

Personal Identity and(or?) Political Contexts in the Poetry of Farrokhzad and Darwish

Introduction

A Common Core Standard in the U.S. curriculum asks students to “analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature ([CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.6](#)). But what is “world” literature? When is something read as “world” literature and when is something read merely as “literature?” How have Western understandings about the world and world literature shaped students’ ability to engage with concepts and ideas that are coded as “other?”

This lesson aims to widen the scope of what is considered literature, and to challenge students to read beyond essentializing labels that can often constrict the readers’ understanding of the complexity of a writer’s work. Through a comparative reading, students will explore the similarities and dissimilarities between two different authors’ works, and develop a better understanding of the common themes of humanity and subjectivity that may occur in an artistic work. This lesson uses two Middle Eastern poets as a case study, Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967) and Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008). While poems from these two poets have been used in a comparative framework, any two artists whose work has been marginalized or “peripheralized” from the traditional canon can be adapted for this lesson.

Included in this initial plan is a contextual overview, which explains the history and literary background of these two poets. As can be seen in the contextual overview, both poets and their work have often been commemorated for the various causes and identities they espoused- Farrokhzad for the cause of feminism and Darwish for the cause of nationalism. However, consuming art only through an ideological or historically deterministic framework is reductive, and promotes a causal reading of poetry that reduces artists to the historical or political circumstances of their lives.

Instead, the goal of this lesson is to read the poetry of these Middle Eastern artists for their inherent artistic value. Rather than a causative reading, whereby readers find value and meaning in poetry through connecting poems with historical events or ideologies, these poems should be read at “face value.” The following exercises in this lesson plan propose one method for this type of reading, to encourage readers to connect with the subjectivity and individuality expressed in the personal/autobiographical poetry of Forough Farrokhzad and Mahmoud Darwish.

Contextual Overview

The Middle East refers to a geographic area loosely bordered by the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Sea and comprising the modern-day countries of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.

During their transition to independent and sovereign statehood, the countries of the Middle East were directly influenced by and subject to forces of Western imperialism. The term

“Middle East” was actually coined by British and American military experts to describe the region between the Western Hemisphere and the “Far East” during their expansionist plans of the early 20th century¹. In 1916, François Georges-Picot and Sir Mark Sykes (one of the early proponents of this term), arranged the secret Skyes-Picot Agreement, whereby Arab lands were to be divided into different areas ruled by France and Great Britain upon victory over the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. One year later, Great Britain issued the Balfour Declaration, which established support for Jewish immigration and resettlement in the land of Palestine, under the political and military governance of the British mandate. By 1948, nationalist movements within Mandate Palestine compelled Britain to withdraw, terminating the mandate. A bitter conflict followed between Jewish Zionist and Palestinian nationalist forces. The Jewish Zionist forces were victorious and established the independent state of Israel in 1948, during which over 700,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes by Israeli forces.

The modern-day country of Palestine, while not recognized as a nation-state by the United Nations, is a semi-sovereign area composed of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. While there is autonomous governance in the form of the Palestinian Authority, much of Palestine is under direct or indirect occupation by Israel’s security forces.

Meanwhile, to the east of Palestine, the country of Iran was emerging as a nation-state after centuries of rule under various Persian empires. This process was most notable in the 1921 coup against the Qajar Dynasty by the new Pahlavi rulers, who created a strong central government for the nation-state upon their obtaining power. Unlike many other countries in the Middle East, Iran was not directly colonized or ruled by European forces. This meant that the Iranian people did not have to fight a war of independence from imperial forces to establish their own sovereignty. However, Iran was still vulnerable to foreign military interventions. In World War I, the Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1907 split the country into two spheres of influence, with Russian troops occupying the northern half of Iran and British troops occupying the southern half. In 1953, American intelligence operatives staged a coup to prevent nationalization of the country’s oil production, which would have resulted in smaller profits for American and British companies. The country experienced its last major political shift in 1979, when different segments of the population joined forces to protest the U.S.-backed *shah* (term for the traditional monarch). Rejecting the oppressive and secular monarchy led by the *shah*, Islamist forces led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established the Islamic Republic of Iran, which continues today.

These events deeply influenced the evolution of Palestinian and Iranian societies. In addition, broader forces were at play; in the 19th and 20th century, global forces around the world spurred a new social movement called modernism. Following WWI, populations around the world were weary with traditionalism and began to experiment with new forms of artistic and literary expression. The Middle East experienced these trends, and local artists expressed the new modernist ideas of experimentation in their own work.

In Iran, modern Persian poetry emerged in the 1920s as Iranian society was experiencing the upheavals of modernization and centralization. Called “she’r-e no,” (شعر نو, lit. “new poetry”), this modern movement encouraged free-thinking from restrictive rhyme schemes and promoted a more common vernacular in poetry.² One of the major proponents and artists of modern Iranian poetry in this movement was Forough Farrokhzad. Born in 1934, Farrokhzad had a traditional

¹ Karl E. Meyer, “Editorial Notebook: How the Middle East was Invented,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 1991. <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/13/opinion/editorial-notebook-how-the-middle-east-was-invented.html>

² Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak and Kamran Talatoff, *Essays On Nima Yushij: Animating Modernism In Persian Poetry*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.

upbringing in the capital of Tehran, and grew up as a lively and rebellious girl in a strict household. She began writing poetry in her teenage years, and her poetry quickly drew fame and attention for its modern and striking verse. Farrokhzad was also a boldly revealing artist, and she wrote openly about her own sexual desire in her poetry, ignoring social taboos against expressions of female sexuality. To this day, her memory lives on among the Iranian people, both as a figure of controversy and as one of the greatest poets in Iran's history.

