several scholars have already noted the striking appearance of nature in Darwish's work and have used concepts from ecocriticism to explain these representations.² They analyse early poems by Darwish and argue that he formulates an 'inter-connectedness' between Palestinians and the physical environment. Furthermore, they stress the political functionality of such a representation as it supports Palestinians in their resistance against Israeli occupation. I agree with Ahmed et al. when they argue that nature and Palestinians are represented as 'interconnected'. I also support their emphasis on the nationalist context which these representations of nature are embedded in. However, they fail to acknowledge the key role *memory* plays in constructing this interconnectedness. In my point of view, it is precisely this dimension of memory through which the relationship between Palestinians and the physical environment is imagined.

My analysis of Darwish's work will focus on three ways in which the motifs of memory and the physical environment interact. These two motifs interact with each other in such a way, that they support the idea of a natural bond between Palestinians and the Palestinian physical environment. First, the physical environment is represented as an indispensable element in the process of remembering the lost homeland. Second, the father is put forward as a mnemonic figure to express the durable and interdependent relationship Palestinians have with the physical environment. And third, in several instances the importance of remembering the distinctiveness of the Palestinian/environment relation is stressed.

² See for instance Ahmed, Hashim, et al. (2012), and Ahmed, Lazim and Vengadasamy (2012).

For this paper I have selected four early poems by Darwish: 'Poem of the Land' (1976), 'To my Father' (1969), 'I Belong There' (1986) and 'We Go to a Country' (1986). These poems appeared in different collections published over a course of almost twenty years, but can all be considered part of Darwish's 'early period'. This period is characterized by a 'lyrical standpoint of personal suffering' (Mattawa 2014, 30), a strong emphasis on the past, and a tone of longing for the lost homeland (Jayyusi 1992). Since Darwish wrote many poems and I only have limited time and space, I have tried choosing the works that I think express these characteristics most clearly.

Making this selection was especially difficult since I do not read Arabic, which made me completely dependent on translations. I have used work from different translators and in some cases used more than one translation per poem. For my reading of 'We Go to a Country' and 'I Belong There' I primarily used a translation by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché from the selected works *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*. However, a second translation by Abdullah al-Udhari as published in the collection *Victims of a Map* (Adonis, Darwish and al-Qasim 1984) proved to be helpful as well. 'To my Father' and 'Poem of the Land' are from different translators (the former is translated by Ian Wedde and Fawwaz Tuqan, the latter by Lena Jayyusi and Christopher Middleton), but all three poems were translated according to the same method. First they were translated from Arabic to English, then a professional English poet rendered this translation into a more poetic form.

1. Theoretical framework

Before we can read Darwish's work through the combined lens of ecocriticism and cultural memory, some theoretical points need to be clarified. How should we define these two fields exactly, and more importantly, how do they relate to each other? In short, I will be using ecocriticism as a lens to examine the function of literary constructions of the environment in Darwish's poetry. This function is in the first place mnemonic: literary constructions serve to remember the lost or threatened connection between the Palestinian people and their environment. However, they also serve a clear political goal: to formulate a collective Palestinian identity and to justify their presence in Israel/Palestine. Cultural memory, which I understand as the development of a

relationship to the past through the formulation and mediation of discourse, serves to further explain these mnemonic and political functions.

Ecocriticism emerged as a theoretical discourse and mode of analysis in the early 1990s and has since undergone crucial theoretical developments. In their 1996 *Ecocriticism Reader* Glotfelty and Fromm defined the field as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment', focussing on texts that display an 'ecological awareness' and that can be helpful in raising consciousness of global environmental problems (1996, xviii, xxiii). In these early stages of ecocriticism a focus on Western American nature writing prevailed and literary constructions of nature and wilderness and their ecological consequences were of main concern.

