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# RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION IN A SELECTION OF PALESTINIAN AND SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY

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# Introduction

**N.B.** Translation is the researcher's unless otherwise stated.





# Introduction

## **RESISTANCE AND OPPRESSION**

### **Introduction**

In the second half of the Twentieth Century, Palestine and South Africa, the two countries selected for this thesis, witnessed major political, social, and literary changes that gave rise to a literature of resistance. 'Resistance literature' played an important role and was used effectively in the fight against oppression. Most of the poetry related to this period has been described as 'poetry of resistance'. Poetry was used as a weapon of resistance that inspired and sustained the liberation struggle. Since Palestine and South Africa share a history of colonization, there are many parallels in the ways that South African and Palestinian poets envision poetry as a vehicle of resistance to oppression.

The present thesis is a study of the theme of resistance as a reaction to oppression in a selection of Palestinian and South African poetry. There are parallels that can be drawn between the Palestinian and South African struggles for liberation and freedom. Both countries involve similar settler conflicts and armed struggle between liberation movements and settler parties. In addition, they have common objectives in getting rid of settler colonialism, occupation, and oppression.

The theoretical framework of the thesis focuses on the concept of 'resistance' as presented in Barbra Harlow's *Resistance Literature* (1987), besides a discussion of the concept of oppression in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Iris Marion Young's concept of the five faces of oppression. The two books of Ghassan Kanafani *Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine* (1966) and *Palestinian Resistance Literature under Occupation* (1968) are used as well.

The aim of the thesis is to reveal the theme 'resistance to oppression' in a selection of Palestinian poetry written during the Palestinian-Israeli struggle, and South African poetry written during apartheid. For that purpose, samples of poems written by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and the South African poet Mongane Wally Serote, whose lives were prescribed by the Arab-Israeli struggle and apartheid respectively, have been selected. The researcher's interest is in how Darwish and Serote used their poetry to express the struggle at a particular historical moment. A discussion of the selected poems will demonstrate how poetry is shaped by the experience of resistance and how it is used as a weapon of resistance. The thesis argues that their poetry succeed in demonstrating how cultural resistance is endemic in oppressed communities. In Palestine and South Africa, resistance means the cultural reaffirmation of the people.

The researcher discusses a selection of poems from Palestinian and South African poetry of resistance. The idea is born partly from the description of Palestinians as 'Israel's blacks'<sup>1</sup>, the similar backgrounds and the comparable

systems of apartheid, Palestine and South Africa have; the similar historical and aesthetic traditions, the 'Palestinian Culture of Resistance' and the 'Black Consciousness Movement' have; the imperialist connection between the Palestinian experience of Zionism and the experience of black people with colonialism and partly from an interest in the clear sense of solidarity with the Palestinian cause sometimes expressed by South African people. Such as Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu who said that if he was to change the names, a description of what was happening in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank could describe events in South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the researcher has many reasons for choosing Palestinian and South African poetry of resistance. For one thing, the Palestinian and South African poetry under investigation show how poetry can be used as a tool of resistance against oppression. Secondly, the thesis highlights parallels between Palestinian and South African poets, while simultaneously looks for differences. Thirdly, finding out similarities and differences among Palestinian and South African poets will emphasize the connection between the poets on the one hand and the rise of an explicit resistance literature that inspires the liberation struggle in their countries on the other hand.

The thesis is divided into an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The introduction discusses the two concepts 'oppression' and 'resistance'. Chapter one highlights the political, historical, and literary contexts of South Africa and Palestine. In chapter one, the researcher discusses the origin, ideology, aesthetics and political

agendas of two artistic movements: the ‘Palestinian Culture of Resistance’ and the ‘Black Consciousness Movement’ in 1960s and 1970s. Chapters two and three focus on detailed analysis of a selection of the poems of Darwish and Serote, respectively. A separate chapter is devoted to each poet. The conclusion demonstrates how the selected poets reintegrate politics into poetry and locate resistance poetry in political commitment. This study considers how poetry can serve as a vehicle of resistance in different communities that feel a cause of injustice and oppression at a particular historical moment.

The researcher in the following section discusses the concept of ‘resistance’ as presented in Barbra Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* (1987), besides a discussion of the concept of “oppression” in Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Iris Marion Young’s concept of the five faces of oppression in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990).

