



Lisa Suhair Majaj's
Geographies of Light: the Lighted Landscape of Hope
(Book Review)

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Abstract: This is a review of the book, *Geographies of Light: the Lighted Landscape of Hope*, a collection of poetry by the Palestinian-American poet Lisa Suhair Majaj, published by Del Sol Press, Washington, D.C., 2009. "Reading Majaj," the reviewer Rehnuma Sazzad states, "we surely realize that whatever differences of skin, colour, or map we may have, we are the neighbours of the stars by dint of inhabiting a tiny planet that has not yet stopped its orbit round its own star." In her view, "The book presents a wonderful landscape, which is filled with the presence of light. The landscape spreads over different continents and establishes the poet's belief and hope in humanity by building up an imaginative geography in which she feels at home."

Lisa Suhair Majaj's Del Sol Press Poetry Prize 2010 winning collection of verses (Del Sol Press, Washington, D.C., 2009, pp. 133) presents a wonderful landscape, which is filled with the presence of light. The landscape spreads over different continents and establishes the poet's belief and hope in humanity by building up an imaginative geography in which she feels at home.

Since the Palestinian-American—born in Iowa, brought up in Amman, educated in Beirut and Michigan, and now living in Cyprus—cannot locate the map she can exclu-

sively claim as her own, she decides to create one for herself through her poetry. How does she draw the lines of this unusual map, though? In my view, Majaj's cartographic skill is the most significant aspect of this collection, for she determines the lines of her imaginative map in a brilliant way. She achieves them by joining the multitude of tiny drops of light emanating from the concrete goodness and warmth of human heart. Majaj excavates her experiences in order to trace the human connection with nature, the fellow human beings, and even the greater

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celestial environment amidst the struggle to live, to come to terms with losses and deep traumas, and of course, the joys of living. Thus, the poet expresses how the light of the human heart becomes visible to her through her life and reality on earth.

Therefore, her poetic mission seems to be to keep knitting the shawl made up of the drops of light that she discovers around her, for one cannot fight against darkness with further darkness. Instead, one needs more and more light-drops to drive it out. Understandably, the drops are not as innumerable as to be readily visible. Therefore, the particles of light that adorn Majaj's landscape delineating her memories, visions, and emotions are hard-earned through her constant search for them. Reading the book, therefore, one is bound to have the feeling that Majaj never ceases to collect the particles to keep forming her ideal map of belonging. As a result, this book of poetry is about keeping focus on the collection, despite the change of places, events and situations that define the poet's life.

I reiterate that her search spans a full gamut of experiences ranging from the pluralistic upbringing, to the sufferings of dislocation, to remembering childhood freedom, to achieving calmness and moving forward. The extract appearing below from the poem, 'Living in History,' beautifully captures her idea of the light being created out of the living history of human existence through all its variations:

Whatever the skins we live in,
the names we choose, the gods we claim
or disavow,
may we be like grains of sand on the
beach at night:
a hundred million separate particles
creating a single expanse on which to lie
back
and study the stars. And may we
remember the generosity
of light: how it travels through
unimaginable darkness,

age after age, to light our small human
night. (122)

Her steadfast belief in lighting the 'small human night' is why she declares above that we are not to dwell on our exterior differences. Neither 'the skins we live in' nor 'the gods we claim or disavow' are crucial to her, then. Instead, she wants us to be as rooted to the world as the 'grains of sand on the beach at night' and yet keep looking upwards, just like them, as they fix their gaze at 'the stars,' As hard to reach as it might sound, a silent but powerful strength is embedded in such an ambitious assertion. Majaj aims here to make us realize that the light of the stars visits us by traversing the vast expanses of 'unimaginable darkness.' Similarly, the light of the human soul keeps awake and alive amidst all sorts of deprivations inside the atmosphere of the earth. Majaj makes our communion with the stars possible, then, in order for us to recognize our celestial existence that could be all the more inspiring, if we put things in perspective. Naturally, Majaj's firm answer to all the irreconciliations of her culturally diverse and divided life is a humanistic approach to them to a greater extent. This not only inspires her to write but also gives her a sense of transcendence of all the travails brought about by cultural disintegration.