However, as several scholars have pointed out, Glotfelty and Fromm's definition of ecocriticism was rather narrow and programmatic (Wallace and Armbruster 2001, Birkert 1996). They see the strict focus on nature as a limitation to the field and therefore plead for a more inclusive focus on the environment. By environment they refer not only to 'natural and wilderness areas ... [but] also [to] cultivated and build landscapes, the natural elements of those landscapes, and cultural interactions with those natural elements' (Wallace and Armbruster 2001, 4). Such an approach to ecocriticism has two advantages. In the first place it allows ecocritics to let go of a strict binary between nature and culture, i.e. between those elements of the physical reality we call natural, and those that have been altered or influenced by human agency. Seeing nature and culture 'as interwoven rather than as separate sides of a dualistic construct' is especially beneficial when dealing with the Israeli/Palestinian environment (3). Over the course of the twentieth century this environment has been subject to major alterations. Villages have been erased from the landscape for instance, to be replaced by forest or parks.³ And olive orchards have been uprooted to make space for new settlements or security structures. These alterations effectively blur the line between nature and culture in the Palestinian environment. Second, a focus on environment opens up the field to texts other than nature writing and allows for an ecocritical approach to 'authors who seem less concerned with nature than with culture' (2001, 3). Indeed, it allows for an ecocritical reading of Darwish's oeuvre. Darwish's poems seem to deal in the first place with the separation of Palestinians from their environment and the political and social forces altering the

³ See for instance Carol Bardenstein *Trees, Forests, and the Shaping of Palestinian and Israeli Collective Memory* (1999).

environment. Darwish addresses these themes not per se from an environmentalist standpoint, but rather from a nationalist one. However, to only focus on this nationalist standpoint would not do justice to the essential role the environment plays in his poetry. Darwish is concerned with the Palestinian national struggle for independence and he often puts his poems at the service of this struggle. But, as I will argue, he expresses this concern for a large part through the Palestinian relationship with the environment.

In *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies* Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer's try to redefine the scope of ecocriticism in such a way that it allows for more political readings as well. They see ecocriticism as

... a methodology that re-examines the history of ideologically, aesthetically, and ethically motivated conceptualisations of nature, of the function of its constructions and metaphorisations in literary and other cultural practices, and of the potential effects these discursive, imaginative constructions have on our bodies as well as our natural and cultural environments. (Gersdorf en Mayer, 10)

Adhering to this definition of ecocriticism allows us to examine literary constructions of the environment in Darwish's poetry and at the same time address their nationalist function.

In the field of ecocriticism several scholars have stressed the importance of cultural memory for understanding the relation between humans and their environment. Axel Goodbody for instance, argues that a cultural memory approach within ecocriticism can help to better understand 'the imaginative strategies and devices, cultural practices, and institutions that allow individuals and communities to form attachments to places and to maintain them over time as an integral part of their identities' (2011, 57). According to Goodbody, a focus on cultural memory provides better insight into one of ecocriticism's main concerns: 'cultural constructions of the natural environment' and how these define people's relationship to this environment (55). This focus is in line with Gersdorf and Mayer's definition of ecocriticism: both scholars put the emphasis on discursive practices. They both see the relationship between people and the environment as constituted by media of discourse, such as literature.

What then, do we mean exactly by cultural memory? Cultural memory is 'the historical product of cultural mnemotechniques and mnemotechnologies, from commemorative rituals to historiography, through which shared images of the past are

actively produced and circulated' (Rigney 2004, 366). The realisation of this product is never finished and so cultural memory is not a stable entity. Rather it should be understood 'as an ongoing elaboration of a collective relationship to the past through the mediation of discourse' (368).

Literature serves a particular role in this process of formulating and mediating a relationship to the past. According to Astrid Erll, literature should be understood as 'an independent "symbolic form" of cultural memory' (2011, 144). This means that literature is a medium of memory that functions in a specific way different from other symbol systems, such as religion, history or law. Erll distinguishes three ways in which literature operates markedly different from other media of memory. In the first place literature allows for *condensation*, i.e. 'the compression of several complex ideas, feelings or images into a single, fused or composite object' (145). Thus, with literature various ideas on the past can be brought together into one object of memory. It is important to note that a work of literature, a poem for instance, is also an object of memory in itself. Secondly, literature mediates memory through *narration*. To construct an image of the past literature orders events and ideas in coherent narratives. As Erll explains, 'only a few elements can be selected to be encoded and remembered' and these elements 'only become meaningful through the process of combination, which constructs temporal and causal order' (146, 147). Finally, literature uses *genres* as formats for the production of cultural memory. The conventions of genres are used to 'encode events and experiences' in a way that is recognizable for people (147). Because of this recognisability, genres help to make sense of the past and remember the past in a meaningful way. Ultimately, the framework of a genre partly defines the framework of how something is remembered.

2. Remembering through the environment

With 'Poem of the Land' the physical environment of Palestine is turned into an essential part of Palestinian cultural memory. The environment and several natural elements in particular are represented as facilitating the process of remembering. They function as a conduit and a cue for remembering. By inscribing the physical environment with these mnemonic functions Palestinians are brought in close relation to this environment.

