

GEN220: General English-II

Semester II

Unit III: Poetry

- 1) Identity Card: Mahmoud Darwesh
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1) Identity Card: Mahmoud Darwesh

Mahmoud Darwesh was born on 13 March 1941, in al-Birwa in the Western Galilee region of Palestine. Having won numerous awards for his resistance poetry, Darwesh is often described as the national poet of Palestine. He was a strong proponent of Palestinian rights and very strong critic of any kind of control on Palestinian life or territories by the Israeli government. His poem 'Identity Card' as a typical example of resistance poetry is very crucial in this context. Identity Card is something that every Palestinian living in the West Bank, Gaza as well as Palestinian Arabs living inside the state of Israel have to carry to prove their identity. It is symbol of control on Palestinian people. Those who don't carry the identity card issued by Israeli government are disallowed to enter the occupied territories.

Darwesh's family were land owners. His village was occupied by Israeli army in 1948. They left their homeland and lived in exile. Darwesh died in exile on 9 August, 2008 in Houston, Texas, USA. His poetry captures the suffering of people in exile but there is also hope about the inevitability of their return. His poem 'Identity Card' is infused with a revolutionary spirit. It was first published in Arabic as "Bitaqat Hawaiyah". The poem received a tumultuous reaction on 1 May 1965 when Darwesh recited it to an audience in Nazareth. Within days the poem spread throughout the Arab world and created a collective conscious about the assertion Arab identity: Write down I am an Arab. It became a tool of cultural resistance for people of Palestine.

This is a poem about assertion of your identity in the face of extreme oppression, when your identity, who you are, your race exposes you to brutal mental and physical abuse. In this scenario, asserting your identity is no less a feat than those performed by the epic heroes of the past. Your identity makes your oppressors angry and expressing it freely without fear as the poet does in the poem (by repeating the lines " Write down/ I am an Arab several times in the poem) makes them almost mad with fury and frustration. The poet even asks the oppressors who enquire into his identity and ask him who he is in order to intimidate him whether the fact that he is an Arab, has eight children and, most of all, the fact that he does not bow down before them makes frustrates and infuriates them. (Refer to the lines "Are you angry?" and "Does that anger you?" in the poem). It is implied that although the poet does not care, he is fully aware that his very existence offends and enrages them.

Identity Card

BY MAHMOUD DARWESH

Write down:

I am an Arab.

My ID card number is 50,000.

My children: eight

And the ninth is coming after the summer.

Are you angry?

Write down:

I am an Arab.

I work with my toiling comrades in a quarry.

My children are eight,

And out of the rocks

I draw their bread,

Clothing and writing paper.

I do not beg for charity at your door

Nor do I grovel

At your doorstep tiles.

Does that anger you?

Write down:

I am an Arab,

A name without a title,

Patient in a country where everything

Lives on flared-up anger.

My roots...

Took firm hold before the birth of time,

*Before the beginning of the ages,
Before the cypress and olives,
Before the growth of pastures.
My father...of the people of the plow,
Not of noble masters.
My grandfather, a peasant
Of no prominent lineage,
Taught me pride of self before reading of books.
My house is a watchman's hut
Of sticks and reed.
Does my status satisfy you?
I am a name without a title*

*Write down:
I am an Arab.
Hair coal-black,
Eyes brown,
My distinguishing feature:
On my head a kufiyah topped by the ighal,
And my palms, rough as stone,
Scratch anyone who touches them.
My address:
An unarmed village—forgotten—
Whose streets are nameless,
And all its men are in the field and quarry.
Are you angry?*

*Write down:
I am an Arab
Robbed of my ancestors' vineyards
And of the land cultivated
By me and all my children.
Nothing is left for us and my grandchildren
Except these rocks...
Will your government take them too, as reported?
Therefore,
Write at the top of page one:
I do not hate people,
I do not assault anyone,
But...if I get hungry,
I eat the flesh of my usurper.
Beware...beware...of my hunger,
And of my anger.*

(Translated by Salman Hilmy)

Reference:

Hilmy, Salman. ““ID Card” by Mahmoud Darwish— A Translation and Commentary”.
Washington Report: On Middle East Affairs. 2017. Web.

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Aug. 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUQrqd8sd_g

2) Digging: Seamus Heaney

'Digging' is one of the most widely known poems of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney and it serves as the opening poem of Heaney's debut collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). This is a poem in which the poet digs/delves into his ancestral roots and proudly identifies with them. Let's read it and think about our own roots.

