Identity and Alterity in Contemporary Arabic Poetry

Perspectives towards the "West"

in poems of Maḥmūd Darwīš, Adūnīs and Fuʿād Rifqa¹

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In their search for identity, Arab writers have for many generations often tried to define themselves in relation to the other, the other being in most cases the European.²

Mohammed M. Badawi is one of many scholars who discuss the impact of European intervention in the Eastern Mediterranean on the development of Arab identity and literature.³ This paper aims to reconstruct the reflections of three Arab writers on this process through their poetry. As Maḥmūd Darwīš, Adūnīs and Fuʿād Rifqa have lived either in Western Europe or in the U.S., they may be considered as writers who were confronted with different influences. This paper will examine how they approach the question of identity in relation to the so-called "West". Do their perspectives subscribe at all to the binary construct of Arab alterity regarding the "Western other"? Despite the central role played by identity throughout all the periods of their writing, this paper will focus on poems published after the Six-Day War in 1967. The underlying question addressed is: How do these writers portray identity after the supposed shattering of the Pan-Arabist dream?

Maḥmūd Darwīš writes poetry to preserve an endangered identity which for him is rooted in spatial terms. His expulsion from Palestine creates an absence that provokes a crisis

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² (Badawi 1993, 5)
of identity. His poem "I am from there" (نا من هناك, 1986) expresses this existential confusion. By repeated ellipses, the speaker lists his possessions beginning with memories that seem to be the essence of his reality. He continues to mention that he has "siblings", "friends", an "eternal olive tree", a "house with large windows" and in contrast, a "prison cell with a single cold window". It becomes clear as he progresses that the sole remaining spatial reference is his origin. His use of "there" instead of "here" indicates that he is no longer present at the place of his roots. The speaker of this poem is portrayed as an individual, at the same time representing those who share his fate. He draws a parallel to other members of his community by stating "I was born as other people are born". The reference to birth also emphasises a common humanity and the maternal allegory of Palestine. In this poem, the "other" occupies his identity-establishing space without being named or addressed.

This differs to a later poem, "The raven’s ink" (جَنَّة الغراب, 1995). The speaker of this piece attempts to approach his interlocuter who takes the form of a raven. This figure appears in the Quranic version of the story of Cain and Abel to show Cain how to bury his brother’s corpse. In the beginning, the "other" is intangible and can only be described as the "dark voiced bell of sunset". The Arabic terms for "sunset" (جَرَب) and "raven" (جَرَب) are morphologically linked to "absence" (جرب), "strangeness" (جراب) and "West" (جرب). All these connotations implicitly reference the "other". The speaker desperately accuses him of fratricide whilst affirming decisively that a future may only be conceivable together. His statements that "There is a single door to our sky" and "Our resurrection will be deferred" suggests that their future will be entwined, whether or not they desire it. The speaker invites

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1 In this paper, Israel is considered as a representative of the constructed "West".
2 All Arabic quotes translated into English follow my own translation except if they are from the poem "The raven’s ink" which was translated by Jeffrey Sacks (see Bibliography). (Darwisch 1996, 15)
3 "La terre est une mère tendre et nourricière, c’est une amante généreuse et féconde, elle est la vierge consolatrice, et la femme est une plaine fertile, l’homme se répand sur elle comme du blé et l’irrigue de ses larmes." (Zeghidour 1982, 248 f.)
4 (Darwisch 2002, 76-9, Darwish 2006, 54-9)
the "other" to "Be my second brother" and says "I am you in words". This exemplifies the humanisation of the enemy who could even become a brother.

Adûnîs develops his concept of identity through the writing process itself. The essential concept in his poems is the body rather than space. In the short poem "The Minaret" ("المئذنة", 1968), alterity is clearly visible in the juxtaposition between the "victim" and the "infiltrator". It narrates how an abstract stranger enters the speaker’s space and imposes his rule upon it. His sole action is to "buy the minaret" and "build a chimney on it". Adûnîs hereby confronts the supposed "Western" concept of modernity which he presents as based on industrialisation. The minaret stands as a synecdoche for a mosque. Rather than representing a theological vision of Islam, the minaret, that is personified as "crying", illustrates a vision of traditional "Arabic-Islamic" civilisation with an emphasis on the community of believers. This perspective is ignored by the stranger who comes to possess an object rather than to interact with other subjects.

Although he refers to the diametric opposition between "occident" and "orient", he subverts these categories in the eponymous poem ("الغرب والشرق", 1968). He may proclaim a new geo-political configuration, but he does so with reference to the same old categories. This poem stages "Western" intervention in the Middle East as contingent upon economic interests which is indicated by the metaphor of a "child intoxicated with oil". It also mentions a new "map" of the region which alludes to its reshaping after the First World War. In the end, both "orient" and "occident" are depicted as one and the same “grave”. For this poet, the shared fate is more fundamental than the creation of a new community based on innovative concepts.