Darwish wrote 'Poem of the Land' on occasion of Land Day, a national day of commemoration celebrated each year on March 30. This places 'Poem of the Land' in the

context of Palestinian national memory. Land Day is an essential part of Palestinian memory culture and according to some can even be seen as the 'major temporal focus of political mobilization' (Sorek 2015, 49). This annual celebration started in 1976 when the Israeli government announced to confiscate large parts of land and Palestinians organized a nationwide strike and demonstrations in response. These actions resulted in a violent clash between Palestinian protesters and the Israeli Defence Force, killing six Palestinians and wounding many more. Although Land Day started as a ritual to remember the victims of that particular day in 1976, it soon grew out to become a platform for other political messages and national memories, particularly for the Nakba, i.e. the displacement of the Palestinian people during and after the first Arab-Israeli war (Sorek 2015). Therefore, this national day does not only serve to remember a particular event, but also the situation prior to the displacement of 1948.

The first two stanzas of 'Poem of the Land' aptly illustrate how narration is used to turn the physical environment into a conduit for remembering. The poem starts by lamenting the death of five girls, killed during those demonstrations in 1976⁴:

In the month of March
 five girls at the door
 of the primary school
Came past the violet
 came past the rifle
 burst into flame (Darwish, 145)

Coming past the rifle made the young girls burst into flame. Subsequently, they 'opened up the song of the soil / and entered the earth / the ultimate embrace' (146). With this description Darwish connects the girls directly to the physical environment: accompanied by the 'song of the soil' (possibly community members singing funeral songs), they enter and are taken in by the earth in an ultimate embrace – burial. In the next stanza we read how 'March comes to the land / out of earth's depth / out of the girls' dance' (146). In this instance March stands for Land Day, the annual remembering of the lost land, but at the same time for the death of those five girls. The memory of these events come to the land, which is to Palestine, 'out of the earth's depth' and 'out of the girls' dance'. Thus, every

⁴ Sources differ on the amount of casualties. *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, which published 'Poem of the Land', speaks of five young girls. Others speak of four girls and two men.

year through the earth the memory of those girls and of pre-Nakba Palestine comes back to those in the land. Moreover, elements of nature are ascribed a facilitating function: 'The violets leaned over a little / so that the girls' voices / could cross over' (146). And also 'the birds / pointed their beaks / at that song and at my heart' (146). When the girls and the lost land need to be remembered, the violets lean over a little, making it easier for the girls' voices to rise from the earth. At the same time birds point their beaks at that song, which could be read as birds supporting the girls' song with their own singing.

Thus, we see that the death of the five young girls is given meaning by ordering it in a narrative of commemoration. This commemoration is narrated as a process that develops through the environment. The burial ceremony inscribes the memory of the girls onto the physical environment. As a consequence, the environment becomes a necessary element of the annual commemoration of Land Day. It has become a conduit for remembering.

In *Memory in Culture* Erll defines cueing as one of the main functions of media of memory (2011). When a medium of memory serves as a cue it triggers people into remembering a particular event or a previously experienced state of mind. Many different kinds of media can serve as cues, for example pictures or texts, but most often it is the physical environment that cues a memory. Particular buildings, the sight of a landscape, or particular elements of nature such as trees or animals can all serve as a mnemonic trigger. However, as Erll explains, 'cues feature neither a sender nor a semiotic code, they cannot be actualized outside the context of memory culture' (2011, 128). In other words, the physical environment gains its cueing function through the culturally and socially constructed 'conventions' formulated in the media surrounding it (128). In this paragraph I will examine not so much how the physical environment itself functions as a memory cue, but rather how 'Poem of the Land' formulates such conventions by representing the environment as having this cueing function.

The fifth stanza illustrates how the environment is represented as a trigger for memory. 'We come to the obsession of memories and the plants grow upon us ascending toward all beginnings. This is the growing of *reminiscence*' (149, italics in original). These 'beginnings' can be understood in light of an earlier stanza, where we learn that they refer to the beginning of the agony of occupation and displacement: 'In the month of March / We enter the first prison and the first love / Memories shower down upon a fenced village / That is where we were born' (147). This allows us to read the movement of the plants

as sending Palestinians back into time, as if they grow towards those past experiences. The plants then, are represented as an element of the physical environment that brings Palestinians to remember the connection with their surroundings they once had.

