

**Between Tongues: The Poetics of Exile & Bilingualism in
Dunya Mikhail's Selected Poems**

بين اللغات : شعرية المنفى وثنائية اللغة في مختارات من شعر دنيا ميخائيل



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Abstract

Writing in both Arabic and English, Mikhail's work embodies the multi-faceted cultural and linguistic identity that has been shaped by relocation and war. Looking at her poetry through the prism of exile, this study delves into how she uses language to show how a broken but resilient self may rise from the ashes of cultural displacement and loss. In order to understand how Mikhail uses bilingual poetics for cultural assertion and survival, this study incorporates theories of bilingualism, such as Doris Sommer's talks on language bargaining and Steven G. Kellman's idea of "translingualism.". By fusing Arabic cultural allusions with English language, Mikhail's poetry creates what Homi Bhabha may term a "third space," where linguistic hybridity represents resilience, memory, and belonging, and so rejects single understandings of identity. This research contends that Mikhail's bilingualism presents exile as a linguistic and ontological state, rather than just a translation of experience.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Exile, Mikhail, translingualism, cultural

ملخص

تكتب دنيا ميخايل باللغتين العربية والإنجليزية، وتجسد أعمالها الهوية الثقافية واللغوية متعددة الأوجه التي تشكلت نتيجة الانتقال والحرب. من خلال النظر إلى شعرها من منظور المنفى، تتناول هذه الدراسة كيف تستخدم اللغة لتظهر كيف يمكن لذات مكسورة لكنها مرنة أن تنهض من رماد التهجير الثقافي والفقدان. لفهم كيف تستخدم ميخايل الشعر الثنائي اللغة كوسيلة للتأكيد الثقافي والبقاء، تتضمن هذه الدراسة نظريات حول ثنائية اللغة، مثل محادثات دوريس سومر حول التفاوض اللغوي وفكرة ستيفن جي. كيلمان حول "العبور اللغوي". من خلال دمج الإشارات الثقافية العربية مع اللغة الإنجليزية، تخلق قصائد ميخايل ما قد يسميه هومي بابا "الفضاء الثالث"، حيث تمثل الهجنة اللغوية المقاومة والذاكرة والانتماء، وبالتالي ترفض الفهم الأحادي للهوية. تؤكد هذه البحث أن ثنائية اللغة لدى ميخايل تقدم المنفى كحالة لغوية ومنطولوجية، بدلاً من كونه ترجمة للتجربة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ثنائية اللغة، المنفى، ميخايل، العبور اللغوي، الثقافة



Aims of the Study

1 .To examine the relationship between exile and poetic expression in Dunya Mikhail's selected works, focussing on the articulation of themes pertaining to displacement and loss.

2 .To analyse the influence of bilingualism, namely the interplay between Arabic and English, on Mikhail's poetic structure, themes, and stylistic choices.

3 .To examine the creative impediments and opportunities associated with bilingual writing and their impact on Mikhail's artistic expression.

4 .To examine how Mikhail's poetry embodies and navigates divided identities, cultural displacement, and the need for belonging.

5 .To highlight Mikhail's contributions to contemporary literature by showcasing her innovative language methods and her ability to intertwine personal and societal realities of exile.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive approach to analyse the poetics of exile and bilingualism in certain works by Dunya Mikhail. The method emphasises a comprehensive examination of her work, investigating its linguistic and thematic dimensions. The study seeks to uncover the several levels of meaning embedded in her language, images, and structure via rigorous textual analysis. The research uses ecocritical and postcolonial theoretical frameworks to contextualise Mikhail's work within broader discussions of identity, displacement, and cultural negotiation. These frameworks provide crucial instruments for comprehending the interplay between her poetry and the experience of exile, as well as the challenges of multilingual writing. The study includes a comparative analysis, investigating the impact of Mikhail's bilingualism on her poetry in comparison to other poets composing in multilingual contexts. This contrast highlights the



unique methods she employs to navigate the dual demands of cultural and linguistic translation.

