



THE PREY BECOMING THE PREDATOR: READING AUDEN’S REFUGEE BLUES AND DARWISH’S IDENTITY CARD AS A POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

When history of erasure is repeated, its implications are felt deeper than the history itself. The displaced, the disfigured and the dislocated, in their desperate act of survival, tend to victimize the vulnerable. When one reads through the pages of dislocated landless Jews and Palestinians, one eventually traces the path that has rendered them homeless. Being a refugee, being a nameless entity, and being rendered homeless is always a traumatized status quo involving intense struggle in recreating identity. Auden’s ‘Refugee Blues’ evokes sadness of a community that has nowhere to go and that faces violent eradication. With no political identity, the refugees’ inexplicable denial of a home compels the reader to retrospect the historical and political past to understand their predicament. ‘Identity Card’ by Mahmoud Darwish is a surge of sadness but a reproachable sadness of a man who was forced to become a refugee in his own homeland. Again the traumatized cry of an Arab forces the reader to trace the trajectory that led to the exodus of the natives. If we read both the poems as a continuum, one can find that the prey has become the predator. Juxtaposing ‘Refugee Blues’ and ‘Identity Card’, this paper attempts to analyse the political discourse in nationalism and identity. The distorted reality that strikes the reader remains incomprehensible.

Tracing back to the B.C era one can find from time immemorial, Jews were expelled or sent to exile repeatedly by many rulers of Palestine. The Assyrian exile, the Babylonian exile and the Roman declaration to wipe out the Jews are well known historical events. The Jews migrated to various countries and they flourished there with the available resources and made their presence and their contribution to the countries’ economy noticeable. This later posed a threat to the natives, and anti-

Semitism grew without any reservation among European countries. The hatred reached its peak with Hitler’s propaganda to destabilize the lives of the Jews, and the generations of the migrated Jews were at the receiving end. Auden being a witness to the happenings has penned down his empathy for the German Jews in his poem “Refugee Blues.” As one traverses through the lines of Auden, the plight of the Jews and Auden’s visualization of their future get well established. Auden’s observation as a



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Asia Pacific Journals

ELK Asia Pacific Journals – Special Issue

ISBN: 978-81-930411-2-3

political analyst offers the reader a glimpse of the pathetic state of the Jews that worsened and finally resulted in execution of millions of Jewish population. The Refugee Blues is not just an individual outcry but a collective consciousness of the Jewish community. The opening lines fix the reader immediately to the context, and initially the identity of the speaker is not known or purposely kept in anonymity because of the fear of being identified as a Jew which in reality would cost them their lives. The reader is introduced to a group that is now homeless or rather deprived of a home. Both the rich and the poor, regardless of their status are now homeless having been stripped off all their possessions.

Say this city has ten million souls
Some are living in mansions, some are
living in holes:
Yet there's no place for us my dear, yet
there's no place for us.

There is neither room for returning to their
homeland now nor staying in the place that
they have made their own for 'their old
passports cannot be renewed' and hence
they are "officially dead".

Jews flourished wherever they migrated and
also established themselves in par with the
natives who felt that the Jews deprived them
their daily bread,

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got
up and said:

'If we let them in, they will steal our daily
bread';

He was talking of you and me, my dear, he
was talking of you and me.

When outsiders settle more comfortably in a
place than the insiders do, it eventually
unsettles the natives. After Hitler had taken
over as the Dictator of Germany, the hate
speeches aimed at Jews instigated every
citizen to become anti-Semitic. It did not
just stop with the boundaries of Germany.
As Hitler expanded his regime through wars
and encroachments, the wave of anti-
Semitism also spread.

Auden creates a pictorial image of the plight
of the Jews through analogies from nature.
The Poodle was decked in a jacket and a cat
could get in but the German Jews were
denied of home food and shelter. The fish in
the sea had their freedom to swim happily
but Jews were denied freedom of movement.
They were driven out of their homes, stifled
in Ghettos that had wired compounds and
were treated as sub humans. Auden draws
the imagery from the animal world to depict
the unimaginable degradation of the Jews by
the Nazis.

Being stripped of their identity and rendered
homeless, the Jews had no option other than
waiting for death at the hand of the Nazis.
For Hitler, it was ethnic cleansing, the
erasure that he felt was needed to prove to
the world that the Aryan race was superior
and the Jews were sub humans. But for the
Jews whose basic right to live was under
threat, survival was all that they would have
prayed for. They could not dream of a home
of their own in the land that they believed to



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ISBN: 978-81-930411-2-3

be theirs. The European Jews had a strong sense of belonging to the land where they grew up, and as Place Attachment theory proposes that this sense of belonging or “place attachment refers to the long term affective bond to a particular geographic area and the meaning attributed to the bond. When a person lives in a particular locale over an extended period, that person will often develop feelings of affection for, and a sense of belonging to, or being of that place so that place becomes one anchor of his or her identity”.(Lazar, Hirsch)

