Symbolism and Symbols of Resistance Movement in Mahmoud Darwish’s Poetry

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Abstract

Mahmoud Darwish, a great poet and a skilled literary figure, composes poems in both traditional and modern styles and demonstrates extraordinary talents in both styles. He employs the two poetic styles to defend causes of Palestinian people.

Darwish also employs different poetic forms and benefits from mythologies, legends, tales, Quranic stories and even holy books and scriptures of the pre-Islamic period such as Bible to compose poems and create beautiful technical images and sublimate his poetic texts. Such techniques also help him enrich his poems intellectually through the embodiment of beauty.

Darwish is regarded as the most prominent symbolic poet in the resistance literature. He is also known as the best exemplar of a humanistic poet in the world of symbols and secrets. He does not compose mundane poems but those which are replete with subtle concepts and filled with utmost beauty. His poems have been composed with extreme creativity and innovation. Besides, his poetic styles are glaring with gorgeousness. Given the use of elegant, profound, and pervasive symbols in Darwish’s poetry, the present study attempts to explore some of the symbolic themes employed by him. Accordingly, as some of poems composed by Darwish rely upon symbolic styles and have reached perfection in their originality and innovation. It is of interest to find out if such poems and poetic style deserve to be equated with the world’s greatest poems and odes.

Keywords: Darwish, symbolism, resistance movement, poetry, poetic styles.
Introduction

As symbolism came into Arabic literature and poetry in the twentieth century under the inspiration of the European culture, a great number of poets such as Adib Mazhar, Saeid Aql, Sayyab, Khalil Alhavi, al-Bayati, and Mahmud Darwish appeared in the world of poetry. Following European symbolists, these Arab poets created a close relationship between poetry and music. They believed that music with its impressive and fluent melodies is closely bound to their inner thoughts. In symbolic poems, there is no room for rigidity and stiffness as it is the musical tenderness and elegance of music that reveals the secrets inside human beings and makes poetry pleasant and enjoyable to them. On the other hand, these poets are of the conviction that meters of classic style poetry, rhymes, and their restrictions will hinder a poet’s imagination and do not allow it to move beyond the world of creation. Therefore, we are not able to review their symbolic poems very critically as every critic perceives symbolic poetry according to his/her own spirit and preferences.

Symbolic poetry refers to ambiguities and obscurities that exist in some of the words used in poems. Arabic poets, especially poets of the resistance movement use symbols to explore their nature, meaning, and sense. They hide their feelings behind the veil of symbols and interpret their intentions with the help of ambiguities existing in symbolic styles.

Symbolism

A symbol means pointing out by eyes, eyebrows, hands, and mouth. A symbol in Persian means mystery, hint, and hidden clues or anything else that lies between two or more person, of which the other party is not aware. In other words, a symbol refers to any sign, hint, word, or phrase that implies the meaning of a concept other than its superficial meaning.

Symbolists penetrate the depths of the human soul through their poems. They do not seek images of the nature to reflect the cry of their souls. In contrast, Parnassians illustrate their poetic images in visual arts to create a link between poetry and Greek marble statues and painting (Ghonimi Helal: 1994, p. 516).

After romanticism, the school of symbolism is the most important school of lyric poetry that has left a deep influence in the world. A symbol is indirect expression of inner feelings that cannot be known through contractual words. In other words, a symbol creates a link between the essence and objects. Using his perceptions, the poet interprets the symbols and is able to feel the reality without direct expression (ibid, p. 515). As such, it can be suggested that the symbolic poetry means to reveal the human spirit not in its romantic sense, but in its philosophical sense that is to seek the truth of the secrets of the soul that cannot be explained and interpreted through words. Consequently, symbolism can be defined as a school which describes affairs that are impossible to interpret or their interpretation is impossible except through magic and surprising
others. To put it another way, humans describe objects and the world in a way that it is impossible to see them by our physical eyes (Albières: 1965, p. 153)

Some critics have used ambiguous matters when defining symbolism. As a case in point, Albert Marie Schmidt I his book on symbolism, What Do I Know?, has pointed out: “What do I know about symbolism? One million vague things” [he replies]. What this indicates is that symbolism is always out of the realm of criticism and finds its way skilfully out of description and elucidation (Seyyed Hosseini, p. 214)

Ultimately, the goal of symbolism is to account for the probability of possibilities and impossibilities at the same time. Therefore, what cannot be expressed by other rhetorical ways, can be made known through symbolism. Therefore, a symbol is the art of access to what is regarded as impossibility.