From this viewpoint, the constitution of the book in seven sections is significant, for each section has a specific temperament as it searches for the humanistic light from a particular angle. For example, the first section deals with the idea of childhood and beginning. It conjures up some warm pictures of the Majaj family, despite its trials to deal with the disorientation of dispossession that seems to be buried underneath the everyday reality, but surfaces from time to time. When this happens, the poet feels that the taste of coffee changes in her mouth, for it

... fills with dregs:
coarse, bitter-sweet, earth-dark,

dense as unclaimed memory. (4)

The sheer fact of the not usually retrieved memory becomes apparent through the image of its 'unclaimed' status. Besides, the memory lying buried deep within is compared to the dregs of some 'dense,' 'coarse,' 'bitter-sweet,' and 'earth-dark' coffee, which makes us realize that we are in the company of a poet of fine sensibility. Simultaneously, we understand that growing up with such burdens of memory was not easy for the child the poet used to be. But the memories of Amman she unfolds tell us that even in her childhood she found a way of dealing with her alienation by connecting her mind with the surroundings:

Banyan trees patient as centuries.
Beirut barely stirring.
The Mediterranean luminous
with the expectation of light. (8)

Evidently, for her, nature bore the first sign of the luminosity lying beyond a war-torn Lebanon that gave her the strength to survive.

I think one of the main attractions of Majaj's poetry is her ability to take the readers to the exact environment of one of the corners of her multiple universes, when she describes it:

Summer held Amman in its
breathlessness,
Siesta of burning dust, sun melding to
sky.

Construction chiselled the daze of heat,
shouts of labourers, swirl of stone dust,
weave of weariness, stone-chippers
tapping
a blood rhythm. (8)

Even if one has never been to Amman, one can experience the heat, daze, burn, and stone-dust of the place. A rhythm arriving out of the melding of the sun and sky also

makes us feel the 'breathlessness' of youth under the heat. Moments like this almost makes us forget that we are reading some poetry dealing with the suppressed pain of not finding a sure anchor. And so, we realize why the spirit of the wanderer does not yield: 'My feet grew tired, but I remembered my name.' (15)

The second section continues with the problem of the unsettled origin, but projects it with more longing for light. Nature is proven to be its source, once more. The light of poetic inspiration is found through recreating the images of 'exuberant earth,' 'pine shrubs,' and poppy blossoms, 'fierce tongues beneath transient skies,' (21) which are in effect the fruits of the poet's memory seeds. Memory, therefore, becomes another means to survive:

Uprooted, any stalk or vine
would wither and die. But if the
taproot
is strong, a transplant can live. (23)

The poet searches for memories to draw strength from them so as to know what aspects of her cultural roots she identifies with. These help her to build a taproot the support of which makes her sail through her frequent transplantations in unknown geographies. As if to reflect her adaptability, her verses in this section both expand into prose poems and shrivel into the shape of an egg!

The third section is about ripening, which the poet brings into sharp focus by the first poem entitled: 'Pomelo Days.' This section is also where we see the sign of a bright poet, since Majaj does not present the ripening as an automated process. On the contrary, she shows her constant reworking of the self as part of her coming of age and beyond it:

I tilt toward the earth, leaning with the
weather, held
in place by little more than gravity and

the tenacious will
of someone who gathered stones from
the field, placing them
one atop another, trying to make
something that would stay.

From how many lives? I build myself up
as I go. (36)

Majaj's depth of vision is pleasingly visible here. The clambering of cherry trees in her childhood mentioned earlier in the book is now connected with her adult years' struggle to build a stone-structure representing a firm self-identity. It is as if the child in the poet is still collecting 'stones from the field' to build 'something' that will stay in the weather-swept topsy-turvy world, which vehemently draws her to its circumference by a force greater than gravity.

