

BOOK REVIEWS

NAJAT RAHMAN, *In the Wake of the Poetic: Palestinian Artists after Darwish*, Contemporary Issues in the Middle East (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2015). Pp. 190. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780815634089

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Najat Rahman appears to take on at least two related tasks in her ambitious book, *In the Wake of The Poetic*. One is to demonstrate the ways in which Palestinian artists extend the work of the prince of Palestinian poets, Mahmoud Darwish. The other is to show how, in so doing, they rethink the political, most notably the politics of a national identity they wish to open to diasporic and transnational dimensions. Rahman pursues these objectives in a Palestinian aesthetic scene stretching across all of historic Palestine and into the diaspora. This scene includes: poetry, of the spoken-word variety as well; cinema; visual and performative arts; and music, with a focus on hip-hop. Through subjects of loss, dispossession, belonging, dispersion, and the struggle against erasure, which she designates as “theoretical modalities,” Rahman aims to show how Darwish lives on in the works of younger artists working with a diverse set of media who, like him, struggle against their homeland’s (and its people’s) effacement by Israel’s founding and functioning. Unfortunately, the promise of Rahman’s worthy aspirations remains unfulfilled.

In the book’s four chapters, each of which is dedicated to a specific *métier*—poetry, cinema, visual art, and music—Rahman succeeds in treating her readers to moving and perceptive observations of what Palestinian artists have been doing, including Darwish. For example, she elegantly portrays Darwish’s search for belonging in which “the ‘return’ was a lasting encounter with absence” (p. 17). When allowed to speak, Rahman’s voice exudes an impressive closeness to and understanding of her subjects, as when quoting from Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad, explaining the line, “I want to awaken so that I can think of the pure dawn” as expressing part of Hammad’s “elusive homecoming” (p. 44). Thus Rahman’s book provides a sometimes insightful, always highly informed, survey of who is doing what and where in the leading domains comprising the contemporary Palestinian art scene.

And here lies the delivery and the unfortunate debacle of this book in that it reads much like an almanac, extensive and at times exquisitely sensitive, but a survey nonetheless. It does not amount to an analysis with the level of argument and voice we have come to expect from Rahman’s evident scholarship as exhibited in the book she co-edited with Hala Khamis Nassar, *Mahmoud Darwish, Exile’s Poet* (Northampton, Mass.: Interlink Publishing, 2007). Both in her new book and in a related interview (“New Texts Out Now: Najat Rahman, *In the Wake of the Poetic: Palestinian Artists after Darwish*,” *Jadaliyya*, accessed 7 October 2015, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32555/New-Texts-Out-Now-Najat-Rahman-In-the-Wake-of-the-Poetic-Palestinian-Artists-after-Darwish>), Rahman states that she wants this work to serve as “a tribute” to Darwish (p. 3). My sense is that the book’s troubles emanate from just this objective. While it may be possible to simultaneously give tribute and offer an argument, here the scales seem to have tipped markedly towards cataloging at the expense of interrogating. Furthermore, the book suffers from poor editing and stylistic review.

Should Rahman wish to show how Palestinian artists do extend the work of Darwish then both conceptual and methodological work are in order. Conceptually, Rahman needs to formulate an explicit sense of “extending,” such as whether extending includes incorporating quotes, concepts,

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styles, and so forth. In other words, what counts as Darwishian? Methodologically, Rahman needs to establish standards for what counts as evidence of “extending” so formulated. In other words, how can we determine whether a given work should be considered Darwishian? *In the Wake of the Poetic* barely awakens to these central tasks. That the delivery on both counts remains wanting is evident when Rahman claims that a poem by Ghassan Zaqatan “recalls” or “evokes” another by Darwish. Do “recalling” or “evoking” conceptually coincide with “extending”? How can we be sure that the named poem is so “recalled”? Are both Darwish and Zaqatan’s evoking of “a voice that finds its image in a mirror” sufficient to claim that the latter’s work is extending the former’s? Because Rahman delves into her tribute without adequately attending to her particular use of “extending,” her claim remains equivocal. Between the book’s beautiful premise and its nondelivery, I was left with a jarring reading experience.

All too often the book also appears to muffle what Rahman does in fact have to say on her topic. Other voices speak to a far greater degree than hers does. Pandemic and dizzying name dropping (notably, pp. 39–43 and the opening of Chapter 3) and an extensive succession of fashionable sources drown out Rahman’s minimal voice without really clarifying the labors of the featured artists, not to mention their relation to Darwish. Rahman’s resounding silence also confuses transitions from one author (academic or artistic) to another and from one section to another. It hit me especially hard in moving from a section on Mona Hatoum to one on Till Roeskens, a German-French artist whose inclusion is as intriguing as it is unexplained.

Ironically, a book dedicated to “struggle against erasure” nearly erased its own argument. I say “nearly” because I found Rahman’s attempts at advancing an argument (I counted four, not including repeated intents of “I would argue. . .”) occluding, without entirely obliterating, a possible argument. Rahman seems to want to argue that: “art in dispersion . . . constitutes practices of ‘dissensus’” (p. 2); artists “continue the legacy of Darwish without being derivative” (p. 3); “the 1990s heralded a new period of creativity in the wake of the Oslo accords and ‘as a result of the decentralization of the Palestinian political scene’” (p. 3); and finally, that the aesthetic projects she surveys “open into politics” (p. 10). Rather than solidifying these four assertions and crafting them into a cohesive argument, Rahman plasters layers (quotations, naming dropping, and silence) over them. So “kenotic” is Rahman’s voice that I came to wonder whether the book is hosting its argument’s wake “in the wake of the poetic.”

It stands to reason that, impressively versed in Darwish’s work, Rahman should be familiar with an early poem, “About a Human,” wherein Darwish wrote, “Every shibboleth that dries fills the valley with more grains.” Like Mahmoud’s drying shibboleth, I want to suggest that Rahman’s book contains some deftly fruitful “grains” in its astounding premise. Not unlike Senghor for negritude or Baudelaire for Western modernity, Darwish has been a (perhaps the) muse in poetic and political searches for “the musical” in Palestinian (although not only Palestinian) belonging at a time when the very concept of belonging, let alone homeland, is barely surviving. For scattering this grain, we can be grateful for Rahman’s work. Perhaps it will yield fruit in her next endeavor.

NAHID SIAMDOUST, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran*, Stanford Studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic Societies and Cultures (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2017). Pp. 368. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9781503600324

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Called an “instant classic,” “revelatory,” and “groundbreaking,” Nahid Siamdoust’s monograph on four prominent Iranian artists, captures the sea change in the musical scene in Iran between the years 1996 and 2011.