

Riffling Through Words in Unsettled Poetics: An Anatomization of Palestinian Spoken Word Poems of Resistance

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Resistance can occur in any space-time where power dynamics are articulated. Israel-Palestine conflict has turned out to be a different facet of violent resistance. Palestinian spoken word poems in particular are gaining international attention. However, the elite academia still considers this genre as inferior to conventional poems. The aim of this study is to prove that the leanness of language and lack of ornamentation of the of the Palestinian performance poems act as powerful tools in conveying resistance; and, as poems of resistance they stand on par with conventional poems of resistance. A textual analysis of the concepts of eclecticism vs. parochialism and Lesely Jeffries' concept of negation aids the argument.

Key Words: Performance poetry, Spoken word poetry, Palestinian Performance poems

Introduction

Spoken word poetry has brought out a new service in viewing poetry that is devoid of abstract complications. It has provided safe grounds for the masses to imbibe the intended message. It is slowly gaining popularity in the popular culture and the wide acceptance is in itself an answer for the sceptics. Palestinian spoken-word poems, in particular, have received international applause and it has created many Palestinian sympathisers. However, spoken word poems are often detested by the academic circle for its starkness. "The flailing, stylized vocals will be interesting enough on their own that no one will notice how bad the actual writing is (2)" says Paul Vermeersch, a critic. Many critics like Paul Vermeersch have spoken against the infringement of performance poetry into the poetic genre. It is a fact that in spoken word poetry one may not get the luxury of relishing the intellectual pleasure of deciphering the hidden meaning as in the conventional poems.

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However, as poems of resistance the lack of embellishments aids to provide a direct dart in conveying the meaning. Thus the aim of the study is to prove that the leanness of language and lack of ornamentation of the performance poems act as powerful tool in conveying resistance and as poems of resistance they stand in par with the conventional poems of resistance.

Palestinian spoken-word poems of resistance have its own contribution in the digital intifada and are considered as the voice of resistance. Resistance poems usually convey protest against a dominating authority which may be in the form of patriarchal norms, the autocratic rule or even the corporate culture. They usually takes two stance one in the form of active resistance and the other in the form of passive resistance. The active resistance poems convey immense range of anger and it clearly brings out the rage against the dominating figure. The prassive resistance point finger at the subjugation encountered by the dominated group and it is more of a self- sympathising. Most of the Palestinian spoken word poems belong to the former category.

Eclecticism vs Parochialism

The apt strategy to understand a text is through comparison and it is vis-a vis with the Structuralists notion of meaning as relative and differential with other sets of meaning. The spoken-word poems of Rafeef Ziadah and Remi Kanazi are studied against the conventional poems of Mahmoud Darwish and Samih Al Quasim. The use of eclecticism vs. parochialism and application of various degree of connotation is studied to prove the same.

Eclecticism denotes to the redefining of philosophical or other abstract concepts like the reversal of myths in order to convey a specific message. Ludmilla Jordanova rightly remarks that eclecticism “ is precisely the ability to embrace complexities while making sense of them, and to think flexibly about diverse phenomena at distinct analytical levels, that characterises historians' purchase on the past” (*History in Practice*, 53).Most conventional poems of resistance are more generic and the poets usually try to bring universality into it. It is an accepted fact, at least in the academic circle, that universality is the hallmark of any literary work. However, the spoken-word poems straightjacket itself from universality and focus on the current issues at hand. The minimal use of eclecticism in the spoken-word poems provides a better conduit of carrying the intended message to the audience. Here, the audience can understand and relate to it without the hindrance of abstract concepts. An overlook of the conventional and the spoken word poems becomes essential in proving this stance.

Eclecticism can be easily deduced from the poems of Mahmoud Darwish, who is considered as the national poet of Palestine. The element of mysticism shrouds in his poems even though some are pure personal. Dr. Marwan Asmar, a literary critic, has pointed out that in the poem “In Jerusalem”, the poet speaks about the existence of nonexistence. The mysticism in the poem circles around question of existence and the poem, in an elusive manner, points figure towards the enemies who are the reason for

their predicament. The act of resistance is given a romantic aura and a tone of self-sympathising can be deciphered.