As symbolism came into Arabic literature and poetry in the twentieth century under the inspiration of the European culture, a great number of poets appeared in the world of poetry. These poets believed that meters of classic style poetry, rhymes, and their restrictions will hinder a poet’s imagination and do not allow it to move beyond the world of creation. According to them the symbolic literature can give the poet a chance of moving beyond the creation and outward thoughts.

Among the poets who belong to the Palestinian resistance movement, Mohammad Darwish is considered as one of the greatest symbolist poets as he resorted to symbolism due to intense political pressures and his willingness to be free from classical prosodic meters under the influence of the Russian Symbolisms and some other issues.

Darwish's poems especially some of his new odes are characterized by unique features due to appropriate and extensive use of symbols. Accordingly, new Arabic poems, relying upon symbolic styles have reached perfection in their originality and innovation that they deserve to be equated with the world's greatest poems and odes (Abu-Haqa, 1979, p. 650).

Before explaining some symbols used by Darwish, it should be noted that each symbol used by him may have different meanings and interpretations. This section tries to interpret some of the symbols used by him as a discovery and explanation of all his symbols is not possible in a single study.

1. Wind

The wind was traditionally regarded in the literature as a symbol for fertility and productivity. Darwish has also employed it frequently as a symbol:

I am a descendant of lily flowers and crosses.
The wind becomes pregnant and then it gives birth to me as an honorable thing. (Darwish, A., 1983, p. 437)

However, for Darwish, wind is a symbol for resistance as the enemies are destroyed through its resistance against them:

*What does the wind says:*
*We are the same winds which uproot roadsters and stars* (Darwish, A., 1983, p. 578).

The wind power and its rebellion help a revolutionary poet such as Darvish to make use of it as a symbol for power. In fact, the wind is like a power that helps revolutionaries to break suddenly into the enemy’s strongholds:

*My friends’ shouting rips the power of the wind and they break suddenly into strongholds. O, my Home, wait beside the city gate, we shall return. It is not the time that people are waiting for. The wind will move only upon the Captain’s will. And then the ship will overcome all streams* (Darwish, A: 2000, p. 56)

It seems that the poet wants to challenge a verse written by Motanabbi who believed the man is not able to have all his dreams come true; life is like a wind that is moving against the sailors’ will and prevents the ship moving forward (Motanabbi: D.T., p. 472).

It is not true that human beings can fulfill all their wishes. Life is like a wind that is moving against the ships.

Such ideas and fancies which make people vulnerable and helpless overwhelm the public opinions. But Darwish is against such ideas and thus he believes that by relying upon the power of revolutionary comrades, it is possible to overcome difficulties.

### 2. Dove

The word dove in Darwish's poetry is the symbol of peace. Therefore, the poet associates it with wheat and bunches as in the following verses:

*I’ll go Where, O my dear friend? Wherever the bird is flying and the wheat is clapping. To rely on a space where a wheat bunch is waiting there* (Al-Nablesi: 1987, p. 578)

*Trees, birds, plants and birds stand for peace and resistance. Therefore, the poet hopes that the trees and branches grow and produce green leaves. The tree will remain steadfast. The tree and its branches will remain steadfast. In the light of the sun, it will grow and become green. The bird will come. There is no choice unless the bird returns. The bird will come.*

Tree is used as a symbol for the Arabic nation. As long as the roots of the tree are firm on the ground, it can grow more and more. A Palestinian man will grow like a tree as long as he
lives in his homeland. However, exile, displacement and expulsion are like an ax striking on Palestinian people. Hence, they find peace when they live like a tree besides birds. The tree is a home for people of Palestine and despite all existing tragedies, they should return back to their homeland like a bird that has no choice but to return back to the tree.

This love is not one-sided and this is not the bird that is in love with the tree. But the peace among trees is established by the birds singing there. That is why the sentence “The bird will cone” is repeated again and again as it is the greatest proof of self-confidence, hope for victory, and the anticipation of a bright future by God’s permission of God (Atawat: 1998, p. 655).

