

Navigating Belonging and Displacement in Dunya Mikhail's Poetry: A Study of Identity and Exile

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Abstract:

This study examines the themes of displacement and belonging in Dunya Mikhail's selected poems, making use of postcolonial theory as a critical lens. By probing works such as "The Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea," "In the Country of My Heart," "The War Works Hard," and "The Iraqi Poet's Wife," the paper highlights the collapse of identity amongst the convolutions of exile and warfare. The theory, drawing on the thoughts of Homi Bhabha, highlights the changeability of national identity and the involvement of hybridity as Dunya Mikhail navigates her domicile in both her motherland and the diaspora. This examination aims to expose how Mikhail's selected poems function as effective responses to the displacement felt by folks in the wake of the struggle, subsidizing to the greater discourse on the influence of war on individual and collective identity.

Keywords: postcolonial theory, Dunya Mikhail, displacement, identity, belonging, poetry, exile, Homi Bhabha.

الابحار بين الانتماء والتشرد في شعر دنيا ميخائيل: دراسة عن الهوية والمنفى

ملخص

تبحث هذه الورقة في موضوعات الانتماء والتشرد في شعر دنيا ميخائيل، مستخدمة نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار كعدسة نقدية. من خلال دراسة أعمال مثل "يوميات موجة خارج البحر" و"الحرب تعمل بجد"، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على استكشاف الشاعرة لهوية الفرد في خضم تعقيدات المنفى والحرب. يركز الإطار النظري، المستمد من أفكار هومي ك. بابا، على سيولة الهوية الثقافية وتجربة الهجنة كما تنتقل ميخائيل في مكانها بين وطنها الأصلي والشتات. يهدف هذا التحليل إلى الكشف عن كيفية أن شعر ميخائيل يُعد استجابة قوية لحالة التشرد التي يشعر بها الأفراد في أعقاب الصراع، مما يساهم في الخطاب الأوسع حول تأثير الحرب على الهوية الفردية والجماعية.

كلمات مفتاحية: دنيا ميخائيل، نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار، الهوية، التشرد، الانتماء، المنفى، هومي ك. بابا، الشعر.

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1. Introduction:

Dunya Mikhail, an Iraqi American poet, has authored several poetry collections. Her book *The War Works Hard* (New Directions, 2005), translated by Elizabeth Winslow from Arabic, received a PEN Translation Fund Grant, was a finalist for the Griffin Poetry Prize, and was recognized as one of the 25 Books to Remember from 2005 by the New York Public Library. Mikhail's collaboration with Elizabeth Winslow on *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (New Directions, 2009) earned them the Arab American Book Award. Her work *The Iraqi Nights* (New Directions, 2014), translated by Kareem James Abu-Zeid, was awarded the Poetry Magazine John Frederick Nims Memorial Prize for Translation. Mikhail's collection *In Her Feminine Sign* (New Directions, 2019) was listed among the top ten poetry books of 2019 by The New York Public Library. Lastly, her upcoming book *Tablets: Secrets of the Clay* (New Directions, 2024) is highly anticipated. In addition, she authored the nonfiction book *The Beekeeper* (New Directions, 2018), which received a nomination for the National Book Award. Furthermore, her first novel, *The Bird Tattoo* (Pegasus Books, 2022), was a finalist for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction. She explores issues of war, exile, and loss via the use of sarcasm and subversive simplicity. She blends reporting with fable, and lyricism to convey her ideas. While her poetry documents the hardships of war and forced displacement, she has also addressed the impact of restriction on her artistic expression. In an interview with Cathy Linh Che for the New Directions blog, Mikhail made this observation, that in Iraq, there was a governmental agency dedicated to censorship, staffed by individuals whose primary responsibility was to monitor and regulate matters about “public morality”, determining what material was permissible for consumption and expression. Before publication, every writer required permission and it is not uncommon for a poet to lose her\his life over a single phrase. Communication is, thus, constrained by political censorship in addition to the boundaries of societal conventions. Interestingly, Iraqi censorship

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is implemented after the content is published while in the United States, it occurs before the dissemination of written or spoken content. Consequently, to circumvent censorship, Dunya Mikhail uses metaphors extensively to construct many levels of meanings. While it may have been beneficial for her poetry, it is important that figures of speech are not used only to conceal meanings.