I fly
 then I become another. Transfigured. Words
 sprout like grass from Isaiah's messenger
 mouth: "If you don't believe you won't be safe."
 And my hands like two doves
 on the cross hovering and carrying the earth
 But I think
 to myself: Alone, the prophet Muhammad
 spoke classical Arabic. "And then what?" Then what? (12-20)

Jerusalem has always been a controversial space and is purely visible right from the annals of history. The poet has elucidated voices from the three religions whose hub of existence is indebted to the city of Jerusalem. Elucidation is made from the three major religions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The poet compares himself to the Christ figure which denotes suffering. However, the absence of resurrection is symbolic as seen in the last line "and I forgot, like you, to die (26)." The prophet Isaiah's words blend with that of Prophet Muhammad in order to show the existence of non-existence. The different positions of viewing reality and its authenticity which eventually led to the crusades are questioned by the poet in the lines "how /do the narrators disagree over what light said about a stone? / Is it from a dimly lit stone that wars flare up? (7-9)." It, at the same time, throws light at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict where the Israeli's claim the land purely on Biblical bases. Element of eclecticism is ironically manoeuvred by referring to religious icons in order to show that their existence in Jerusalem is a way of nonexistence since the oppressors are more powerful. The ephemerality of transfiguration is in itself denotes eclecticism which points toward many abstract interpretations.

However, the Palestinian spoken-word poems are more direct and they do not resort to eclecticism in conveying the intended message. It, in turn allows the intended message to reach the audience without the hindrance of any abstract concept and the audience can easily sympathize or empathize with the Palestinian cause. "We Teach Life Sir" by Rafeef Ziadah is an apt example. The poem is a response to the Israeli massacre at Gaza. The poet criticizes the media for not taking the matter with its seriousness. The poem is presented as an answer to a journalist who questions the poet on why the Palestinians teach so much hatred. The parochialism of the poem can be deduced from the following lines:

We teach life, sir
 We Palestinians teach life after they have occupied the last sky

We teach life after they have built their settlements and apartheid walls
 We teach life, sir. (21-24)

The absence of eclecticism or the parochial approach is very evident and the poet has resorted to more of a direct retort. The active resistance is exemplified by directly asserting that they teach life or in other words they teach the world how to survive when they have lost the “last sky” and when their homes have been alienated from them with “apartheid walls”. The poet questions the international media for attributing the terrorist tag on them. The absence of romantic aura and the lack of eclecticism have provided space for direct expression. However, it is to be noted that the poem does not at the same time have a prosaic style. The internal alliteration and the use of refrain has given emphasis to the poetic voice.

Negation

Roman Jakobson prioritizes the poetic function over others and asserts in *Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* that “the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination (358).” This clearly shows that the poetic language is itself an admixture of selection and combination and the use of negation is not accidental. In Lesely Jeffries words “Negation refers to a particular way in which language reflects human cognition’s view of the world. Linguistic representations of opposition encourage the reader to view phenomena as being somehow opposed to each other” (*Stylistics*, 32). It is to be noted that every Negation presupposes a corresponding assertion but every assertion does not presupposes a Negation. Negative connotation has advantages on its own especially in the area of resistance literature. Negation thus has charm in itself and at times it has more power in asserting an idea or conveying resistance. Negation can be categorized into two, namely implicit and explicit negation. Spoken word poems have more explicit negation compared to the conventional resistance poems. In explicit negation affirmation can be easily deduced while in implicit negation an impediment of Implicature is seen. The affirmation mentioned here denotes to the presupposed meaning that can be decoded from a Negation and Implicature denotes to the implied meaning that is not articulated directly. The analysis of the explicit and implicit negations in the Palestinian conventional and spoken word poems of resistance is as follows.

The poem “We Teach Life, Sir” is an answer to the journalist who asked the poet why the Palestinians teach so much hatred. The poem is also direct retort to the attitude of the international media who handled the Israeli-Gaza conflict diplomatically. The context of the poem is the Gaza massacre of 2014 and the poet is against the international media who were more interested in focusing on the statistical data of the calamity and also in dramatizing the catastrophe. Moreover, the media did not hesitate to blame

Hamas. In this respect, the Negation is used as a tool to exemplify the protest against the stance of the international media. The Negation is more direct and the assertion can be deduced without the hindrance of any Implicature as shown in Table 1.

$\sim P$	P
(1) "But still, he asked me"(5)	In spite of all the calamities he, the journalist dared to ask the question on why the Palestinians inflict so much hatred.
(2) "But today, my body was a TV'd massacre"(17)	The Palestinian portrayal in the international media reached its zenith when they turned away its head from the political issues and concentrated more in dramatizing the catastrophe.
(3) "But they felt sorry" (19)	Ironical affirmation and is pointed towards the international media.
(4) "not exotic", "not terrorist"(23)	It asserts that we, the Palestinians are fighting for justice denied and how can an outsider term it as exotic or terrorism
(5) "Wouldn't have to hear the sound of bombing for the rest of their life the way I do"(26)	The poet has encountered hear the sound of bombing and the catastrophe right from my birth
(6) "This is not political"(31)	This is political
(7) "And no sound-bite, no sound-bite... will bring them back to life." (33)	The dead are dead and the question of whom does the news benefit can be deciphered

Table 1: deciphering meaning from negation to assertion

Here, the meaning is direct and can be easily deciphered if one is well acquainted with the socio-political background of Palestine. In the same respect explicature can be deciphered in the spoken word poem “The Poem Will Not End Apartheid” by Remi Kanazi. In this poem the poet not only criticizes the Israeli government and the U.S but the Palestinian political party Fatah as well.