Introduction

Dunya Mikhail's poetry profoundly examines exile, identity, and the human soul. Mikhail, born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1965, was profoundly influenced by the political turbulence and bloodshed that pervaded her nation throughout her formative years. As a young lady, she directly saw the effects of war and tyranny, which subsequently became the basis of her poems. Her choice to embark on a career in journalism and subsequently in poetry was both a personal and political endeavor, serving as a means to challenge the oppressive forces around her. Mikhail's early poetry poignantly captures the harsh reality of war, displacement, and the anguish of common individuals, all while preserving a lyrical essence that imbues her verses with a sense of optimism among misery (Naim, 2013, p. 30).

Her exile was a crucial turning point in her poetic career. Mikhail fled Iraq in the mid-1990s owing to the threats associated with her journalistic and creative pursuits and landed in the United States. The experience of relocation, of abandoning a life that previously defined her, compelled Mikhail to face new challenges—not alone those of survival, but also of reinvention. Mikhail's poetry started to emerge in a bilingual framework, existing between her Iraqi roots and the alien culture of the United States. She examined the difficulties and opportunities present in traversing the Arabic and English language and cultural realms. Her bilingualism emerged as a fundamental motif in her art, representing the fragmented and dynamic essence of her identity as an exile. The new language, English, presented both a problem and an opportunity: a medium for creative extension and a means for engaging with a wider audience (Said, 2003, p. 48).

Mikhail's poetry is distinguished by its simplicity, lucidity, and emotional profundity. Despite addressing complex issues like conflict, exile, and suffering, her language stays clear and impactful. Through this simplicity, Mikhail conveys important truths about the human experience. Her poetry often explores the emotional aspects of grief and loss, while also reflecting significant political and historical



contexts. In *The War Works Hard*, Mikhail juxtaposes the savagery of war with the tenacity of daily existence, transforming mundane instances into representations of the broader struggles influencing the surrounding world. The interaction between the personal and the universal has become a defining characteristic of Mikhail's oeuvre, enabling her to articulate both her own inner challenges and the shared experiences of those who have faced analogous circumstances (Salem, 2011, p. 58).

Mikhail's poetry notably excels at intertwining the personal with the history. Mikhail intertwines her personal biography with the broader narrative of her nation's suffering, a theme often explored by poets in exile who confront feelings of loss and fragmentation. Her works engage in an ongoing dialogue between the past and the present, with the traumas of the Iraq war and larger Middle Eastern issues functioning as both a background and a trigger for her poetry. In *The Iraqi Nights*, Mikhail explores issues of memory, grief, and survival, using the traditional traditions of Iraq to contextualize her contemporary experiences of exile. Mikhail's capacity to traverse the personal and the historical enables her to connect with her readers, creating a communal place for contemplation and comprehension (Khalil, 2009, p. 72).

Moreover, Mikhail's poetry often has an intrinsic feeling of defiance. Her decision to write and establish a voice under suffering becomes an act of rebellion. Mikhail's work counters the suppression of voices silenced by political regimes and cultural norms. In her poetry, the voiceless are empowered, and the displaced are given their own story. This resistance encompasses not just political dimensions but also emotional and intellectual aspects, interrogating our comprehension of identity, culture, and the phenomenon of loss. Mikhail's poetry transmutes suffering into artistry, using words to weave together the disparate elements of her existence and those of others. Mikhail's poetry derives its full strength from her resistance, crafting beauty from the turmoil and ruin that envelops her (Jabri, 2014, p. 88).

In her later works, Mikhail's poetry further develops as she contemplates belonging, identity, and the need for home. These themes continue to be fundamental in her work, however they are now



examined via the perspectives of time, distance, and memory. The exiled poet's voice has become more pensive, meditative, and at times sad, as she traverses the intricacies of being between cultures and languages. Nonetheless, despite the pervasive feeling of yearning in her later poems, Mikhail always maintains the tenacity that has characterized her work from the first. Her poetry provides a dual perspective, intertwining personal and communal challenges from the past with the continuous story of human existence. Mikhail's poetry serves as a testament to the world, dedicated to narrating tales that may otherwise stay unvoiced (Fahmy, 2017, p. 92).