8 (Adonis 2004c, 25)
9 (Adonis 2004a, 82)
This understanding of identity changes in the poem "The Pearl" (النحلة, 1968) when the speaker’s focus shifts from an external alterity to his own "self". This poem is marked by binary semantic fields such as water and fire as well as dark night and light and culminates in the thought of acquiring knowledge. The speaker describes himself as a "prophetic fever". Both the night and the earth are personified as bodies that the speaker wants to embrace. He appears to fall in love with the entire world while withdrawing into his poetry. "I am a book| my blood is ink| and my limbs are language", he states. In this verse, language, poetry and writing are allegorical representations of the speaker’s body. Instead of drawing an ideal picture, however, Adūnīs chooses to break the positive perspective with references to destruction. Both the terms for language ("kalāmu") and ruins ("rakāmu") are connected through a rhyme and illustrate the speaker’s internal conflict and his general sense of alienation caused by the metaphorical "broken mirrors of history".

Fu’ād Rifqa differs essentially from the other two poets. For in his writings, identity is depicted as antecedent, meaning, it is existent before it can be thought and formulated. This concept is reminiscent of the philosophical idea of equi-primordiality which regards "world, language, and humankind" as the three archetypal phenomena of existence. This vision provides his poems with a deep sense of internal calm. However, Rifqa’s approach gradually changes. Until the early 80s, he follows the purpose of writing against the instability of the world and reacts with a withdrawal into the "self". Later, he prefers to open up and merge with the universality of creation. His speaker wishes neither to return somewhere like Darwiš’s nor to stay like Adūnīs’, but to wander the world. Consequently, his poems do not comprise any explicit alterity but instead, he attempts to encounter "the other" with candour and fascination.

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10 (Adonis 2004b, 85)
11 The reference to knowledge is linked to Enlightenment in this case.
12 (Rentsch 2013, 398) Since this text was published in German, I translated these terms into English.
This attempt becomes most visible in the mode of intertwining poetry and philosophy of both "cultural" backgrounds as exemplified in the poem "Hölderlin" ("هولدرلين"), 1970. In numerous interviews, Rifqa expressed his personal closeness to German literature and his aim to build bridges between different cultures. "Hölderlin", for instance, is a poem referring to the German Romanticist poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) and is composed of different dialogical levels due to changing speakers. The first speaker addresses his comrades and wishes to build towers for them that shall illuminate their night-time journeys. This metaphor refers not only to lighthouses but also to the towers of the German city Tübingen which are named after Hölderlin. The speaker thereby expresses his aim to enlighten their ways both in a spatial-visual regard and on the philosophical-poetic level.

It is the poet who receives a "divine guest" in this piece. This poem thus draws a parallel between the European stream of Romanticism and Islamic mysticism: both stage the poet as the mediator between the divine and the earthly spheres. The poem’s form reflects this hybridity, since it shows a crossed rhyme in the second stanza ("tūmi", "as-sāhirīn", "al-ātti", "as-sinīn"). Rifqa neither uses a classical Arabic mono-rhyme nor free verses, but adapts a European structure of rhyme to Arabic verses without imitating any particular German form of poetry.

For him, the quest for identity is one that ties all human beings together. This thought is particularly reflected in the poem "Trial" ("محاكمة", 1993). Its speaker appears unable to formulate his existence. A second speaker asks him several questions such as "When were you born?" and "Where are you heading to?" which he cannot answer but with abstract metaphors. One of them is, for instance, that "the sources and beginnings are eternal". The last question is "Who are you?" Although the first speaker does not know how to respond to

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13 (Rifka 2001, 44)
14 (Jentzsch 2004, 32)
15 Both poets shared the experience of living in this city.
16 (Rifka 1994, 82)
this question either, he is not concerned. Nature seems to give him certainty, for he refers to natural phenomena such as seasons and the wind. The second speaker is not allowed to judge this approach. He only interrogates his counterpart, but does not impose any particular thoughts on him. Rifqa’s concept of identity is static in the sense of staying connected to the comprehensiveness of the universe, though it is depicted as most dynamic from within.

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Conclusion

As this analysis has shown, the quest for identity is a key theme for these three authors. However, their respective concepts are grounded in different assumptions. Both Darwīš and Adūnis apply the opposing categories of an external and internal space. Moreover, they share an emphasis of the past. In their poems, past activities have repercussions in the present and the future.

Neither of them employs an essentialist "occidentalism". Instead, the speakers of their poems turn against specific aspects related to "the other". For both authors criticise his influence on the internal space, namely occupation for the former and the supposed "European" concept of modernity for the latter.

All three of them share the premise that poetry and writing are crucial to their way of retrieving, reconfiguring or realising identity. For Darwīš, writing is the virtual possibility to preserve a lost form of identity. Adūnis regards it to be the path taken in his search for an identity that is adapted to present circumstances. As for Rifqa, writing represents an approach to becoming one with the cosmos.

Regarding their positions towards the "West", it may be concluded that these three poets realise a dialogue between the literature traditions of different backgrounds. None of their speakers is defined as exclusively Arab. Instead, they create a collective sense of identity by evoking shared experiences and aims: first, the community of fate and the vision of a new "us" in the poems of Darwīš; second, the "Arabic-Islamic" tradition and the people in Adūnis’
poems; and third, the human community in Rifqa’s poems. Each of them finds a different answer to the question of how to define the "self" in relation to the "other".

Bibliography

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