As the life force throws her in the earthly struggle, she keeps working towards her transcendence through the 'Seasons of Fire, Seasons of Light.' This beautiful poem ends the section where these seasons intermingle as the poet changes hemisphere. This is why the fiery autumn of New England reminds her of the lit Lebanon, as she crosses continents, while the gloomy memory of leaving behind the war-torn city lingers around. The memory dictates that during the transition to New England, the war refugees looked upward from the sea and found a canopy of stars keeping them company. Amidst the glint and glare of sumac and maples of North America, therefore, the poet knows that

After the brilliance of autumn,
nothing will be clearer than the
simplicity of loss. (48)

Nature's company makes the acceptance of loss possible. Loss is not the note, though, on which the beautiful poem ends. The interweaving of New England and Lebanon continues by leading the seeker of light to hope for spring days. In her mind's

eye, she sees that the almond trees are blossoming in accord with 'the sea's soft breath,' where the hills have been 'taken by fire' (49), in Lebanon.

In case the readers have the feeling that Majaj's is an affective landscape simply filled up with natural images in order to drive out the losses of non-belonging, I have to point out that the poet's politics of map making runs deeper than that. This is proven when the fourth section throws us into the thick of things. The poet's struggle for a definable political identity is perfectly intelligible here. In 'Guidelines,' she says:

If they ask you where you come from,
say Toledo. Detroit. Mission Viejo.
Fall Springs. Topeka. If they seem
confused,

help them locate these places on a map,
then inquire casually, Where are you
from?

Have you been here long? Do you like
this country? (53)

Majaj seems to have wandered from one point of America to another without being able to decide if she is Arab or American. The use of the caesura emphasizes each of the place of her trajectory and brings out her unsettled condition rhythmically. However, when she is accosted by the question of her point of origin, she has to take time to formulate an answer, which is why the enjambment enhanced by the gap between the verses is brilliant. What answer does she come up with, though? The answer is a startling no answer. Instead, she turns the questions around to reflect that the questioner himself/herself is also not indigenous to the land of immigrants. Majaj's success as a poet thus lies in recognizing the perfect moment for irony and utilizing it pointedly.

However, she does not fail to mark the moments residing beyond ironies. We realize that some undecidability hangs permanently on her shoulders, when Majaj depicts

an irremovable rift in her identity. In her name poem, she states:

You call my daily name, *Lisa*,
the name I've finally declared
my own, claiming a heritage
half mine: corn fields silver
in ripening haze, green music
of crickets, summer light sloping
to dusk on the Iowa farm.

The other name fills my mouth,
A taste faintly metallic,
Blunt edges around which my tongue
Moves tentatively: *Suhair*,
an old fashioned name,
little star in the night. The second girl,
small light on a distanced horizon. (63;
emphases in original)

The verses, I think, contain the crux of the whole collection and hence, my lengthy citation appears above. Majaj is not an easy combination of Lisa and Suhair. The former contains a dailiness that she associates with the vibrant rural America, one of the sources of her light creating the imaginative geography of her home in the writing. The other source of the light comes from a far distant landscape where a star is keeping vigil. Thus, the poet transforms vigilance, the etymological meaning of Suhair, the Arabic part of her name, into the ground of her constant search for the little dots of light, even when the darkness of night engulfs the surroundings. Another significant point about this part of her name is that it is from a language foreign to her. However, there is a wonderful willingness to keep her ties with a distant language and land alive. In my view, maintaining a complex existence of being both from 'the Iowa farm' and a troubled Arab land by following a beacon of light for the continuous self-transformation towards a better pattern of socio-political existence is the root out of which this beautiful collection of verses branch out.