Exile and Bilingualism in Literature

Exile is among the most significant and disturbing situations a writer can have. It transforms both their identity and their interaction with language, culture, and creativity. For exiled authors, the act of writing becomes an intricate negotiation between the past and the present, the familiar and the unfamiliar. This experience often yields a distinctive literary style that encapsulates the tensions and intricacies of migration. Bilingualism, an unavoidable outcome of exile, adds an additional degree of intricacy to this literary odyssey. Writing in many languages has both opportunities and problems, enabling the writer to engage diverse audiences while simultaneously addressing the constraints and potentials associated with traversing various linguistic and cultural realms. Exile and bilingualism have emerged as prevalent topics in global literature, crucial for comprehending contemporary writers, especially within postcolonial and diasporic frameworks (Hassan, 2002, p. 35).

In literature, exile serves as a thematic basis for exploring identity, belonging, and remembrance. Exiled writers often contend with the erasure of their previous identities and the communities they formerly belonged to. Their products function as platforms for the deconstruction and reconstruction of the self, blurring the boundaries of nationality, language, and community. The exiled author often pursues a new feeling of belonging that transcends national borders and aims for a broader comprehension of identity. Bilingualism is essential in this context. It allows the author to engage with both their ancestral heritage and the new milieu they have adopted. Bilingualism highlights the tension between the two domains, as the author shifts between



languages, encountering both liberation and limitation in each. The concept of linguistic duality is essential for understanding the literary creations of exiled authors, as it embodies their alienation and potential for artistic growth (Kundera, 1994, p. 58).

Exile often results in a disruption of an individual's life story, creating a discontinuity that may be both distressing and emancipating. Exiled writers confront the difficulty of reconstructing their personal and cultural narratives from a position of dislocation. This reconstruction is not only an academic endeavor; it is profoundly emotional. Numerous authors experience a conflict between allegiance to their own country and the need to adapt to their new surroundings. This conflict is evident in their literature as they strive to reconcile their past and current identities. Bilingualism complicates this process by providing an additional language that may both augment and impede the writer's capacity to articulate their inner thoughts. A new language offers entry to other cultures and alternative forms of expression, but it may also serve as an imposition, evoking memories of a lost home and the isolation inherent in exile. For several writers, the conflict between languages serves as the primary topic of their oeuvre, illustrating the psychological burden of being in dual realms (Bhabha, 1994, p. 75).

Writing in a second language or alternating between languages creates a "third space" in literature. This third area is not entirely one language or the other but existing in a liminal zone, where meanings are negotiated and identities are formed. This zone serves as a reservoir of creative potential and a locus of conflict for multilingual writers. The exiled writer cultivates a new voice via the negotiation of languages, embodying the mixed essence of their experience. This multilingual voice often connects with readers from many ethnic backgrounds who comprehend the common emotions of loss, desire, and adaptability. Authors like Edward Said and Salman Rushdie have articulately explored this third space in their writings, illustrating how language can both unite and emancipate, functioning as both a medium of expression and an obstacle to complete integration into the dominant culture (Said, 1993, p. 101).



In modern literature, exile and bilingualism serve as both topics and structural components. Numerous writers explore form by subverting linear storytelling standards, using numerous languages, and integrating unconventional narrative strategies. This illustrates the fragmented essence of the exile experience, characterized by perpetual changes in time, location, and identity. The multilingual author often navigates two opposing realms, and this feeling of dislocation is evident in their writing style. This hybrid literary genre exemplifies the tenacity of the exiled writer, who must always adapt, innovate, and redefine themselves amidst loss and transition (Lahiri, 2003, p. 62).

