Abstract

Even though postcolonial theory has helped in the critique of non-western texts and the re-reading of literatures from earlier periods, it has for the most part failed to engage with the Arab region and its literatures in spite of Edward Said’s seminal book, Orientalism, which set in motion the academic discipline. Meanwhile, Robert Young argues that postcolonial theory since its inception has been concerned with the politics of invisibility, striving to make the invisible visible. Yet, the Arab region generally and Arab literature particularly have received little attention when compared to other literatures from postcolonial nations. To this day, the history and the Arab world’s earlier contribution to the world remain invisible. Deemed ‘other’, it is excluded. Perceptions of the Arab World are mostly reductionist, with an insistence on homogeny that negates diversity. Here, I look at two voices that resist both abstraction and invisibility, through an analysis of two texts that are concerned with issues of shrinking and imposed identity. I discuss Mahmoud Darwish’s poem Mural in which the Palestinian poet strives to affirm his being through language by confronting the existential question of ‘who am I?’ when the homeland no longer exists. By acquiring some form of permanence, the poem could keep the question of the Palestinian identity alive. Whereas, in A Rift in Time: Travels with my Ottoman Uncle Raja Shehadeh tracks the footsteps of his great-uncle, to reconnect with his disappearing homeland. In Shehadeh’s retracing of his great uncle’s steps, he exposes a region that is much changed, from which a sense of a diminishing identity evolves. The geographical lines that have been drawn since the Sykes-Picot agreement define who the people are and how they see themselves. Drawing a parallel dialogue between both periods, Shehadeh asks the reader to imagine another reality, one that is not confined to physical borders or imposed identities.

Keywords: Mahmoud Darwish, Raja Shehadeh, Palestinian Literature, Postcolonial, Identity, and Absence