On the other hand, the return of birds requires peace and security. When things are not ok, they will not fly back. Darwish uses the word dove and its flight as symbols for the missing peace in the homeland (Yahya, 2003, p. 84):

\[
\text{The bird will fly.} \\
\text{The bird will fly.} \\
\text{Land belongs to me to rest on it.} \\
\text{I love you; I love even your fatigue.} \\
\text{My beloved and I are like two souls in one body.} \\
\text{When my beloved is sleeping, I wake up to look after her.} \\
\text{She seems in her dreams;} \\
\text{The bird will fly.} \\
\text{The bird will fly} \text{ (Darwish, B, 2000, pp. 420 and 419).}
\]

A dove is flying. Then it lands. It flies again and sits after a while. This continued flight and landing is a dream for peace that is repeated by the poet and his beloved in their minds. It is like a light that alternatively turns off and then on. Palestinians are waiting for this peace so that they can see the day when the nightmare of Israel’s occupation is over.

It seems that the poet and his beloved are two souls in one body. He protects his beloved in his dreams but his lost dreams reject him. In the last verse, the bird is about to land but it does not land at last. This is used as a symbol to show that peace and stability are out of touch. Yes! Peace is still flying and is not going to land. Nevertheless, the poet still hopes that a day will come when peace and stability will be established.

3. Birth

The word birth is some poems by Darwish is a symbol for hope for freedom and resistance as the birth of a Palestinian child means consistency of resistance which will lead to freedom (Al-Qasim B. D. T., p. 128).

As such, Darwish in his poem book, Olive Leaves, refers to this fact in a symbolic checkpoint:

\[
\text{Write down:} \\
\text{I’m an Arab.} \\
\text{My ID number is fifty thousand.}
\]
I have eight children.
And my ninth child is going to be born after the summer.
Are you getting mad? (Darwish, A., 2000, pp 36 and 35).

4. Poetry

Poetry has long served as a promotional medium in the literature and poet acted as the language of his own tribe. Thus, in the resistance literature, poetry has never been not far from its mission. Samih al-Qasim states that the function of poetry is to teach social, political, and revolutionary issues. According to him, poetry is not just for the joy and pleasure. So poetry, in his opinion, is a symbol for humane movements and social and revolutionary activities. It can be also used as a tool for training and educating people in the community (Samih al-Qasim A. D. T., p. 12):

They have put you behind bars. But is it really possible to imprison you? Are you going to be hanged at the dawn light?
They have put you behind bars. But are the prison walls are so powerful to suppress your poetry?
Darwish is also of the same opinion. He states that odes that are not useful for the purpose of educating the community should be thrown away. An ideal poetry is a poetry that is intelligible to the public so that people can learn from it. Otherwise, it is better to remain silent:
Our poems have no color
If the big ear, the laities, fail to understand them,
They are worthy of being disposed of.
And become immortal by our silence (Darwish, A., 2000, p. 28).

5. Jasmine

The term jasmine symbolizes the blood and sacrifice. The fighters, who are killed martyred when facing the enemy, are like jasmine blossoms which fall down gently on the water or ground with a farewell.
Shaker al-Nablesi says: “Jasmine in Darwish's poetry can be a symbol for Palestine. The term is similar to Palestine in some letters and rhymes (al-Nablesi: 1987, p. 314):

I seek jasmine in my dreams
A few years ago when we put a wise man in prison
The prison walls revolt against our wisdom (Darwish, A. 1983, pp. 252 and 251).
And your craze for a toy prevented you to understand those years (Darwish, A. 1983, pp. 252 and 251).
6. Autumn

Autumn is a symbol for sadness and misery and this is evident in verses composed by Darwish. Perhaps one of the reasons why this symbol has been developed is that most of the tragedies and failures suffered by Palestinians have occurred in the autumn. Jamal Abdol Nasser’s death, the Palestinians’ massacre in Sabra and Shatila camps in Lebanon, and the Lebanese ware with the Palestinian resistance movement all occurred in autumn (Yahya, 200, p. 83). As such, autumn is used as a symbol of misery and hopes the season is over as soon as possible so that people can witness growth and development (Dervish, B: 2000, p. 5):

If this autumn is the last autumn, we should get united with clouds.
To rain for plants which are hanging from over our songs.
We should rain over the trunks of myths.
If this autumn is the last autumn, we should get away from
Banishments sky because we have grown slightly taller than others’ tree.
While we did not notice the dryness of throat singing ......, there is a long way ahead.