Digging

BY SEAMUS HEANEY

*Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.*

*Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down*

*Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.*

*The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.*

*By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.*

*My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.*

*The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.*

*Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.*

Analysis of the poem:

“Digging” is a poem by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. The poet is a Catholic native of a predominantly Protestant Northern Ireland which is still under England.

The one metaphor that runs through the whole poem is that of “digging”, which is also the title of the poem. “Digging” is something which the poet wants to associate with because he has grown up in an environment where the main occupation of the people was farming and he describes the sounds and sensations associated with this activity precisely. As is evident from the lines: “Under my window, a clean rasping sound / When the spade sinks into gravelly ground: / My father, digging.” (“Digging” 3-5).

These lines bring clear and precise images of the sharp edge of a spade sinking into soil which contains gravel. It is not only the image we see, he makes us hear the sound of the process. The fact that the poet loves it, is observed from ‘a clean rasping sound’ expression.

Because the poet is a Catholic from a Protestant Northern Ireland which is still torn by civil strife between the Catholics who don’t want to be a part of the British Union and Protestants who are die-hard supporters of England, this is bound to have an effect on his poetry as is clear by the simile he has used in the very second line where he compares his pen to “a gun”.

Although the poet identifies with his forefathers with all his heart, he realizes that he is not capable of doing what they used to do. He cannot be a brawny and hardy farmer like his forefathers; he cannot handle a spade. This is shown in the lines: “but i have no spade to follow men like them.” (28).

But the poet doesn’t give up. He says that he has his pen in his hand “snug as a gun” and: “I will dig with it.” (31).

The metaphor of “digging” elaborated throughout the poem represents poet’s quest for his distant roots. He will handle the past with his pen as his forefathers did to the earth with their spade. He will dig into the past and describe it. He will narrate where his people came from; he will describe how his people suffered; he will describe how they have been victims of invasions; he

will describe how they were brought to the edge of extinction by the negligence of the state during a famine; he will describe the course his people have taken through history. This is how he will define who his people are and ultimately who he himself is, and this narrative will be in opposition to the official narratives.

References:

Heaney, Seamus. "Digging". *Poetry Foundation*. Web.

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3)

This is a Photograph of Me
BY MARGARET ATWOOD

*It was taken some time ago
At first it seems to be
a smeared
print: blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;*

*then, as you scan
it, you can see something in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree
(balsam or spruce) emerging
and, to the right, halfway up
what ought to be a gentle
slope, a small frame house.*

*In the background there is a lake,
and beyond that, some low hills.*

*(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.*

*I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.*

*It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or how small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion.*

*but if you look long enough
eventually
you will see me.)*

Analysis of the poem:

Margaret Atwood's "This is a Photograph of Me" has two parts: the part that is outside the parentheses (the first three sentences divided into 14 lines of uneven length) and the part that is within the parentheses (the remaining three sentences divided into 12 lines of uneven length).

In the first five lines of the poem the poet/ the narrator begins to describe a vague and nebulous photograph:

"a smeared

print; blurred lines and grey flecks

blended with the paper;"

Then as we reach the sixth line, she starts to give the formless content of the photograph an uncertain shape by saying that if we pay close attention to it, things that seem like a branch, a gentle slope and a small house begin to emerge out of the mist and the formlessness:

"a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree

(balsam or spruce) emerging

and, to the right, halfway up

what ought to be a gentle

slope, a small frame house."

She goes on to describe the background of this blurry photograph:

"In the background there is a lake,

and beyond that, some low hills."

Here ends the part outside the parentheses."

Here, dear students, you must pay attention to the fact that although half of the poem is done and the poem is titled "This is a Photograph of Me", the image of the poet or the narrator (who is supposed to be the subject of the photograph) has not been described anywhere (either in the background or the foreground of the photo). Don't you think it is odd? Well, think about it and come up with your own explanations for this apparent discord between the title and the content of the poem. Let me start you off with a hint: It is intentional on the part of the poet.

Now starts the second half of the poem—the part within the parentheses. It is as if this part was not an important part but just an unnecessary afterthought or a non-essential addition. However, it is in this part of the poem that we learn that the photograph under discussion was taken on the day after the narrator drowned and that the vague contours of the narrator's body could be detected just under the surface of the lake in the background of the photograph if we look closely and long enough:

“I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.

...

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.”

Again the discord between the formal features and the content of the poem. The part within the parentheses should deal with unimportant details. On the contrary, it contains the most important details. Why might that be? Try to come up with your own explanations. However, to start you off, it must be mentioned that it is clearly intentional on the part of the poet.