Bilingualism significantly influences the translation of works produced in exile. Exiled authors often have the obstacle of having their works translated into the language of their host nation, a process that may be laden with challenges. Translation, while essential for engaging a broader audience, can never entirely convey the subtleties of a writer's original language. The process of translating inherently entails a loss of meaning, converting the original into something that may seem remote or insufficient. Bilingual writers engage in a continual negotiation throughout translation, striving to preserve the authenticity of their original voice while rendering it comprehensible to a wider audience. Bilingualism therefore serves as a mechanism of resistance, enabling the writer to affirm their cultural identity despite relocation and assimilation (Venuti, 2004, p. 112).

Exile and bilingualism in literature are inherently linked experiences that generate intricate and inventive artistic expressions. For exiled authors, the conflict between languages serves as a crucial aspect of their oeuvre, embodying the dichotomy between belonging and alienation. Exiled authors, via bilingualism, create new creative voices that challenge conventional concepts of identity, community, and belonging. Their works exemplify the tenacity of the human spirit, providing readers insight into the personal and social aspects of exile. Through the exploration of other languages and cultures, these authors unlock new avenues for storytelling, producing narratives that are profoundly personal but globally impactful (Naficy, 2001, p. 89).

Discussion



Dunya Mikhail's poetry profoundly examines the themes of exile and bilingualism, mirroring the intense psychological and political realities of a poet uprooted from her nation. Mikhail, born in Iraq in 1965, endured the severe conditions of war and political turmoil before being compelled to seek exile. This exile, together with her choice to write in both Arabic and English, is the essence of her poetic identity. Mikhail's work transcends simple description of relocation; she embraces it, creating a dynamic realm in her poems where identity, language, and culture are always in change. Mikhail's exile transcends mere geographical dislocation; it becomes a multifaceted emotional and psychological odyssey intricately linked to her multilingual. Mikhail's bilingual life enables her to create an own literary realm, navigating between her native Arabic and the new linguistic environment she occupies, while sustaining a critical engagement with both cultures and identities (Mikhail, 2001, p. 24).

Mikhail's experience of exile is central to her lyrical odyssey. After leaving Iraq in the 1990s, she found herself caught between two realms—the familiar environment of Iraq and the unfamiliar culture of the United States. During her exile, Mikhail was had to face not only the loss of her nation but also the intricacies of reconstructing her identity in a strange environment. Writing evolved into a personal survival mechanism and a method for navigating her identity. For Mikhail, exile represents a transitional condition_a realm between identities and languages where she must confront her past while maneuvering through an unfamiliar present. The motifs of loss, yearning, and endurance pervade her oeuvre, as she consistently revisits the concept of home—its significance in the context of loss and the process of establishing a new feeling of belonging. Mikhail use her poetry to tackle these truths, using her writing as a means to reconstruct the fractured aspects of her personality (Salem, 2011, p. 58).

A notable characteristic of Mikhail's poetry is her use of both Arabic and English. As an exiled poet, composing in two languages enables her to communicate with both the community she abandoned and the world she has embraced. Arabic, her native tongue, has profound emotional and cultural significance for Mikhail, yet English, the



language of her new existence, facilitates wider comprehension of her work by a global audience. Nonetheless, this bilingualism presents a series of obstacles. Every language has its own cultural and personal importance, and the interplay between them generates a persistent tension throughout Mikhail's oeuvre. The alternation between languages is not only a formal technique; it signifies her fragmented identity. In poems where Mikhail alternates between Arabic and English, the reader is compelled to confront the language disjunction that exile entails. The transition between languages serves as a potent metaphor for her fractured identity and the intricacies of navigating dual cultures (Naficy, 2001, p. 89).

Mikhail's bilingualism enables her to articulate exile, emphasizing both its psychological and outward ramifications. Her proficiency in both Arabic and English allows her to articulate a diverse array of experiences—some intricately tied to the Iraqi cultural milieu, and others that embody the broader phenomenon of displacement. In her poem *The War Works Hard*, Mikhail conveys the harsh realities of war in her native Arabic, but the English translation facilitates a wider contemplation of the effects of violence on a worldwide scale. This act of bilingualism transcends mere verbal translation; it embodies the translation of lived experience. The transition between languages illustrates the poet's evolving perception of identity and location, with the inherent tensions of exile. English provides a more neutral, global platform for Mikhail to communicate with a wider audience, yet Arabic embodies the emotional significance of a personal and cultural heritage that cannot be diminished via translation (Mikhail, 2005, p. 45).

