

Collective Identity in the Early Poetry of William Butler Yeats and Mahmoud Darwish: A Comparative Study

Mohammad Badr AlDeen Al-Hussini Hasan Mansour
Department of English
Faculty of Arts, Banha University

2016

Abstract

This paper attempts to compare the theme of collective identity in the early poetry of the youthful nationalistic phase of resistance of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) and the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008). It intends to examine the articulation of “identity” in the two poets; the identity which they wished would create for their nations, Ireland and Palestine, respectively, against oppressive imperialist/Zionist forces of erasure.

The similarity between Yeats and Darwish is not only in the composition of poetry which enacts their attitudes towards their nations and identity, but also in the subjugation of their nations by hostile oppressive forces: the English in the case of Ireland and the Israeli in the case of Palestine. Additionally, these oppressive forces have adopted similar policies, focusing on “collective dispossession” and identity erasure of the oppressed.

The paper shows how a poet can embody the nation and how poetry can indeed remind people of their identity and emphasize to them the importance of holding on the tradition of their country. In this manner, both Yeats and Darwish can mobilize their fellow men around a national heritage and encourage them not to surrender to their oppressors.

It shows that Yeats’s early poetry reveals his earlier nationalist aspirations for finding a “Unity of Culture” for the Irish people that could create a common culture, or a sense of collective identity, which would unify the Irish people against the oppressive English regime. Hence, Yeats’s early poetry is deeply rooted in the past, mythology, occultism, mortality and immortality, and vacillation between extremes. Besides, his belief in the eternal idea of beauty, symbolized in the rose, as a symbol of Ireland, moves him to say that men fight and die for the beauty of women; and since he loves Maud Gonne, he feels that the Irish could fight and die for women if they stand for Ireland. On the other hand, Darwish’s early poetry reveals his ability in forging a collective identity for the Palestinian people by communicating their suffering and loss, portraying their resistance to the Israeli oppression, and emphasizing their solid bond with the land, in poetic lines. Thus, Darwish’s early poetry rejects clinging to the past in its empty sterile qualities, revolts against romanticism, obsolete traditions, history, and mythology. Additionally, Darwish rejects Yeats’s Platonic idealism, symbolized in the rose, and associates the rose with the real world of the Palestinian struggle. As he cannot be in love with a girl and his country at one time, Darwish falls in love with his single beauty, Palestine, and dedicates his poetry to imprinting the stereoscopic picture of Palestine in the memories of his fellow countrymen.

The paper thus acknowledges that the early verse of Darwish is more realistic than that of Yeats in its articulation of identity since Darwish finds his theme in the realm of the real whereas Yeats finds his theme in the vacillation between extremes, or rather between the real and the ideal.

Key Words: William Butler Yeats, Mahmoud Darwish, Collective Identity, Homeland, Resistance, Mythology