7. Roses

Roses in Darwish's poetry shows redness or blood color so they stand for dedication and sacrifice:
We through many roses in the river to pass over roses,
Before reaching roses in al-Jalil, we will lose many roses (Dervish, A: 1983, p. 217).

8. Blood

Blood is seen as a symbol of martyrdom and sacrifice and is one of the most important poetic symbols in Palestine. Nevertheless, the pioneers and leaders of blood as a symbol in the world are Lorca, Pablo Neroda, and Arajun.

Due to its dynamism and vitality in human being, blood has been used in some of Darwish's poems as a symbol for resistance. The poet tries to give spirit to blood and revitalize it so that it can stand for resistance and steadiness (Darwish, A., 1983, pp. 220-219):

Blood is ordered by the resistance movement.
They resorted to it so that we do not sprinkle soil over valuable blood.
Blood’s request is that we bargain for its price (Ibid., p. 248).
The sound of blood was intermingled with the color of wind.
In one of his odes, Sparrows dies in al-Jalil, uses this symbol elegantly and reveals his heart hidden secrets through symbols (Ibid., p. 121).
If there were no drop of blood
There was no sign of long way ahead.
9. Niron

Niron is a symbol for tyranny and destruction of civilization. Although Niron burned Rome, the city is still firm and steadfast. Life is like bunches that fade and then hundreds of bunches grows in their place. And this is derived from realism in life and draws future horizons. Therefore, in the following lines, Niron stands for tyranny and autarchy and wheat bunches for survival.

Pharaoh died.
Niron died
And to all the captives in Babylon
Life has come (Yahya: 200, p. 88).

In one of his odes, Olive Leaves, Darwish addresses the Palestinian people: Although chains have been put in the mouth of the Palestinian and they have been handcuff with rocks of death and deprived from food, clothing, and their own national flag, and were put behind bars for the accusation of homicide and robbery, Palestinians should know that oppression and tyranny are mortal and autarchy is temporal. Yes, expatriation, displacement, detention, and chains are not able to disappoint them from resistance and survival. Besides, as long as wheat cluster grow in Palestine’s plains and mountain slopes, the hope for life and survival remain steadfast and this is the symbol for challenge and life:

They shut his moth with chains.
Handcuff him with the rock of death.
And they said you’re a murderer
They took his food, clothes and his national flag.
They threw him in jail of death.
And said that you’re a thief
Deported him from all ports
And they kidnapped his little beloved.
Then they told him: You are a refugee
O, he whose hands and eyes are bloody.
Night is mortal.
Neither detention remains.
Nor chain loops
Niron died but Roman Empire remained steadfast.
He fights with his eyes.
Wheat bundles dies (are cultivated)
Then the land of Palestine becomes (Darwish, A., 2000, p. 8-9).
10. Mother

The word mother in poems of most poets of the resistance movement especially Darwish and Samih al-Qasim is used as a symbol for the land of Palestine and a land whose sons must protect it (Darwish, A., 2000, p. 56)

Conclusion

Using the concept of symbolism, this study indicated that a symbol refers to a concept beyond its literal meaning. On the other hand, the political domination in the occupied lands of Palestine suppresses any political and instrumental combats by poets. Therefore, there is no choice for poets unless to use a symbolic style. Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. A symbol is an indirect expression of inner feelings that cannot be made known by contractual words. As a result, poets hide their emotions and feeling behind symbols and the listener interprets the symbols using his perceptions and so he can find out the truth indirectly.
2. Darwish is regarded as the most prominent symbolic poet in the resistance literature. He is also known as the best exemplar of a humanistic poet in the world of symbols and secrets. His poems are replete with subtle concepts and filled with utmost beauty.
3. It is not true to say that the only reason of the widespread circulation of Darwish's poems in the Arab world is only the emotional association between Arab readers and the issue of Palestine. However, it must be acknowledged that his poetry is directed at human emotions. In addition, his poems have been known around the world as they have reached perfection with extreme creativity and innovation.
References


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