Mahmoud Darwish is one of the most well-known Palestinian poets of the modern age, who gained international fame and acclaim in his lifetime and continues to be celebrated today. On the whole, Arabic poetry in the 20th century was shaped by the *nahda*, the modern literary renaissance that took place in the nineteenth century in the Arab world.³ However, Darwish and his Palestinian contemporaries were also influenced by a new trend of literary resistance against the Israeli occupation. Born in 1941, Darwish was roughly six years old at the time of the 1948 *nakba*, the "catastrophe" that befell Palestinians during the establishment of the Israeli state. Unable to attend school legally or publish his poetry inside Israel, Darwish left his homeland at age 29 to live abroad for the majority of his adult life, unable to permanently return until 1996. His poetry has won numerous awards for its themes of longing, exile, and resistance.

While both poets were influenced by the social and political circumstances of their time, contemporary readers of Farrokhzad and Darwish have often emphasized these circumstances to a greater degree than when analyzing Western authors and their biographies. For example, critics have defined Darwish as the poet of the Palestinian resistance, overlooking his romantic and autobiographical poetry. In Farrokhzad's case, critics have overemphasized her proto-feminist leanings, recasting her for Western audiences as Iran's Sylvia Plath.⁴ This historical determinism and revisionism of non-Western art is problematic, because it attributes non-Western artistry merely to its social or political circumstances, and not to the artists' personal creativity. Rather, both Farrokhzad and Darwish expressed a desire to be read as individuals, as humans in the process of self-exploration and actualization, not solely as representatives of their nationality or gender. Darwish himself once expressed frustration on the critical reception to his work, remarking that "sometimes I feel that I am read before I write."⁵

The modern reader of "world literature" is thus faced with a difficult challenge. How does one take into account the important historical contexts of a work of literature, while also respecting an author's artistic expression on the page? The following lesson proposes one such possible solution, through a guided, close reading of Farrokhzad and Darwish's autobiographical poetry. Ultimately, this lesson hopes to help students answer Edward Said's persistent query regarding world literature: "Can one formulate a theory of connection between part and whole that denies neither the specificity of the individual experience nor the validity of a projected, putative, or imputed Whole?"

Analytical Task (activity for a lesson):

Key Concepts

³ Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*

⁴ Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Former Lover of the Poet Known as Iran's Sylvia Plath Breaks His Silence," *The Guardian*, February 12, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/12/forough-farrokhzad-iranian-poet-ebrahim-golestan-sylvia-plath>

⁵ Adam Shatz, "A Poet's Place as Metaphor," *The New York Times*, December 22, 2001, Books sec. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/22/books/a-poet-s-palestine-as-a-metaphor.html>.

- Identity
- Collectivism / Individuality
- Private / Public
- Agency / Fatalism

Problem Framing:

Prompt: “Can one formulate a theory of connection between part and whole that denies neither the specificity of the individual experience nor the validity of a projected, putative, or imputed Whole?” - Edward Said

Guiding Questions: How do we read poets as individuals, and poems as expressions of personal feelings and experience, especially for poets often portrayed as representatives or spokespersons for whole communities or peoples? How do we understand the poet’s voice as personal, but also shaped by context?

Exercises

Group Discussion/Close Reading:

Before reading the poems, quickly review key concepts related to poetry and language you want the students to think about as they read (e.g. literary allusions, metaphor, simile, imagery). Tell students they should look for examples of these as they read, especially when they analyze HOW the poets develop different ideas.

Then have students read aloud one of the assigned poems in small reading groups by taking turns reading stanzas in their group until the whole poem is read. Then ask them to discuss and analyze each stanza in turn, taking notes on questions and ideas that emerge as they talk. To guide this discussion, have them talk about the following questions:

- What emotions do you think the poet is expressing in this stanza, and what words or phrases in the poem make you think this?
- What can we learn about the poet as an individual from this stanza?
- What questions do you have or clarifications do you need about the ideas and/or words in this stanza?

When each group has worked through their poem, have them review their notes and ideas and develop a claim statement about the poem in response to the following prompt:

What does each poet want to tell us about his/her life overall? What do they want us to understand about who they are and how they feel?

Each group should also then identify 3-5 pieces of evidence from the text that support this claim, and then prepare to share their claim and evidence with the class.

You can choose to have each group analyze both poems in this way, or assign half of the class one poet and poem, and the other half the other poet and poem.

Lead a discussion in which student groups share and discuss their claims and evidence (this will be spelled out in detail in actual lesson plan).