### **‘Resistance Literature’: Definition**

‘Resistance’ is a critical term crystallized in 1966 when the Palestinian writer and revolutionary Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972) theorized ‘resistance literature’ as literature that was part of the ‘arena of struggle’ (Harlow 2). The concept of ‘resistance’ in literature was first applied by Kanafani in a description of Palestinian literature in his study *Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine* (1966). He defines ‘resistance literature’ as literature written under ‘cultural siege’ (20). Ashcroft asserts that such literature is seen to be “an identifiable and significant, accompaniment to

the project of political, military, and social striving for national liberation” (*Post-colonial Transformation* 28).

The concept of ‘resistance’ in literature is further explained by Selwyn Cudjoe in *Resistance and Caribbean Literature* (1981) and by Barbra Harlow in *Resistance Literature* (1987). For Cudjoe, resistance is “an act or complex of acts designed to rid a people of its oppressors” (19). It is something which so thoroughly infuses the experience of living under oppression that it becomes an almost autonomous “aesthetic political principle” (Ashcroft *Post-colonial Transformation* 28). Cudjoe asserts that “literary resistance is a category of literary writing which emerges as an integral part of an organized struggle for national liberation” (57).

Harlow expands the term into a theorization of the literature of national liberation movements, from El Salvador to South Africa and presents these struggles as parallel revolutionary movements in solidarity ideologically and imaginatively. She defines ‘resistance literature’ as “the literature written in the context of organized resistance movements and national liberation struggles” (4). The struggle for national liberation and independence has produced a significant corpus of literary writing both narrative and poetic. Harlow asserts that ‘resistance literature’ represents an essential “arena of struggle” for those peoples who seek liberation through armed fighting from oppressive colonialism (2). Harlow explains that “the historical struggle against colonialism and imperialism ...is waged at the same time as a struggle over the historical and cultural record.” Moreover, this battle for historical and

cultural control “is seen from all sides as no less crucial than the armed struggle” (7). A study of the selected poems from Palestine and South Africa at the particular historical moments indicated suggests such an attempt of cultural affirmation. In South Africa and Palestine, resistance is concomitant to the cultural reaffirmation of the people.

### **‘Resistance Literature’ and Politics**

‘Resistance literature’ is thoroughly political in nature. In a colonial society, emerging from political dependence, struggling for national liberation and searching for national identity, the fusion of politics and literature is not only indistinguishable, “it literary becomes indissoluble and in the critical stages of national liberation, one becomes almost analogous to the other” (Cudjoe 67). Thus, the link between politics and literature is important. There is a relationship between the two processes, both speak in the name of liberty but approach it from different vantage points and use different methods yet, both try to arrive at the same end, to liberate man. Politics and literature, therefore, complement each other (Cudjoe 68). Indeed, ‘resistance literature’ is explicitly political, “a force for eliciting and mobilizing collective response to oppression” and “a repository for popular memory and historical consciousness” (Harlow 34). Harlow’s argument links ‘resistance literature’ as an arm of armed struggle. A reading of the selected poems in the thesis suggests such fusion of both politics and literature.

This link between politics and literature is illustrated in the works of the leaders of the liberation movements in

Africa where, in the struggle for freedom, literature became one of the main tools of resistance. Amilcar Cabral (1924-1973)<sup>3</sup>, a leader of the Guinea-Bissau Liberation Movement as well as a major theorist of African resistance and liberation struggles, believes that “culture is an essential element of the history of a people” and that it is “the product of this history just as the flower is the product of a plant” (12). Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) that “to destroy a culture means to destroy its people” and Cabral asserts in “**National Liberation and Culture**” (1970):

Thus it is understood that imperialist domination by denying the historical development of the dominated people, necessarily also denies their cultural development. It is also understood why imperialist domination, like all other foreign domination for its own security, requires cultural oppression and the attempt at direct or indirect liquidation of the essential elements of the culture of the dominated people. (13)

Therefore, liberation movements rely on political and guerrilla elements to force governmental and civil change, but only through literary elements, they will be able to liberate themselves from cultural domination. Cabral points out:

The study of the history of national liberation struggles shows that in general; they are preceded by an increase in cultural phenomena, which progressively crystallize into an attempt, successful or not, to assert