In stanza 5 Darwish ascribes the sea and its waves a similar power. This stanza discusses the city 'Acca, or Acre, from which many Palestinians fled or were expelled during the 1948 war. 'Thirty years ago I saw by the sea a girl and I said: I am the waves. / She receded in *recollection*. I saw two martyrs listening to the sea: 'Acca comes with the waves. 'Acca departs with the waves. They receded in *remembrance*' (149, italics in original). The speaker presents itself as the waves, personifying this element of nature, and thereby granting it the power to trigger this girl and the two martyrs to recollect and remember. When the girl meets the speaker in the form of the waves, she recedes into recollection, meaning she withdraws and starts recollecting. Something similar happens to the martyrs. In response to the sound (they are 'listening to the sea') and the rhythm of the waves ('Acca comes and departs with the waves) they remember the city Acre. For the martyrs the waves trigger the memory of this specific city, but Acre can be replaced with other lost Palestinian cities or villages as well. As Erll explains, 'what is recalled in individual minds in response to media cues ... is by no means homogeneous' (2011, 128).

Ultimately, Darwish's use of the physical environment illustrates the working of memory and serves to bring together Palestinians and their homeland. By representing the physical environment as a conduit and a cue for remembering, it becomes part of a memory culture that is distinct to the Palestinian situation. 'Poem of the Land' gives meaning to the environment in the context of Palestinian cultural memory and thereby brings into direct relation with the Palestinian people.

3. Remembering a steadfast relationship

In 'To my Father' the father figure is used as a literary instrument to express the relationship between Palestinians and the physical environment. In this poem Darwish brings his father to the stage to remember his lost family house and to give expression to the feelings of longing and regret his father experienced. The poem clearly speaks of *my* father, it seems likely however, that the figure of the father is deployed in a more general sense as well. The father is put forward as someone who has an interdependent relationship with the environment, nurtures continuous Palestinian presence in the

homeland and thereby tries to withstand the change of time. He serves as a condensed memory figure through which multiple ideas and feelings are remembered at the same time.

As mentioned before, condensation is one of the main mechanism through which literature constructs cultural memory. A literary work has the ability to turn single objects or images into multi-layered figures representing the past. To speak with Erll, the power of literature is 'the bringing together and superimposition of various semantic fields in a very small space' (2011, 145). In 'To my Father' the father is this very small space in which several complex ideas on remembering the relationship between Palestinians and the Palestinian physical environment come together.

Anette Månsson points to the father as one of the main images 'representing the human side of the relation man and nature' in Darwish's early poetry (2003, 92). She explains that this father figure is often depicted as having a very strong connection to the land, so strong even that his life and individual identity is completely dependent on this connection: 'For the father, there can be no stable identity without a country' (92). In the first stanzas of 'To my Father' the vital importance of this connection is well illustrated:

He lowered his eyes from the moon
& bent low to take a handful of the soil
& prayed
to a sky without rain
& forbade me to travel (Darwish, 67)

The fact that the father lowers his eyes from the moon and grabs a handful of the soil suggests he is standing outside, where exactly is not specified. Perhaps the exact location is also not too important either. We know that Darwish's hometown Birweh has been destroyed by Zionist and Israeli forces and that the family has been forced to move several times. This means that wherever the father is, he is not in his hometown. The general mood expressed in this stanza is in line with the father's state of displacement; his actions seem to convey a mood of nostalgic longing for a proximity to the environment. The father prays to a sky without rain and forbids his son to move away from the land. He forbids his son to abandon the land where once their family house stood. The land where, as we read in the third stanza, from the horizon a song still weeps, singing of their family house where 'there were loaves ... & wine & blankets / & horses & shoes' (67). Perhaps if we connect

the nostalgia from this third stanza to the actions described in the first, then the father emerges as a figure of longing. He longs for the homeland, for rain from a cloudless sky, and for a moon that cannot be reached. This also sheds new light on the second line in the first stanza: the father grabs some of the earth from under his feet, trying to bring it closer to himself. He touches some of the soil in order to bring himself closer to the physical environment he longs for.