Mikhail has received the United Nations Human Rights Award for the exceptional contributions to the field of writing and freedom of expression. She has been honoured with the UNESCO–Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture and received prestigious scholarships from the United States Artists, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and the Kresge Foundation. She was born in Baghdad and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Baghdad. Before being included in Saddam Hussein's list of adversaries, she was a translator and journalist at the Baghdad Observer. She relocated to the United States in the mid-1990s and obtained a Master's degree from Wayne State University. She is an Arabic instructor at Oakland University in Michigan and strongly articulates the involvements of individuality and exile in her poems. Stuck in her familiarities of dislocation because of the Iraq War, Mikhail's writing serves as an emotional investigation of the intricacies of belonging among chaos. This study seeks to examine Mikhail's selected poems through the postcolonial theory lens, concentrating on the complicated interaction of self, exile, and the search for being in the right place throughout the selected poems. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/dunya-mikhail>)

2. **Aim:**

The primary aim of this study is to explore how Dunya Mikhail's poetry reflects the themes of belonging and displacement, illuminating the emotional landscape of identity in the context of war. By employing postcolonial theory, the research will elucidate how Mikhail's work captures the nuances of cultural dislocation and the quest for a sense of home.

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3. Research Questions:

1. How do themes of belonging and displacement manifest in Dunya Mikhail's poetry?
2. In what ways does Mikhail's work reflect the complexities of identity in a postcolonial context?
3. How does the application of Homi K. Bhabha's theories of cultural identity and hybridity enrich the analysis of Mikhail's selected poems?

4. Literature Review

Dunya Mikhail is an Iraqi-American poet, known for her collections of poems such as *The War Works Hard* and *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*, which were both translated (Mikhail, 2005; Mikhail, 2009) by Elizabeth Winslow and published by New Directions. Her writing often mirrors her feelings of exile and displacement. They capture the essence of her early sensations and memories (Mikhail, 2009). *The War Works Hard* is an interesting collection that explores the impact of war on people and societies (Mikhail, 2005). Mikhail's poetry courts danger as it highlights the importance of freedom of expression in an environment of political suppression (Censorship in Iraq: Q&A with Award-Winning Poet Dunya Mikhail, 2018). Despite all obstacles, she continues to write with a unique perspective that transcends narrow political boundaries (Mikhail, 2017). She has also written novels such as *The Bird Tattoo* (Mikhail, 2017), *The Beekeeper: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq* and *The Iraqi Nights* (New Directions Publishing, n.d.). Her writing is deeply rooted in her private experiences and social heritage, reflecting a sense of longing for her home. She navigates the difficulties of displacement (Petrusich, 2017). Through her poems and novels, her strong voice resonates with readers all over the world.

There are many other Iraqi American writers and poets who wrote about the war and its atrocities such as Saadi Yosuf, however, this paper aims to bridge the gap between the individuals' experiences in exile and their search for

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identity and belonging through the lens of Mikhail's poetry. Specifically, it plans to address points such as understanding the impact of exile on identity, cultural and emotional dimensions of displacement, intersection of personal and political narratives, representation of marginalized voices, and exploration of belonging beyond geographical boundaries. The paper is to contribute to the existing body of literature. It provides insights into the intricate relationship between belonging, displacement, identity, and exile that Dunya Mikhail's poems selected for this study express. It is expected to enrich the discourse on these critical themes.

Methodology:

This paper uses a qualitative analysis approach. It focuses on close readings of the selected poems. By analyzing the imagery, language, and thematic elements, the researcher uncovers the underlying messages. The paper sheds light on how the poems are connected to identity, belonging, and displacement themes. Moreover, Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical framework is used to contextualize Mikhail's poems within broader discussions. Cultural identity and the impact of exile are the main concerns of this paper. The methodology also includes a review of existing literature on Mikhail's writing to situate the examination within the concurrent academic context.

Bhabha's Postcolonial Theoretical Framework

In the postmodern age, it is important to follow the post-ramifications of all that had come before. According to (Almaarroof, & Mehasin, 2024) and (Almaarroof, & Rostam, 2023) postmodernism has many features which deconstruct traditional or grand narratives. These deconstructed notions are clear in the postcolonial-oriented texts. Thus, analyzing Dunya Mikhail's poems through Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theoretical framework entails the application of

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such key concepts as hybridity, mimicry, third space and ambivalence which are briefly outlined below.

Hybridity refers to the blending of cultural identities that emerge from colonial histories and migrations. Bhabha argues that a hybrid space allows for the negotiation of identity and the formation of new cultural meanings. (Bhabha, 1994). Mikhail's poetry often reflects a hybrid identity shaped by her experiences as an Iraqi living in exile. This can be seen in her exploration of language, cultural symbols, and the merging of personal narratives with collective histories.