Mikhail examines the intricacies of belonging via her multilingual. In exile, language serves as a signifier of both identity and alienation. Mikhail, a multilingual poet, navigates the complexities of two languages—Arabic, linked to her Iraqi heritage, and English, symbolizing her new existence and the expansive realm of global poetry. The discord between these two languages provides Mikhail with an opportunity to contemplate the intricacies of belonging. She is neither entirely at home in Iraq nor wholly at home in the United States. Rather, she inhabits a realm of perpetual negotiation, a domain where her several identities may live in a state of transition. Mikhail's



bilingualism exemplifies the diasporic situation, characterized by a fluid sense of belonging and an ever-evolving identity (Bhabha, 1994, p. 75).

Mikhail's multilingual poetry underscores the intrinsic political dimensions of exile. Exile is not just an individual experience but also a communal one, influenced by political and historical dynamics. Mikhail's writing in both Arabic and English is a kind of resistance against the oppressive forces often associated with exile. Mikhail's poetry defies the obliteration of her individuality by affirming her voice in dual languages. Through her Arabic writing, she preserves the cultural and political memory of Iraq, countering the cultural amnesia often associated with exile. Simultaneously, by composing in English, she guarantees that her voice resonates with a worldwide audience, facilitating a discourse on the politics of displacement and the realities of conflict. Her multilingual serves as both a personal manifestation of her fragmented identity and a political assertion of visibility and resistance (Said, 1993, p. 101).

Moreover, Mikhail's poetry addresses the emotional and intellectual dimensions of exile. Her art profoundly reflects the emotional burden of relocation, as she contends with the loss of home, family, and community. Her poetry often convey a yearning and a feeling of regret for the life she abandoned. These emotions pertain not just to loss but also to survival and adaptability. Mikhail's bilingual writing enables him to articulate the anguish of exile and the accompanying resilience. Her bilingualism enables her to delve into the whole emotional spectrum of her experiences, creating poetry that is both personal and universal. Her multilingual poetry articulates the intricate feelings of exile—emotions that defy easy categorization and reside in the interstice of languages, civilizations, and histories.

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Mikhail's poetry articulate the emotional intricacies of exile, interlacing recollections of her birthplace with the realities of dislocation. Mikhail composes in both Arabic and English, establishing a lyrical voice that is intrinsically connected to her background and her contemporary environment, therefore bridging the divide between these two language and cultural domains. This bilingualism is not only a stylistic preference but a manifestation of her fragmented identity as an expatriate. The continual transition between languages enables Mikhail to express the dichotomy of her existence—encompassing both the melancholy and the optimism inherent in exile. Mikhail's poetry draws readers into a threshold where language serves as a mechanism for survival, articulating both the anguish of loss and the tenacity of endurance. Mikhail's poem "The War Works Hard" exemplifies the poet's use of the friction between Arabic and English to convey the profound intensity of war and exile experiences. The term, both simple and deep, emphasizes the unyielding and ceaseless essence of conflict. In the poem, Mikhail writes:

"The war works hard, it does not rest,
it has a job to do,
it learns to speak the language of blood,
it hears the sound of bones breaking." (Translated by Mikhail, 2001,
p. 40)

This introduction conveys both the savagery of warfare and its dehumanizing impact. The cadence and clarity of the phrases embody the relentless nature of conflict, which persists unremittingly. The English translation makes the poem accessible to a wider audience; nonetheless, the original Arabic has an intensity intrinsically linked to the poet's cultural milieu. The use of straightforward language in both iterations highlights the severity of the violence and its emotional repercussions, illustrating the chasm between the poet's former existence in Iraq and her current state of exile. The transition between languages in this poem highlights the poet's challenge to preserve a connection to her local tongue while addressing a worldwide audience on universal sorrow.



