

## **LIFE AS POETRY AND PROTEST: A STUDY OF MAHMOUD DARWISH'S POETRY**

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### **Abstract**

The Israel-Palestine conflict has changed the socio-cultural topography of the land they both try to assert their claim on. Mahmoud Darwish, also referred to as the national poet of Palestine, weaves his poetry with the metaphors of freedom. Darwish himself being the victim of homelessness uses his poetic sensibilities to provide refuge to the homeless. His poetry attempts to unite the victims of maps with the thread of humanity. Darwish's poetry, though written in the backdrop of Israel-Palestinian conflict, carries universal emotions. This paper attempts to explore how Darwish's poetry reflects his life as an exile and connects him with the refugees across the world.

**Keywords:** Exile, Home, Israel, Palestine, Nature, Darwish

Mahmoud Darwish, also known as "a lover of Palestine," represents the state of Palestine in the second half of twentieth century through his lived experiences. Since the age of six, he had lived as an eternal refugee or a present-absentee, a term which he used in his collection *In The Presence of Absence* (Darwish 7).

According to Cherusseri and Mili, Darwish's poetic career can be categorized into three stages, first, the period before his departure from Israel in 1971; second, from 1971 to 1982, in which the siege of Beirut took place; and third, from 1982 to 2008, the year of his death (26). His broad personal experience and its connection to so many of his people's experiences established him as a National Poet. The revolutionary inside him was born at the age of twelve, at the celebration of Israeli independence, where he was confronted by an Israeli officer for reciting a poem. The poem he recited questioned the inequality amongst Israeli and Palestinian children: "You have a house, and I have none. You have celebrations, but I have none. Why can't we play together?" (Dhillon 46). In an interview with Raja Shehadeh (2002) he said, "This incident made me wonder: The strong and mighty state of

Israel gets upset by a poem I wrote! This must mean that poetry is a serious business.” Darwish felt an immense need to break free from the traditional poetry. Old forms of poetry, according to him, were insufficient to express the state in which Palestinians found themselves. The content as well as the form of his poetry was deeply influenced by his experiences.

In such chaotic times, Darwish stood out as the most prominent voice of Resistance amongst other poets such as Kamal Nasir, Fawaz Turki, Samih al Qasim. They were all revolutionaries having a vision of a humanist ethos and their poetry became a tool to attain the envisioned utopia. The harsh reality that surrounded them was very predictive of a restricted future, however, communism stood up as a hope for betterment. This led Darwish to join Makiand Rakah, the communist parties of Israel. He ended up getting imprisoned many times for writing and reciting verses echoing Palestinian nationalist sentiments and moving inside Israel without permission.

In *Memory for Forgetfulness*, Darwish refers to the siege of Beirut, through his poem “Identity Card”, where the speaker re-affirms his Arab ancestry shunting the denigration of Arabs and their history. The speaker in the poem does not hesitate in disclosing his low socio-economic status, maintaining human dignity and pride in his ancestry. The repetition of the line “I am an Arab” five times emphasizes the inflexibility to get a legal status under the new Israeli regime. Darwish said, “This outcry then became my poetic identity” (Creswell 159). When he speaks of his personal identity, it is often deemed as an articulation of a collective identity. In “On Wishes,” Darwish writes, “Each river has its course its source, its course, its life,” asserting the natural right of Palestinians on the present Israel (299). Darwish conceives poetry as a symbol of humane movements and social and revolutionary activities; and therefore believes that the Odes which are not useful for the purpose of educating the community should be thrown away (Bahram 919). Darwish, as a revolutionary poet, reminds his people that the destination has not come yet.

Amidst wars and migrations, Palestinians were yearning to move towards an identity to claim their space and Darwish claims that space through language. He weaves politics in his poetry by claiming his identity on elemental level. In his “We Walk towards a Land” he claims the space through the presence of sun, sea, sky, wheat, and water, which bind humans with the thread of mortality. He charts a map of protest for the “victims of map” by authenticating the validity of protest through his poetry. In “We Walk towards a Land,” Darwish writes, “A sea around us, A sea upon us “connecting individuals to the ideal of a universal struggle for freedom, to the beauty of life, and language (McClatchy 301). Darwish becomes a chronicler of Palestinian emotions, both felt and repressed. The existential echo that reverberates through Darwish’s language is a calling for home that would come with an identity.