The beauty of the poems moves us, for

its foundation has an idealism the sincerity of which is tangible:

We might plant together, pluck
grapes, brew coffee, tell new
fortunes each day, wash away
grounds of anger. History could be
this simple: earth—the final
claim—cupped like sunlight. (56)

Understandably, these homely, familiar images are the main source of Majaj's earnestness. Nevertheless, the most powerful aspect of the image presented here is the idea of a shared earth. For the poet, the philosophy is quite simple: we are all here to live our ordinary human life through the planting, reaping, brewing, and dreaming of good future under the same sun. Therefore, if our meteorological sharing of the sun is a given, we could transform our history too into an atmosphere reflecting the common aspects of our lived life, rather than the record of conflicts over territoriality and geographical boundaries.

In any case, the fifth section comes as a break from the historico-political musings, since the theme, tone and vision of the poems here are organized around the sweetness of the mother-child bonding. The poet upholds the maternal strength in the poems not only through depicting her affectionate moments with her children but also through highlighting how hard the vocation of motherhood can be. Here we get more glimpses of her sincerity in making her words delineate her experiences in a life-like way. She describes the deep satisfaction of suckling the child, which is simultaneously arduous and taxing, not least because she nursed 'the baby well into toddlerhood.' (74) Perhaps, the instinct to be as unyielding a shelter for the child as a cold-defying penguin for its chick is what overrides the exhaustion of parenting. Sure enough, Majaj writes:

I tuck my child beneath my breasts,

ready
to face any danger in his defense, endure
icescapes
of hunger, tundras of broken nights—
till my mate returns, scoops up the child,
and sends me staggering to the sea of
sleep. (76)

What an insightful picture of men and women's everyday struggle to survive! This is also why we have to believe her that the light she is relentlessly searching for resides inside the humans, for in their ordinariness lies their transcendence!

I think the first poem of the sixth section could not have had a better title, for it truthfully summarises what is discussed in this part: 'Points of Departure.' This is the most overtly and heavily politicized section in the whole book. Yes, it is all about the Palestinian conflict. We see that amid the checkpoints, sentries, cries, memories, documents, and wearies of reaching the debated land, the poet becomes a young girl here, who looks for a border beyond 'the sun's keen blade' (82). Most unsurprisingly, her transcendence does not come from above, for this is the land, where

Sky rims the curve of ocean
opaque as the mountains
mapping the colours of salt. (82)

The unrestrained flow of water has its own mechanism of map making. Since the map is that of salt, there is no quarrel over it. However, the picture is completely different inland. Majaj's prose-poem records how the conflict over the land is plainly killing the zeal for life, as one of the dejected West Bank youth states, 'We are tired, here. We have lost our passion' (83). The poet is deeply affected by the situation. But as we have seen so far, her mission is to rescue whatever little drops of light she can out of the dominant darkness around. This is especially no exception in this part of the collection. Therefore, she does not fail to notice the food vari-

eties, spices, colours of garments, and the fruit platters of West Bank that keep adding to her own map of life.

However, the reality is too overpowering here. Majaj has the perfect image to describe how the conflict is continuously cultivated in the land. She views the surrounding hills as a lasting reservoir of stones that are always 'cropping through the soil of Palestine like a million broken teeth' (83). She can read the hardened but endangered faces of the stone-throwing boys in such an unhinged state. Even so, her instinct is to keep the ray of light alive at least through yearning for peace:

you cry, give us peace!
we cry, give us our lives!

peace grows like any other plant, on the
land
it needs earth and water (87)

Once again, Majaj's nature imagery delivers the difficult message in a simple way. 'You' and 'We' have to stop pointing finger at each other. Rather, both the parties must come forward in planting a small tree called 'peace' in the stony soil and give it 'earth and water' for growth.

However, it seems that this idealistic solution will take a lifetime's wait to come about. In the meantime, the reality that governs the lives of 'us' is that of dispossession, 'the pit of exile,' being erased from history, and the numerous razed villages an italicized list of some of which becomes part of the rhythm of a poem, 'For Palestine' (88). In the face of this dissolution of the historic landscape, Majaj's search for light becomes chant-like, as she tries to cover the pain of keeping alive the demolished crevices, windows, steps, 'the houses, the streets, the doorways' in her poetry at the very least:

light pours into the wells
where they threw the bodies

light seeks out the places where sound
was silenced

light streams across stone
light stops at the quarry (92)

This is where Majaj is most Darwish-like, as her words try to put the lost Palestine back into existence and her voice becomes the echo of those silenced forever.