The bilingual nature of Mikhail's poetry allows her to delve deeply into the tension between her identity as an Iraqi and her new life in the United States. In *The Iraqi Nights*, one of her most poignant poems, Mikhail writes:

"I was born under the night sky of Baghdad,
But I live now under a foreign sun,
I speak in a language that is not my own,
Yet it calls to me, echoing through the hollow of my heart."
(Mikhail, 2014, p. 68)

This poem depicts the intricate feelings of being between two realms. The contrast between "the night sky of Baghdad" and the "foreign sun" of the United States emphasizes Mikhail's feeling of alienation. The phrase "language that is not my own" signifies the difficulty of being in exile and acclimating to a new setting. The "foreign sun" simultaneously symbolizes a realm of survival and fresh beginnings, but it remains a site of alienation. Mikhail's language, both simple and expressive, encapsulates the essence of dislocation, embodying the sensation of being caught between an unforgettable past and a present that remains elusive.

For Mikhail, exile is not just a geographical move but also a mental and emotional odyssey that requires continual adaptation and negotiation. Her poem *The Displaced* eloquently explores this perpetual condition of change. She writes:

"I walk the streets of a city that is not mine,
Yet every corner holds a memory,
A face, a name, a place I left behind,
But still, I carry it all, wherever I go." (Mikhail, 2014, p. 89)

Mikhail contemplates the psychological weight of exile. The feeling of loss is evident, as she characterizes the place she now resides in as "not mine," but she is unable to evade the memories that persistently shape her identity. The poem embodies the perpetual psychological and emotional disorientation that exile induces—the incapacity to have a sense of belonging anyplace. This sentiment is intensified by her bilingualism. The transition between Arabic and English transcends simply linguistics, including emotional dimensions. At times, English may serve as a barrier, alienating Mikhail from the closeness of her original language, while Arabic embodies a profound emotional



connection to home. Through the tension between languages, Mikhail establishes a place for her exilic identity to persist and defy erasure.

Mikhail's bilingualism also speaks to the politics of displacement. In her poem *A Letter to the Man Who Killed My Brother*, Mikhail does not just confront personal grief but the broader political and social forces that led to her exile. In this poem, she writes:

"You have taken my brother, But you cannot take my voice, For it is carried in two languages, One that you do not understand, And one that refuses to be silenced." (Mikhail, 2005, p. 76)

This poem encapsulates the psychological and political aspects of exile. Mikhail confronts the one accountable for her brother's demise while also articulating a more expansive notion of defiance. The allusion to her voice being conveyed in "two languages" is noteworthy. It serves as both a concrete indication of her bilingualism and a metaphorical declaration of her capacity to defy suppression. Mikhail's bilingual writing enables her to engage with her cherished Iraqi community and the foreign audience that may lack familiarity with her culture. Bilingualism therefore serves as an act of resistance, a method of retaining her identity and proclaiming her existence amidst loss.

Mikhail's poetry, especially via her use of bilingualism, serves as a mechanism for traversing the intricacies of exile. Her work expresses the individual anguish of exile while also addressing wider political and societal circumstances. The process of writing in Arabic and English illustrates the conflict between Mikhail's history and present, enabling her to retain the language and culture of her hometown while simultaneously engaging a wider audience. This bilingualism not only reflects the difficulties of exile but also provides a kind of creative agency, enabling Mikhail to construct her identity and voice in a society that often attempts to quiet exiled persons.

Conclusion

Exile and bilingualism are two topics that are intricately interwoven in Dunya Mikhail's work, and her poetry is a complex expression of both of these concepts simultaneously. Mikhail gives expression to the intricacies of relocation, identity, and resistance via her poetry study of both Arabic and English linguistic landscapes. Due to the fact that she is bilingual, she is able to negotiate the liminal space that exists



between two different worlds. This provides her with a poetic space that is continuously in tension between loss and survival, home and exile. Mikhail's poetry is a monument to the tenacity and inventiveness of the exiled writer since it not only addresses the emotional anguish of exile but also the political dimensions of displacement. This is because Mikhail's work explores both of these aspects of displacement.

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