With no promising future ahead, all that the German Jews had to do was to hear “Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro” who wanted them killed. In his second stanza Auden makes it clear to the world that though the Jews had a land of their own once, now they cannot go there as it is no more theirs.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,

Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:

We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

Auden portrays not only the threat of being exterminated, but also the fear and despair that hovered over their lives. If they were to die at the tyrannical claws of Hitler, it would be the end all situation. But to live under life threatening condition with every day a casualty is more excruciating than being dead. The poem stops there leaving both the readers and the Jews with the uncertainty fraught with fear about their future in

Hitler's regime. The world later witnessed the heinous horror named Holocaust and millions of Jews were massacred by the Nazis. With the world war coming to an end and Germany losing the war, the Jews could finally find new homes in other European Countries and in the US, but the home that they would prefer was the land that once belonged to them.

Burdened with the realization about one's volatile condition in a land one doesn't belong to ethnically, the Jews were compelled to return to a land that was believed to have belonged to their ancestors and promised to them in Bible. This desire to return to “National Land” brought them to Palestine that had a mixed population with Arabs and Jews. The decision by the British to create two ethnic states jeopardized the national identity of the Arabs living in those parts that would then become part of Israel. This fear and uncertainty created what Edward Said in *The Question of Palestine* describes as “complex Irony: how the classic victims of years of anti-Semitic persecution and the holocaust have in their new nation become the victimizers of another people, who have therefore become victims of victims”. This brings us to the theme of our paper that proposes to discuss how one group's aspirations for an ethnic identity as prophesied in Auden's *Refugee Blues* through the lines: Once we had a country and we thought it fair/ look into the atlas and you'll find it there” led to the elimination of another as voiced in Mahmoud Darwish's poetry in general and ‘Identity Card’ in particular.



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Naomi Shihab Nye defines Mahmoud Darwish as “the Essential Breath of the Palestinian people, the eloquent witness of exile and belonging, exquisitely tuned singer of images that invoke, link, and shine a brilliant light into the world’s whole heart. What he speaks has been embraced by readers around the world—his is an utterly necessary voice, unforgettable once discovered.” (*Mahmoud Darwish, Exile’s Poet: Critical Essays*)

Identity Card, the poem published in 1964 by Mahmoud Darwish in his second anthology of poetry, *Leaves of Olive*, at the age of 22, captured the anguish of dispossessed Palestinians. This poem put him both on the national and the political map of Palestine bestowing him with the title of ‘national poet’.

The poem is said to be an outcome of the poet’s encounter with an Israeli officer who stopped him to check his papers. The first person narration of the poem provides the reader with a firsthand perspective of Darwish’s personal history which is inseparable from the collective history of Palestine. Understanding the poet’s biography offers a better insight into this poem.

Darwish’s family happened to be among (if numbers are to be believed) approximately 70,000 Arabs who fled or were expelled during 1948 ‘Nakba’ or ‘Palestinian Exodus’. Nearly 80% of the Arab population abandoned their homes during this expulsion which is also often referred to as ‘ethnic

cleansing’. After a year, Darwish along with his family returned to live in Acre, now part of Israel. But ironically they were reduced to refugees in their own homeland or to ‘internally displaced refugees’. In his interview for *The British Guardian* in 2002 he recounted, “We lived again as refugees, this time in our own country. It’s a collective experience. This wound, I’ll never forget”. He left Israel again in 1970. Later joined PLO in 1978 and was banned from entering Israel for his pro-Palestinian political views and inflammatory poetry.

This gives us enough reason to believe that “Identity Card” was indeed his literary protest against the so called colonizers who deprived him of the most primary and essential requisite of existence, the sense of belongingness. This poem rose to the popularity of becoming a ‘national song’ or a protest song, voicing the anguish of the deprived and the marginalized. The poet himself confesses, “I don’t decide to represent anything except myself. But that self is full of collective memory” (*Mahmoud Darwish — Poet of the Arab world*, by Maya Jaggi, *Published — Friday 14 June 2002*) or as he reinforces in his poem ‘Mural’,

Whenever I search for myself I find the others

And when I search for them
I only find my alien self
So am I the individual- crowd?



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His bold and rebellious outcry in this poem begins with a blatant attack on those who chose to overlook and acknowledge the presence of Arabs in Israel. "Write down!/ I am an Arab/ And my identity card number is fifty thousand." These defiant lines form the refrain of the poem. He moves on to say "I have a name without a title". Here one can draw a similarity between Auden's description of Jews in his coinage "officially dead" and the plight of Arabs staying in Israel as "present-absentees" without an official recognition.