The father's attitude of nostalgic longing is in line with the connection he has with the environment. This connection is elaborated on in the second stanza:

The lightning lit valleys.
My father has been in them
nurturing the stones
since time immemorial & creating trees
His loving skin slowly scatters dew like snow
His hand makes the stone sprout leaves. (Darwish, 67)

When the father was still present in those lightning lit valleys the environment was ensured of good care. He is not merely an inhabitant, but served as a steward cherishing the stones and bringing life to them. Thus, the father is not only dependent on the environment for his identity, also the environment needs the presence of the father. They are mutually depended of each other.

Aside from 'nurturing the stones / since time immemorial', the father has also been 'creating trees'. The meaning of the father creating these trees is best understood in the context of the Palestinian idea of rootedness. Rootedness is one of the main themes of Palestinian resistance poetry and fits within the larger discursive framework of *sumud* – a concept widely used in Palestinian literature, visual art and political discourse. In the first place *sumud*, or steadfastness, is used to express the persistence of Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation. One particular manifestation of steadfastness is the strong belief in the necessity of remembering. For, to speak with Månsson, the 'Erasing of memory of someone equals a complete expulsion into *manfā* [exile]. Ultimate loss is caused not by the geographical or physical separation of migration, but by the resulting forgetfulness' (Månsson 2003, 61). Thus, being steadfast means to keep resisting, but also to keep remembering.

In Palestinian poetry trees are seen as the ultimate symbol of being rooted in the physical environment and therefore often used to give expression to this steadfastness of

memory (Bardenstein 1999). Fig, olive or orange trees often represent a lost family house, a bulldozed village, or the lost homeland in general (1999). In the case of 'To my Father' I believe the trees do not necessarily represent one particular location. Rather, they stand for the father's attempt to ensure that his relationship of interdependency with the environment will always last and thereby his presence is not forgotten. Månsson supports this reading when she states that in Darwish's work 'through the tree, man is connected to the earth' (2003, 90). Moreover, 'the life of the tree is forever bound to the life of the one who planted it' (89). In other words, the father creates the trees in order to overcome the erasing effect the passing of time can have.

This particular symbolization of trees is not uncommon in Darwish's work. We see a similar form in the poem 'I Belong there'. In this poem Darwish writes about an unspecified 'I' that belongs 'on the land' (Darwish 2003, 7). In the first lines his presence on the land is immediately justified with having memories of that land. Darwish writes: 'I belong there. I have many memories' (7). Memory serves as an indicator of a sense of belonging. Darwish continues with an enumeration of other things the 'I' possesses and that support his claim of belonging on the land. Aside from having things such as 'a house with many windows', family, friends, and 'a prison cell', the first-person has 'an immortal olive tree' (7). When we take into consideration the motif of trees in Palestinian poetry, again it is most likely that this 'immortal olive tree' is used as a symbol to express the lasting relationship of Palestinians with the physical environment. The first person has memories that precede displacement and besides that the olive tree that connects him to the land.

The function of the father as producer of Palestinian rootedness is supported by the way he seems to represent not only a personal history, but continuous Palestinian presence as well. The father has been creating trees *since time immemorial*. Since there is no such thing as a father living since time immemorial, it seems that this 'father' does not refer to one particular person. Moreover, he is not called by his name, which allows him to be more than just Darwish's father. Most likely then, this father stands as a symbol of the presence of earlier Palestinian generations in the homeland. He represents the preceding generations of Palestinians that lived in the land and that channelled their energy towards maintaining a close relationship with the physical environment. This reading is supported by the admonishments he addresses to his son. The father calls on his son to abandon travelling, meaning to stay close to the homeland he has been

nurturing for so long. It seems that with this request the father tries to pass on his role as steward over the environment on to a new generation. He is urging younger Palestinians to maintain this particular connection with the physical environment.

Ultimately, the father is a condensed memory figure in which different ideas and feelings come together. He gives expression to feelings of nostalgia and longing in response to forced separation from his homeland. Secondly, the father serves to illustrate the particular connection between man and environment; they are represented as being interdependent. Thirdly, the father, through his interaction with natural elements such as trees and stones, functions as the person that firmly roots Palestinian presence in the physical environment. Moreover, this function is enhanced by his role as symbol for continuous Palestinian presence.

4. Remembering embodiment

The poem 'We Go to a Country' is set against the backdrop of exile, of not being in one's homeland, but in a completely different country. As a result of this state of exile the protagonists in this poem experience a conflict between on the one hand the missed homeland and on the other hand the new country, the unsatisfactory substitute. The representation of this conflict in 'We Go to a Country' reveals a new aspect of the relationship between Palestinians and the physical environment. Palestinians are represented as closely bound together with the environment of their homeland, to such an extent that they form one inseparable body. At the same time 'We Go to a Country' stresses the importance of remembering this relationship, in a similar way as in 'To my Father'. The relationship of embodiment must be remembered in order to avoid complete separation and exclusion.