Here ends the second/parenthetical half of the poem.

4)

The Moment

BY MARGARET ATWOOD

*The moment when, after many years
of hard work and a long voyage
you stand in the centre of your room,
house, half-acre, square mile, island, country,
knowing at last how you got there,
and say, I own this,*

*is the same moment when the trees unloose
their soft arms from around you,
the birds take back their language,
the cliffs fissure and collapse,
the air moves back from you like a wave
and you can't breathe.*

*No, they whisper. You own nothing.
You were a visitor, time after time
climbing the hill, planting the flag, proclaiming.
We never belonged to you.
You never found us.
It was always the other way round.*

Analysis of the poem:

“The Moment” by Margaret Atwood is composed of 18 lines which form three stanzas of 6 lines each. The lines are uneven in length. The first and the second stanzas (i.e. the first 12 lines) are made up of a single sentence while the third stanza (the last 6 lines) is made up of 6 sentences.

The poem deals with the willful thinking on the part of humans that they could own nature or any part of it, whether it is land, trees, animals, water bodies and the like. After years of hard work and enduring and surmounting innumerable difficulties when we finally get a house, a piece of land in a country we call our own, we think the house, the piece of land, the island on which we live and the country the island is a part of belong to us in one way or the other, we think that we have earned the right to be the masters of these things.

“you stand in the centre of your room,

house, half-acre, square mile, island, country,

knowing at last how you got there,

and say, I own this,”

In claiming ownership of all this, we forget one important thing: this concept of laying claim to a part of Nature or the world is entirely artificial and completely alien, irrelevant and insignificant to the overall scheme of things in the natural world. The moment we claim ownership of any part of this natural world we go against its very essence. We no longer seek or are able to enjoy (or even understand) the comfort that a shady tree can provide, and the soothing effect that birdsong is able to give; our actions in pursuit of material gain corrupts the nature of which we are a part.

“the cliffs fissure and collapse,

the air moves back from you like a wave

and you can't breathe.”

It is as if the natural world, in response to our unnatural pursuits, withdraws from us, leaves us alone, and doesn't care what happens to us. After all we are just another species in a long list of species that have come and gone on the immense geological stage of this planet.

The natural world seems to whisper to us that we might think that because through our efforts and hard work we have got the opportunity to live in a house on a piece of land on a certain island in a certain country we own that piece of land or, in a collective way, that island or that country, but we are mistaken: we own nothing; none of the above entities belong to us; we are just passing through; our existence on the stage of nature is ephemeral, individually, as nations and as a species.

“No, they whisper. You own nothing.

You were a visitor, time after time

climbing the hill, planting the flag, proclaiming.”

In fact, natural entities like trees, animals, forests, rivers, seas, land and the like cannot belong to humans in any sense of the word “belong”. On the contrary, it is we who belong to Nature—we are just one of the products of the highly complex and fecund way in which nature works: the evolutionary process.

“We never belonged to you.

You never found us.

It was always the other way round.”

However, in the immense arrogance typical of human beings, we rarely act in ways that give the impression that we realise our humble and shaky position in the overall scheme of things in Nature.

Notice how the poet personifies the natural entities. She talks about “soft arms of trees” undoing their embrace from around a human being once they think in terms of owning or laying their claim to, individually or collectively, things that are either a part of Nature or derived from it.

“...the trees unloose

their soft arms from around you,”

The poet further ascribes the human property of speech (although it is just whispering) to the entities such as land, trees and the like that are a part of nature in the last stanza.

“No, they whisper. You own nothing.”

The poem must also be seen in the historical context of the European and, especially, the British and French colonisation of North America (the USA and Canada). These colonists from across the Atlantic Ocean simply came and began to lay claim to huge swaths of land based on their superior technology, displacing and massacring the indigenous people who had lived on the land for ages. Not only that, they viewed the land and Nature there as something to be subdued to human will. Thus, Vandana Shiva in her essay entitled “Everything I Need to Know I learned in the Forest” says:

“Robert Boyle, the famous 17th-century chemist and a governor of the Corporation for the Propagation of the Gospel Among the New England Indians, was clear that he wanted to rid native people of their ideas about nature. He attacked their perception of nature “as a kind of goddess” and argued that “the veneration, wherewith men are imbued for what they call nature, has been a

discouraging impediment to the empire of man over the inferior creatures of God.”” (Shiva, 2012)

Reference:

Atwood. Margaret. “This is a Photograph of Me”. Poems Hunter. Web.

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