Darwish presents the extent to which each and every aspect of Arab life was dominated by Israeli authorities in his "Victim Number 48." The poem is based on his own experience of imprisonment along with poets like Samih al-Qasim, Hanna Abu Hanna. The use of word "victim" instead of "prisoner" and Romantic items such as roses and moon borrowed from Palestinian folklore universalizes the pain and suffering of people. While the decadence of short spanned rose and guidance spirit of moon evoke the revolutionary emotions, the suffering of the mother symbolizes the suffering of Land which was losing its sons to war and hatred. In "Steps in the Night," Darwish writes, "Try to kill me ones for all, do not kill me with approaching steps" reflecting upon the cruel ways of the oppressors/authorities (McClatchy 300). Darwish makes a humanist appeal to Jews to live with Palestinians in harmony. Pain is not confounded to a single religion or identity, it expands itself until there is a direct and collateral damage of human self. The images and chores that symbolize "sumud" (steadfastness) do not dwell upon the notions of hatred between communities which involve in confrontation, but they give out a humanistic appeal. This is done not only through resting the colonial hegemony, but also through expressing the hope of coexistence.

Edward Said once stated, "History is written by those who win and those who dominate" but Darwish proves that he can also write history from the point of view of the "bottom", as Darwish himself puts it in his *Memory for Forgetfulness* (Darwish). Darwish himself lived in an Israeli controlled area of Palestine, where his writings were censored. It was through these poems that Darwish conveyed the figurative location of his homeland, a place immersed in his thoughts and writings. Because of the continuous experiences of Darwish from Palestine to Lebanon, Tunisia, Paris, and Cairo and again to Ramallah, the poet's sense of perception regarding identity and home underwent a seminal change by identifying himself as a global citizen. His "self" is full of collective memory.

In an interview with Raja Shehadeh (2002), Darwish stated, "I shall only be liberated of Palestine when Palestine is liberated." Even the most personal of his poems were claimed to be carrying nationalist sentiments, it was impossible for him to break away from the given identity. Throughout his poetic career, Darwish has turned his experiences of life into aesthetics of poetry. He has created an eternal song of protest and resilience through poetry. In his "On Wishes" he writes of his own Shahrzad (free city), "you become my places of exile" (McClatchy 298). Darwish speaks of, to and for the lost state of humanity, "Exile is more than a geographical concept, you can be an exile in your own homeland, in your own house, in a room. It is not simply a Palestinian question" (Shatz) The idea of not having an identity or a land to claim becomes the "approaching steps" that attack the psyche of a person. Thus, Darwish writes, "We have a country where we see, only the invisible." Darwish, in his poem "Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading" writes, "Identity is the child of birth, but at the end, it is self-invention, and not an inheritance of the

past”(Darwish). Like Said, Darwish was reluctant to accept any identity enforced by the hegemonic structures of Israel and the West. Identity is dynamic, it is to be imagined, attained, beyond mundane.

In charting a protest through his poetry, Darwish does not polemicize it. The reduction of poetry to a polemic reduces the purpose of language and literature. The discussed imagery and metaphors in his poetry together make a revolutionary statement. The moon in “Victim Number 48” has died but the purpose of the poem has not. The moon will again borrow the light from sun and will again become the guiding spirit. In the protests which are done on the level of survival, the poet becomes the sun that enlightens and provides the masses with endurance. While writing the poetry of protest, Darwish knew that Israelis too were besieged, they were afraid of Palestinian writers. His verses never spoke against Israelis, they asked for a harmonious future. Darwish is a revolutionary poet; his life becomes his poetry that intends to empower the last person in the queue. His poetry can be read, understood and used by any refugee in any corner of the world. He wanted an agreement between Arabs and Jews through literary means (Behar 192). The poetic warriors of both the sides would have written about the same beloved, the same land, without rendering her barren with dead sons. In conclusion, the purpose of Darwish’s poetry was to awaken the humanity, as he wrote during the siege of Ramallah: “Some particles of peace might sneak in our hearts / inspiring us to adopt poetic means / to come to terms for the things we love” (Behar 192).

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