The context of exile is immediately emphasised in the poem's title. 'We Go to a Country' seems to refer to a group of people moving away, travelling to a different location. In her dissertation Månsson describes 'common words for expressing the condition of exile and separation' in Darwish's early poetry and points out that often travelling or going on a journey is used as a metaphor for exile (2003, 55). In line with this metaphor the exiled Palestinians are represented as strangers, travellers or vagabonds who live in scarcity and are separated from the sphere of home or even entirely excluded from society (2003). The 'We' in 'We Go to a Country' is characterized in a similar way. Halfway through the poem we read: 'If wheat and water are cut off from you, eat our love,

drink our tears' (Darwish 1984, 33). When people are in need of provisions this 'We' has no food or water to offer, the only gesture of solidarity they can make is offering their love and grievances. Furthermore, in their substitute country they face 'roads that take us to every house except our house' (33). They can move freely, but are unable to reach their homes. We can conclude then, that the travelling 'We' indeed refers to Palestinians physically separated from their homeland, living in exile.

As mentioned before, this group of exiles is caught between their longed for homeland and the unsatisfactory substitute country. They do not recognize themselves in their new surroundings and feel out of place. The substitute country is not like their homeland, where Palestinians had a favoured position and, more importantly, there existed a special connection between the physicality of the Palestinian people and the Palestinian environment. This favoured position and special connection is described in the first lines of the poem by opposing the substitute country with the homeland:

We go to a country not of our flesh. The chestnut trees are not
of our bones.

Its stones are not the goats in the mountain songs, and the eyes of pebbles are not
lilies.

We go to a country that does not hang a special sun over us.

The ladies of the myths clapped their hands for us. A sea for us
and a sea against us. (Darwish, 33)

Thus, Palestine is what the substitute is not. It is a place in which people and the environment seem to form a synthesis; the country is Palestinian flesh and trees are Palestinian bones. The stones in Palestine refer to goats in mountain songs, which are possibly traditional Palestinian songs. And in Palestine pebbles resemble lilies, flowers that often figure in Palestinian poetry as a symbol for the beauty of the Palestinian homeland (Parmenter 1993). Moreover, in Palestine this group of exiles is treated with a 'special sun' and 'ladies of the myths' applaud them.

In the first two lines nature is represented as constituted by the human body. It seems that Palestinian bodies merge with the environment. This merging between body and environment is a common theme in Darwish's work, which Månsson interprets as 'a strategy for excluded groups to assume space' (2003, 200). In response to the threat of 'dismemberment ... separation and dissolution of self' the body is represented as being inextricably bound up with the physical environment (200). In other words, Palestinians

embody their homeland. For instance, Månsson describes how in the poem 'Sirhan loves a woman of joy!' 'Country is body ... [t]he earth is the garment on the exiles' bodies that in turn become extensions of the physical country and nation' (202). In 'Poem of the Land' we see a similar construction, as Darwish writes:

'I name the soil I call it / an extension of my soul ... I name my ribs / trees / Gently I pull a branch / from the fig tree of my breast' (Darwish, 146).

The final line of 'We Go to a Country' pushes the metaphor of embodiment to the ultimatum of life or death: 'The soul should find its soul in its own soul or die here' (Darwish 1984, 33). In this instance 'soul' has a double meaning. On the one hand it refers to the human soul, on the other hand it refers to the physical environment. Thus, the human soul must be able to recognize itself in its physical counterpart, i.e. the environment, or else death is the only alternative.

In the case of 'We Go to a Country' we see that memory does not necessarily constitute the relationship between Palestinians and the physical environment, but rather is put forward as a necessary element for maintaining this relationship. 'We Go to a Country' stresses the importance of remembering as a way to keep the relationship of embodiment intact. This means the function of memory in 'We Go to a Country' is similar to that in 'To my Father'. Remembering is an act of steadfastness, an attempt to counter the separation and exclusion that results from the condition of exile. Again, '[i]f forgetfulness is danger, memory is the key to attain presence and inclusion (Månsson 2003, 62). Thus, when Palestinians go to a different country memory helps to preserve the bond with their homeland.