One of the distinct features of Majaj's collection is that the vast injustice meted out to the Palestinians is rendered visible in a story-telling mode. For example, 'These Words' lets us know of a teenage village wife, Rana, who died during labour at a checkpoint, which became an insurmountable barrier between her and the much needed help she sought from doctors at a hospital. Majaj details the incident:

Turned back at the checkpoint
by soldiers indifferent
to fear, or love,

or the fierce labour
of life, she found
only barricades, guns. (98)

Indeed, the pieces of words describe Rana's indescribable pain and sufferings in the face of the merciless barricade and the inhuman apathy. Majaj's negative capability is evident as she wonders how it felt to be the girl who experienced the intolerable waves of pain in the midst of which her baby breathed only to die. In the end, all that remains is a heavy silence of the young mother, her baby, their chronicler, and the readers as well.

In a moment, though, the poet breaks her silence to lash out at the injustice by declaring ironically that if we repeatedly deny that there is anything scandalous in this, the wrongs will be righted. The way Majaj arranges her words in the verse below, the sheer waste of human life is made to glare at us:

Say it fast and over:
this is not a massacre this
is not a massacre this is not
a massacre...
...this is not a
massacre (101)

The last word says it all, however much the world tends to avoid naming the fact. In any case, at the beginning of a befittingly entitled poem, 'Shards,' the poet lists some of the stock phrases with which the world gets away with not encountering the facts on the ground:

*A technical failure terrible accident
unfortunate
event regrettable but necessary we had
to take action there was no choice
(104; emphasis in original)*

We feel the massive cruelty lying behind not only the killings and destructions of the millions of Gazans referred to here but also the nonchalance with which the humanly incomprehensible incidents are turned into mere fragments of harmless news headlines. Thus, Majaj utilizes her words to jolt the world's conscience, and we discover a resistant poet in her.

Understandably, the seventh and the last part of her book is about forming a resistance to injustice that never loses hope for a better future. Therefore, the section opens with a very effective poem, 'No,' by declaring that

Maybe it can't
thwart history: the powerful have
always known
what they can do, and they do it.
No can't stop an avalanche.
But No could be a retaining wall...
No is steadfast. It knows what it's like
to have nothing in its hands but dignity.
(111)

To me, these lines carry the main strength of the political axis of the collection. When total darkness reigns by stopping even the strength to search for light, Majaj believes a small innocuous word, 'No,' could still support existence by reminding one of one's human dignity. In other words, however dense the darkness is that descends upon the landscapes the poet is connected with, she reaffirms her belief in humanity. This in turn keeps alive her vision of hope. As asphodels, the flowers of Hades and the dead, rise above the earth in search of air, her words want to transcend the immediate reality, which is mostly disheartening, in order to be 'open to the light' (115).

In the end, Majaj's unbudging belief in our essential humanity makes her resistance to injustice so empowering. Her verses make us experience a remarkable uplifting and rejuvenation of spirit. In the ultimate analysis, comparing her lines to the elegance, expanse, and intensity of the Darwishian ones may be left to the judgment of the reader, but who could either forget or disbelieve as sincere a promise as this:

Low sun flares its crimson light
across the land. It will rise again
tomorrow,
vigilant and weary as hope. (119)

The success of this prize winning collection should become comprehensible now. The clarity of vision, the sincerity of search, and the power of hope encountered in the book through the verses like the above remind us again and again of our distinct planetary existence. Reading Majaj, we surely realize that whatever differences of skin, colour, or map we may have, we are the neighbours of the stars by dint of inhabiting a tiny planet that has not yet stopped its orbit round its own star.