Mimicry refers to the way colonized subjects imitate the colonizers' culture while simultaneously creating a differentiated identity. This concept discloses the ambivalence within colonial power affairs. (Bhabha, 1984). Mikhail's writing may contain features of mimicry as she directs her Iraqi roots and her involvements in the diaspora. She captures a sense of both belonging and otherness.

The Third Space (Bhabha, 1994) is a conceptual space where cultures interact. They produce new meanings and identities that are neither entirely one nor the other. The concept serves as a site of conversation and negotiation. (Bhabha, 1994). Much of Mikhail's poems operate in this Third Space. They oscillate between her homeland and her current existence. They reflect the tensions and possibilities inherent in her experiences of exile and identity. Bhabha underlines the role of cultural translation in creating meaning across dissimilar cultural contexts. This process is often fraught with tension. However, It is essential for shaping identity in postcolonial situations. (Bhabha, 1984). Her use of language, imagery, and symbols in her poems can be realized as acts of cultural translation. It reflects her identity and the broader collective memory of dislocation and war.

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Ambivalence, (Bhabha, 1994). captures the self-contradictory feelings toward identity, culture, and belonging experienced in colonial and postcolonial contexts. It reflects the difficulties of exchanging identity between cultures. Mikhail's images on home, loss, and identity can demonstrate the ambivalence of belonging to numerous cultures while dealing with the realities of war and displacement.

5. Post-colonialism in Mikhail's poetry

5.1. "The Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea": a postcolonial analysis

Reading Dunya Mikhail's poem "The Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea" through the postcolonial theoretical framework of Homi K. Bhabha exposes the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, the Third Space, cultural translation, and ambivalence. Below is a detailed analysis focusing on these concepts, alongside an examination of the poem's meaning, literary and poetic devices, and commentary on form and content:

The martyr couldn't believe his eyes
when his tomb was bombed
as he braided a garland for his beloved—
a red garland,
yet...on the way to heaven...
it turned white.
He bent toward the water with a small rainbow clutched in his hand.
In this way he makes music.
He lifts his hands to the clouds and braids her tears into a flower.
In this way, he sings.
A wave breaking outside the sea.
In this way, I go on. (Mikhail, 2014)

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The poem explores themes of longing, displacement, and the search for identity in the context of exile. The metaphor of a wave—something that moves but is also a part of the sea—evokes feelings of absence and the struggle to find a place in the world. The wave's yearning for the sea represents the poet's nostalgia for her home and the multifaceted emotions tied to individuality and belonging. She embodies the concept of hybridity, for instance, in the overlap of disparate cultures. The wave represents her Iraqi identity, while the sea symbolizes the wider world where she dwells. The combination of these identities echoes the dual consciousness experienced by exiled folks as they attempt to reconcile their past with their present-day.

A sense of belonging is created throughout the connection to the beloved. The image of a martyr intertwining a garland for his beloved signifies intimacy and deep personal association. The act of creating something beautiful for someone precious reveals the sense of belonging in a relationship. It highlights love as an influential force. It is a power that binds individuals together, even amid chaos. This comradeship can work as an anchor for one's identity.

In the poem, there is a spiritual aspiration, as in the imagery of lifting hands to the clouds which symbolizes a yearning for a connection not only with the beloved but also with the divine or transcendent. This signal can be understood as an attempt to bridge the distance between earthly and spiritual realms. Furthermore, it affirms a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself. The act of making music and braiding tears into flowers symbolizes the transformative power of love even in loss, i.e. it is used to add music and beauty. This creative expression nurtures a sense of belonging to a larger narrative, i.e. a one that encompasses love, loss, and memory. It suggests that individuals, through these experiences, find their place within the human condition. The sense of displacement is created through many elements, one of which is the

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bombed tomb. The martyr's incredulity at the idea that his tomb being bombed signifies a profound sense of disruption. The destruction of (a tomb) reverses its traditional symbolism of rest and belonging and points to chaos, violence and confusion. They displace people from their homeland and distorts their narratives. The bomb itself may symbolize the violence which disrupts the sanctity of life and memory.

The transformation of the garland from red to white mirrors the change from passion and life (red) to purity and mourning (white). This change suggests a displacement from the vibrancy of life and love to a state of sorrow and memory. It arouses a sense of loss and alters one's understanding of belonging. The martyr's movement toward heaven signposts a physical and metaphysical displacement; this notion can be regarded as a journey to heaven. His transition from the earthly realm to the spiritual arena can evoke feelings of alienation from the world he belonged to before martyrdom, emphasizing the emotional and existential struggles faced in a war-torn reality. The small rainbow, in its turn, symbolizes hope or fleeting beauty amidst displacement. Yet it also highlights the disparity between the current precarious existence and the utopian vision. This image can illustrate the struggle to hold onto belonging while navigating through loss—implying that even within beauty, there is an undercurrent of dislocation.