There are four lines in particular that express this function of remembering in 'We Go to a Country'. These lines follow on the description of the homeland and read as a distinct section in this poem:

Black handkerchiefs for poets. A row of marble statues will
raise our voices.
And a threshing floor to protect our souls from the dust of
time. Roses for us and roses against us. (Darwish, 33)

According to Månsson, losing one's voice is closely related to the danger of forgetfulness. She explains how in Darwish's poetry the loss of voice aggravates the loss of memory. The

loss of voice further undermines the symbolic connection with the environment that Palestinians maintain through memory. Therefore 'silence [is] to be avoided at all costs' (2003, 62). We see this idea expressed in the first line, when Darwish writes 'A row of marble statues will raise our voices'. The image of the marble statue is one of rigid stone, an immovable object firmly planting Palestinian voices in the environment. This image of fixity strategically counters the situation of physical absence and threatened symbolic presence. It articulates the perseverance of exiled voices and thereby emphasises the importance of remembering.

The next line expands on this message. Darwish writes 'a threshing floor' will protect the exile's souls 'from the dust of time'. The threshing floor needs to be understood in the context of a trend in post-1948 Palestinian poetry. Barbara Parmenter explains that after the uprooting events of the 1948 war Palestinian authors started emphasising agricultural aspects of the Palestinian landscape, especially those 'material elements in the immediate environment' (Parmenter 1993, 73). This emphasis served to 'recapture in words and images a natural, spontaneous relationship between Palestinians and their environment' (72-73). This explanation allows us to read the threshing floor as a symbol of the Palestinian connection with the environment based on their historical rural interaction with the land. Then, if we read that the threshing floor protects the exile's soul from the dust of time, it means that through the threshing floor Palestinian presence in the homeland will be remembered.

To come to a conclusion, 'We Go to a Country' imagines the relationship between Palestinians and the environment as one of embodiment. Palestinian bodies are represented as merged with the environment. At the same time the poem stresses the necessity of remembering the relationship between Palestinians and their homeland. Only by avoiding the loss of memory and refusing to be silenced this relationship can be maintained. If we combine these two central motifs, it seems that 'We Go to a Country' calls for the remembering of embodiment. The poem is not a call for remembering *a* relationship with the environment. It urges Palestinians to remember what this relationship looks like. In one of the final lines it is mentioned how Palestinians in exile know something and see something others cannot see: 'Ah, the country where we see only what is not seen: our secret' (Darwish 1984, 33). In the substitute country they only see their homeland and the connection they have with it. They remember their secret of embodiment.

Conclusion

In this paper I have looked at the function of literary constructions of the physical environment. These representations stand in strategic relation to the motif of memory. The combination of this motif with the representations of the physical environment articulates the relationship between Palestinians and their homeland. In the poems I have analysed the physical environment is represented in the context of memory and remembering in order to preserve the relationship between Palestinians and the environment and thereby avoid complete exclusion from their homeland.

In 'Poem of the Land' the physical environment of Palestine is put forward as a conduit and a cue for remembering Land Day. This means that the hardship of displacement and exile and the unhindered relationship with the environment prior to the Nakba, are commemorated and remembered through the physical environment itself. 'Poem of the Land' serves as the medium by which the physical environment is represented as functional within Palestinian cultural memory. Thereby it specifically connects Palestinians with the physical environment of Palestine.

'To my Father' gives a better idea of what this connection between Palestinians and the physical environments looks like. The father shows how Palestinians and the physical environment are imagined as being interdependent of each other for their continued existence. At the same time the father gives expression to the steadfastness of remembering. His role in the poem emphasizes the fundamental importance of remembering for the preservation of the Palestinian people/environment relationship. Thus, on the hand the father represents continuous interdependent presence in the homeland, on the other hand he is a symbol for the steadfastness of Palestinian memory. By making this combination 'To my Father' imagines the relationship between Palestinians and the physical environment through the specific dimension of memory.

'We Go to a Country' also stresses the perseverance of memory, but adds to this the representation of the physical environment as embodied by Palestinians. To counter the danger of separation and exclusion 'We Go to a Country' represents the Palestinian people/environment relationship as one of embodiment and urges Palestinians to remember it as such.

Ultimately, these poems by Mahmoud Darwish present memory and remembering as the way to live through the hardships of exile without losing the connection to Palestine. Through remembering the Palestinian people and the environment remain deeply connected.

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Plagiaatformulier



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