My roots

Were entrenched before the birth of time
And before the opening of the eras
Before the pines, and the olive trees
And before the grass grew

These unsettling lines sting the reader with the poignancy of the writer's experience of being uprooted. The timelessness of the sense of belongingness to one's native land or birth place is captured in its true sense when Darwish says "my roots were entrenched before the birth of time". These emotionally charged lines also evoke the readers' sympathy while legitimizing the poet's claim over the land that was nurtured by his ancestors.

After Oslo Accord in 1995, he was allowed to return, and he settled in Ramallah under Palestinian authority. Despite gaining a new identity, Darwish's anguish failed to cease as he expressed in his *New York Times* interview, A Poet's Palestine as a Metaphor

by Adam Shatz, "I had never been in the West Bank before," he said. "It's not my private homeland. Without memories you have no real relationship to a place."..."I've built my homeland, I've even founded my state -- in my language." He chose his words, imageries and symbols to reclaim his territory, to recreate his mutilated identity. As observed in the paper "Eco Resistance in the Poetry of the Arab Poet Mahmoud Darwish", "these images evoke feelings of resistance to the colonizers expressed by the poet who is suffering from the barrenness of his homeland due to the destructive and tyrant colonizer." And this trauma becomes explicit in the following lines:

You have stolen the orchards of my
ancestors

And the land which I cultivated
Along with my children
And you left nothing for us
Except for these rocks...

The imagery of quarry and stones in the poem becomes further reminder of a painful uprooting and marginalization. Thus his early poems like 'Identity Card' are narrative of ancient Palestine, describing homeland's origin and at the same time marked by resentment because the enemy has disturbed its harmony.

Darwish makes every possible attempt to deny this indignity of their situation by manifesting the pride they cling on to, the pride they take in their humble origins:



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My father... descends from the family of the
 plow
 Not from a privileged class!...
 Teaches me the pride of the sun
 Before teaching me how to read

The poet refuses to succumb to the ploy of
 the enemies of rendering them helpless and
 thus rejects the idea of victimization when
 he writes “I do not supplicate charity at your
 doors

Nor/ do I belittle myself at the footsteps of
 your chamber/ So will you be angry?

Darwish instead chooses his poem ‘Identity
 Card’ to fearlessly challenge the usurpers;
 thus providing hope and inspiration to
 countless numbers affected by the tragedy of
 Exodus. He challenges his usurper, believed
 to be the most militarily powerful country in
 the Middle East, through the opening lines
 where he claims his strength through
 numbers.

I have eight children
 And the ninth will come after a summer
 Will you be angry?

But as Edward Said describes in ‘The
 Question of Palestine’, Darwish and his
 representatives were waging a war against a
 “difficult opponent: people recognized as
 the classical victim of history... with a
 superpower interlocutor in the US...” These
 hardships gave rise to a genre of Arabic
 writers called “resistance writers”. Edward
 Said recognizes the contribution of these
 group of artists in furthering the cause of
 liberation of Palestine in his essay “Towards
 Palestinian Self-Determination” as he

writes, “Arabic literature now boasts of a
 genre ... “resistance writing”,... a writing of
 self-assertion and of resistance to
 anonymity, political oppression, and so on.”
 Edward Said elevates Mahmoud Darwish’s
 Poem ‘Identity Card’ by bestowing it with
 the title of a national poem.

Darwish led a life of ‘wandering exile’ most
 of his life. The trauma of seeing the violence
 at a tender age of six would have left
 ceaseless ripples of traumatized childhood
 experience on him. Darwish’s bitterness
 also arises from what he said to Maya Jaggi
 in her interview for the Guardian, “My
 grandfather chose to live on a hill
 overlooking his land. Until he died he would
 watch [Jewish] immigrants from Yemen
 living in his place, which he was unable
 even to visit.” His provocative lines with
 which the poem ends probably are a result of
 this bitterness and resentment.

Therefore!
 Write down on the top of the first page:
 I do not hate people
 Nor do I encroach
 But if I become hungry
 The usurper's flesh will be my food
 Beware..
 Beware..
 Of my hunger
 And my anger!

‘Refugee Blues’ sings the blues of a
 particular group that was dislocated and
 displaced, and ‘Identity Card’ speaks in



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volumes about the aftermath of that dislocation. Considering the current developments, the end to Israel-Palestine conflict remains a dismal and distant vision. Encroachments and erasures of identity of a particular tribe or a group is not a recent phenomenon. The human civilization from time immemorial has stood a mute witness to territorial disputes escalated by clashes between cultures, religions, languages and races. The unending conflicts as presently seen in Crimea, East China Sea, Jammu Kashmir see no hope of conclusive resolution. Intervention of neutral powers has yielded no results, yet mankind has not deterred from denying dignity of life to many. Edward Said in his book "Peace and its Discontents" exclaims, "I sincerely believe in reconciliation between peoples and cultures in collision.... But true reconciliation cannot be imposed; neither can it occur between cultures and societies that are enormously uneven in power."

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ELK Asia Pacific Journals – Special Issue

ISBN: 978-81-930411-2-3

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