<i>~P</i>	<i>P</i>
(1) Sometimes I don't know who to hate more	Hostility toward Israel and the political party Fatah are portrayed and the intended ironic stance is evident.
(2) And don't give a nickel to their people	The political parties like Fatah are not focused towards the betterment of the people.
(3) Why doesn't try implementing one in Israel first	It is satirical and it is a way of telling that why don't they mind their own business.
(4) Doesn't mean that the bones you built it on have fully decomposed.	Just because you occupied our land claiming it as yours and it does not alter the truth.
(5) Because we never asked you to go back to Europe	We never asked you to go back to your place of origin as you did.

Table 2: deciphering meaning from negation to assertion

The explicit negation gives an aura of authentication and assertion at the same time. The encoded message is decoded with much ease, thanks to the uncomplicated representation of connotative meaning. However, in the conventional poems of resistance the negation cannot be easily decoded because it is impeded by Implicature. For instance, in the poem “Passport” the poet represents the loss of Palestinian identity by resorting to the metaphor of passport which is taken away from him. The resistance is in a way of not accepting the demarcated boundary created by Israel.

<i>~P</i>	<i>I</i>
(1) “They did not recognize me in the shadow”(4)	They, the Israeli's did not recognized the poet in all his misery
(2) “They suck away the colour in the passport”(9)	They suck away his identity
(3) “Don't leave me pale like the moon”(11)	Pleading not to leave him alone in this dilemma (pale moon symbolizes alienation)

(4) "Don't leave the palm of my hand without the sun"(12)	Pleading not to leave him without an identity (sun symbolizes self)
<i>I</i>	<i>P</i>
(1) They, the Israeli's did not recognized the poet in all his misery	They conquered our land and still failed to recognize the condition we are into
(2) They suck away his identity	They took not only our land but our own identity.
(3) Pleading not to leave him alone in this dilemma (pale moon symbolizes alienation)	Ironical – it seems like pleading but it is affirmation of their identity as Palestinians
(4) Pleading not to leave him without an identity (sun symbolizes self)	Ironical – it is more like asserting their identity

Table 3: deciphering meaning from negation to implicature and from implicature to assertion

The loss of identity and land is presented by resorting to figures of speech and thus the affirmation can be deduced only from the Implicature. Negation is not given primary importance in the poems of Al Quasim's poems and he equivocally incorporates Marxist ideology into the Palestinian resistance poems. The poem "A Report from Battlefield" has a metaphorical level of meaning and the entire poem can be taken as a synecdoche of the exhibited cruelty of the enemies. Nevertheless, the Negation is not assertive as the spoken-word poems Rami Kanazi or Rafeef Ziadha. The Negation, Implicature and Assertion of the poem "A Report from Battlefield" is as follows.

<i>~P</i>	<i>I</i>
(1) "They did not wash the body"(3) (2) "Nor did anyone pray for him"(5) (3) "I do not know where the grave is."(12) (4) "And do not know if there is a grave"(13) (5) "I do not know if there is a corpse"(18)	They did not pay homage to the dead enemy I don't even know if he is dead or alive

<i>I</i>	<i>P</i>
They did not pay homage to the dead enemy	The enemies are heartless or cruel and from how they treat the dead one can imagine to the extent of how they treat the living
I don't even know if he is dead or alive	A Palestinian has crossed the other side illegally and we don't know his predicament and this in turn is a reflection of the living as well

Table 4: deciphering meaning from negation to implicature and from implicature to assertion

The title of the poem is itself ironical when looked from another angle since the enemies do not even consider the fugitive as an equal enemy. Here the negation is not shrouded by much embellishment. Nevertheless, the Assertion is impeded by Implicature.

Conclusion

Palestinian resistance has gained a new edge through spoken-word poems. The simplicity of the spoken word poems has in fact added up to the spreading of Palestinian cause in the international sphere. The aim of the study was to prove that performance poems stand in par with conventional poems of resistance and Palestinian spoken word poems were analysed to prove the same. The main drawbacks that are pointed towards the spoken word poetry are its leanness of language and lack of ornamentation. However, these factors in turn aid in elevating spoken word poetry to one of the best medium of resistance poetry. They include the variations in the degree of connotation, parochial way of handling the theme which is in sharp contrast with the eclecticism of the conventional poems of resistance amplification of terror, romantic and anti-romantic element and the variations in representing the ideological aspects also contribute to the same.

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