Dunya Mikhail's poems mimic her authentic experience and depict the fluidity and variability of identity. This mimicry highlights the ambivalence of her position; she can echo her origins while also reflecting the influences of the new environment. This duality captures the tension between embracing one's heritage and adapting to a new context. This poem exists in a Third Space, where the poet creates a dialogue between her identity as an Iraqi person and her involvements in exile. It allows for the expression of in-betweenness and

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distinctions. When the wave is longing for the sea, it symbolizes the split between past and present, home and away.

The poet's use of imagery and language functions as a means of cultural translation. The wave raises natural, universal themes while it represents specific cultural contexts of longing and loss. The interplay between private and collective involvements in dislocation enriches the reader's acceptance of an identity shaped by war. Emotions conveyed in the poem encapsulate ambivalence—both the desire to belong and the pain of separation. Mikhail's reflections convey a complex emotional landscape that resonates with many exiled individuals, embodying the ambivalent feelings of connection to one's home whereas contending with the reality of dislocation.

Literary and poetic devices are frequent in this poem. The metaphor of the wave signifies longing and movement, while the sea represents the homeland or identity. As such, vivid imagery creates a sense of place and emotion, evoking the nuances of the poet's feelings of nostalgia and dislocation. As the wave is personified, the human qualities bestowed on it allow it to express desires and emotions, further deepening the connection readers may feel to the themes of longing and identity. However, both the wave and sea symbolize the broader themes of connection and separation, embodying the complex nature of cultural identity. The musical quality of the poem is enhanced by alliteration and repetition, while the use of rhythmic devices emphasizes key emotions and ideas.

The poem is mainly written in free verse, which reflects the fluidity of the wave and reinforces its themes of movement and change. The lack of regular rhyme mirrors the uncertainty that comes with exile, allowing Mikhail's voice to flow freely between memories of loss and yearnings for identity. The juxtaposition of emotional depth and simple natural imagery creates a poignant exploration of belonging and the challenges faced by those in the diaspora.

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"The Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea" serves as a profound exploration of identity, belonging, and displacement through Dunya Mikhail's poignant use of metaphor, imagery, and sound devices. Analyzing the poem through Bhabha's postcolonial lens reveals the intricacies of hybrid identity and the ambivalence felt by individuals caught between cultures. The poem resonates powerfully with themes of migration, loss, and the enduring impact of one's homeland on the quest for self-definition in a globalized world.

5.2. A Postcolonial Analysis of "The War Works Hard"

This poem is a powerful and sarcastic commentary on the nature of war and its devastating consequences. The poet uses various literary and poetic devices to convey the horrors of war and the hypocrisy of those who glorify it:

How magnificent the war is:
How eager
and efficient!
Early in the morning
it wakes up the sirens
and dispatches ambulances
to various places
swings corpses through the air
rolls stretchers to the wounded
summons rain
from the eyes of mothers
digs into the earth
dislodging many things
from under the ruins...
Some are lifeless and glistening
others are pale and still throbbing...
...
...
invigorates the coffin makers
gives grave diggers
a pat on the back
and paints a smile on the leader's face.
It works with unparalleled diligence!
Yet no one gives it
a word of praise... (<https://poets.org/poem/war-works-hard>)

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The poem is a revolutionary and scathing critique of the way war is often portrayed. When in reality, war is a destructive force that brings immense suffering to humanity, the poem describes it as a magnificent and efficient endeavour. The poet uses irony and sarcasm to highlight the absurdity and inhumanity of war and to expose how those in power use it to serve their interests. (Archer, 2010).

The poem underscores the collective experience of families, communities, and people during war, i.e., communal experience. The poet uses sarcastic phrases like “invigorates the coffin makers” and “gives grave diggers a pat on the back” to suggest that, notwithstanding the destruction, there exists a perverse sense of belonging within the roles people must play in the war economy, as well as social structure. This notion ties folks to their societies through shared involvements of loss and survival.

An evocation of forced migration is depicted in the poem to give a sense of displacement and loss. Such line as “urges families to emigrate” sadly reports the forced displacement caused by war. It shows that families often leave their homes and familiar environments to escape violence. This matter leads to a profound sense of uprootedness. This notion highlights the struggle between one's historical roots and the necessity of survival. Thus, it emphasizes the painful experience of losing one's place in the world.