Then, ask the groups to use a similar process to analyze each poem with a new set of questions, but also provide the background reading and have students read the historical background. Tell students they will use both the background reading and poems to answer the questions:

- When was the historical and political context of this poet's work? What events shaped their life and influenced their poetry?
- What struggles did they probably face and/or witness that might be reflected in their poetry?
- How do the poems reference, suggest, and or represent historical and political events?
- What does the poet seem to say about their nation and their people? About their struggles?

Ask the groups then to again generate a claim, this time in response to this question: How does the poet connect their experience to history and political forces? What inferences can we make about how they see their nation and/or people? What is the evidence in the poem?

Individual Writing:

After discussing the poem(s) in pairs and/or with the class, direct students to work individually for half an hour. In this phase, students are assigned to reflect on the poem once more after hearing the poem read aloud and hearing different interpretations of the poem from their classmates. Following their individual reflections, students are asked to write their own autobiographical poem. Students should feel free experiment with genre/form (spoken word, rap, etc.), as long as the subject of their written expression is their own identity. Teachers may collect these responses at the end of the exercise, or ask students to share their work with the rest of the class.

Poem: "Another Birth" by Forough Farrokhzad, translated by Hassan Javadi



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All my existence is a dark verse
which repeating you in itself will take you
to the dawn of eternal blossomings and growth
I have sighed to you in this verse, ah,
in this verse I have grafted you
to tree and water and fire.

Perhaps life
is a long street on which a woman with a basket passes every day.
Perhaps life
is a rope with which a man hangs himself from a branch.
Perhaps life is a child returning from school.
Perhaps life is lighting a cigarette in the languid repose

between two embraces
or the mindless transit of a passer-by
who tips his hat
and with a meaningless smile says “good morning” to another passer-by.

Perhaps life is that thwarted moment
when my gaze destroys itself in the pupil of your eyes.
And in this lies a sensation
which I will mingle with the perception of the moon and the discovery
of darkness.

In a room the size of one loneliness
my heart
the size of one love
looks at the simple pretexts of its happiness,
at the fading of the beauty of the flowers in the vase
at the sapling you planted in the garden of our house
at the song of the canaries
that sing the size of one window

Ah...
This is my lot
This is my lot
My lot is a sky which the hanging of the curtain steals from me.
My lot is descending an abandoned stair
to find something in decay and exile.
My lot is a grief-stricken walk in the garden of memories
and surrendering my soul in the sadness of a voice that says to me:
“I love
your hands.”

I will plant my hands in the garden
I will grow green, I know, I know, I know
and in the hollows of my ink-stained fingers
swallows will lay eggs
On my ears I hang earrings of twin red cherries
and stick dahlia petals on my nails

There is a street where
still, the boys who loved me
with the same tousled hair, slender necks, lanky legs
think of the innocent smile of a girl
whom one night the wind took away
There is a street which my heart
has stolen from the scenes of my childhood

The journey of a form on the line of time
and with a form, impregnating the barren line of time,
a form aware of an image
which returns from the party of a mirror.
And it is thus
that someone dies
and someone remains
In the shallow stream that flows into a ditch
no fisherman will hunt a pearl.

I
know a sad little fairy
who settles in the ocean
and plays her heart on a wood-tipped flute
softly, softly
a sad little fairy
who dies from a single kiss at night
and will be born with a single kiss at dawn.

Poem: "I look on my Ghost Coming from a Distance" by Mahmoud Darwish, translated by Anton Shammas

I look out like a balcony on what I want
I look out on my friends carrying
the evening mail
wine and bread
novels and records...
I look out on a sea gull and on the
trucks of soldiers
changing the trees of this place
I look out on the dog of my
neighbor who emigrated
from Canada a year and a half
ago...

I look out on the name Abu al-
Tayyib al-Mutanabbi
who traveled from Tiberius to
Egypt
on the horse of song
I look out on the Persian rose that
rises up
over the iron fence
I look out like a balcony on what I
want

I look out on the trees that guard
the night from itself
and guard the sleep of those who want me dead...
I look out on the wind searching for its homeland
in itself...
I look out on a woman sunbathing within herself...
I look out over the procession of ancient prophets
climbing barefoot to Jerusalem
I ask: Is there a new prophet
for this new time?
I look out like a balcony on what I want

I look out on my image fleeing from itself
to the stone staircase, carrying my mother's scarf
trembling in the wind: What would happen, were I to return



to childhood? And I to you...and you to me
I look out on the trunk of an olive tree that hid Zakariyya
I look out on words that have died out in *Lisan al-Arab*
I look out on the Persians, the Byzantines, the Sumerians
and the new refugees...
I look out on the necklace of one of the poor women of Tagore
ground beneath the carriage of the handsome prince...
I look out on a hoopoe sapped from the king's reprimand
I look out on metaphysics:
What will happen...What will happen after the ashes?
I look out on my body, afraid, from a distance...
I look out like a balcony on what I want

I look out on my language, two days later
A short absence is enough
for Aeschylus to open the door to peace
A short speech is enough
for Antonio to incite war
A hand of a woman in my hand
is enough
to embrace my freedom
for the ebb and flow to begin anew in my body

I look out like a balcony on what I want
I look out on my ghost
coming
from
a distance...