Impact on Tradition and Expression is shown to give a sense of cultural displacement. The poet exposes how war “provides themes to poets” and “fills the newspapers with articles and pictures.” This line suggests that artistic expression is co-opted by the themes of conflict. This notion raises questions about cultural identity and heritage in the wake of war. For example, what once served to bond societies through communal narratives, now, becomes overshadowed by narratives of violence and annihilation.

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Equality between the killer and the killed is described in relation to the notion of the loss of identity. In “achieves equality between killer and killed”, moral displacement is expressed . The line indicates that amidst the chaos, identities become blurred and individuals lose their sense of self and belonging in a world of roles dictated by violence. This moral ambiguity mixed with feelings of alienation increases as communities grapple with the actions and consequences of war.

This poem is also written in free verse, without a specific rhyme scheme or meter, thereby the poet is given the freedom to express her thoughts and emotions without being constrained by traditional poetic structures. Literary and poetic devices are used proficiently in this poem, which is rich with vivid imagery, as the war "swings corpses through the air," "rolls stretchers to the wounded," and "sows mines in the fields." These images create a powerful visual representation of the devastation caused by war. Moreover, the poet personifies war, describing it as an active, diligent worker that "wakes up the sirens," "dispatches ambulances," and "contributes to the industry of artificial limbs." This personification identifies war as a human of a relentless and ruthless nature. (Kuniholm, 2006).

The poem is heavily laced with biting sarcasm leveled against leaders, as seen in lines like "It inspires tyrants to deliver long speeches" and "provides food for flies". These sarcastic statements undermine the medieval notion of war as a noble or heroic endeavour. The repetition of the phrase "It works with unparalleled diligence!" emphasizes the poet's sarcastic view of war as an efficient and productive enterprise. The poem juxtaposes the "lifeless and glistening" corpses with the "pale and still throbbing" wounded, creating a stark contrast between the dead and the living victims of war.

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The content of the poem is a powerful indictment of the glorification of war and the hypocrisy of those who perpetuate it. The poet draws attention to the real-world consequences of war, such as the suffering of mothers, orphans, and the wounded, as well as the profiteering and opportunism that often accompany it. (Annan, 2001). The poem contains several opposite references to real-world aspects of war, such as; Sirens and ambulances, which are common features of war zones, medals awarded to generals, a common practice in military conflict, the industry of artificial limbs, which often expands during and after wars, orphans and gravediggers, who are impacted by the devastating effects of war, and newspaper articles and pictures, which are used to report on and document war. Generally, this poem is a powerful and poignant exploration of the true nature of war, using a range of literary and poetic devices to challenge the prevailing narratives that glorify it. (Knightley, 2004).

6. Conclusion

Through the close examination of two war-poems by Dunya Mikhail', this paper has shed light on the multilayered involvements of belonging and displacement which illustrate the lives of those navigating the difficulties of postcolonial self. Mikhail's poems analyzed above have emerged as emotional testaments to the sensitive and psychological disorder provoked by the loss of a steady life, conflict, forced migration and lost sense of self in the wake of war. The analysis through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theories has been contributory in unveiling the tones of social hybridity and the third spaces that the speakers in the poems inhabit. The concept of the "third space" has been particularly enlightening in exploring the position of the exiled and displaced. They are neither fully rooted in their home nor fully integrated into their adopted homes. The selected poems have captured the profound sense of non-belonging and the painful renegotiation of identity that accompanied this liminal state. Furthermore, the paper has emphasized how Mikhail's poetic voices fight the binary logic of belonging and non-belonging. They embrace a more fluid and

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multifaceted understanding of identity. The poet's refusal to submit to the strictness of national, cultural, or linguistic boundaries, a matter that resonates with Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely," which undermines the very notion of home and challenges the predominant narratives of belonging.

This investigation into the themes of belonging and displacement in Dunya Mikhail's poetry has exposed the profound insights with the experiences of those who have been uprooted and displaced. Her writing stands as a dominant testament to the flexibility and adaptability of the human spirit in the face of adversity. It offers a poetic counter-narrative to the dominant discourses of nationalism and cultural purity. By foregrounding the complexities of postcolonial identity, the paper adds to a profounder understanding of the universal human condition and the ongoing struggle for belonging in an increasingly globalized world. The poems, chosen in this study, intricately weave together themes of belonging and displacement through the vivid imagery and ironic commentary on the war. The layers of experience emphasizes the cost humans pay for violence. The connections forged in trauma, the longing for a lost sense of home, and the struggle for identity amid chaos are skillfully depicted. Each line serves as a reminder of the way in which war reshapes the landscapes of belonging. War often leaves behind displaced individuals and fragmented communities.

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