

## Nationalism—a Way to Resistance: A Case Study of Darwish's Poetry

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### Abstract

*This study addresses the way Palestinian literature asserts Palestinian national identity. Practitioners of Palestinian poetry have dedicated it as a response to the Zionist claim that "Palestine is a 'land without a people for a people without a land.'" In the context of the Palestinian–Israeli struggle, and the accompanying discourses by Israeli occupiers to deprive the Palestinians of the right to live on their own land, the Palestinians followed different paths to defend their rights and pursue their cause; while some chose military resistance, others chose cultural resistance. Considering this, this study will examine Mahmoud Darwish's attempt to achieve the "autonomy, equality and recognition" of the Palestinians through his selected poems. Taking Darwish (1941-2008) as an example, it will focus on how poetry is utilized to defend the Palestinian nation by re-establishing Palestinians' real image as a people at present and connecting it to Palestine as a historical homeland.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Nationalism* is a political movement that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and since then, it has had a significant influence on literary works regarding the history of nations. Resistance literature dealing with colonialization and decolonization, particularly, adopts nationalism as an approach to questions of identity and recognition. Yeats is one example of an author who applies the nationalist approach to the Irish question.

In a televised interview, Benedict Anderson, an Irish political scientist, spoke of how nations inspire love, often profoundly self-sacrificing love, and the fantasy of nationalist feeling that can inspire self-sacrifice for the dead of the nation (its heroes and history) or for those yet unborn (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNJUL-Ewp-A>). It is this kind of sacrifice and devotion that is traced in the literary tradition of the people of Palestine.

Since nationalism as a movement is rooted in politics, literature's relationship to nationalism is that of a vehicle that perfectly addresses the Palestinian attitude toward the idea of nationalism in their writing. This study aims to prove that Mahmoud Darwish's approach to the idea of nationalism as anti-colonialism serves as a multifaceted device that guards the solidarity of the Palestinian national identity. Darwish's poetry falls within this approach to nationalism. His suffering under the occupation provides an image of the suffering of almost all Palestinians. In *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Ilan Pappé states that the "first targets of the Israeli forces in the ten days between the two truces [of June 8, 1948, which lasted for

four weeks, and July 18, 1948, which was violated the moment it came into effect] were the pockets within the Galilee around Acre,”<sup>i</sup> the location of Darwish’s own village, al-Birwa. A total of 1500 inhabitants were easily forced out.<sup>ii</sup> Darwish, at six years old, lived through the trauma of the invasion and evacuation. His family fled to Lebanon believing that they would return soon but remained there for two years. This experience must have strengthened Darwish’s relation to the land and enhanced his sense of nationalism. His early poetry shows a commitment to the question of his own country adopting a cultural approach to Palestine and to the Palestinian dilemma. Poetry became a substitution of homeland. He once said in an answer to a question on “[T]he relationship between the ‘earth’ and ‘poetry’ [which] sustains all [his] poetry that ‘Since the earth was taken from me and I was exiled from it, it has turned into the source and address of my spirit and my dreams... It’s a synthesis. It’s both the source of poetry and the material of poetry and language.’”<sup>iii</sup> Moreover, the agricultural, rural uprising of the young Darwish influenced his attitude on the nature of the resistance poetry that he began writing, and gave it a nationalistic dimension.

## **2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Beginning with its first congress in Basel on August 29, 1897, the Zionist movement developed plans to secure land in the eastern Mediterranean where the Jewish diaspora could settle. It was at this time that the Palestinian question began to gain significant interest. The Palestinian struggle for freedom started as early as the era of British colonization of Palestine, beginning in 1917 and lasting through the Israeli period, and became the main subject matter of Palestinian political and literary activities. In 1948, the British Mandate under which the Jews were

protected and permitted to return to Palestine ended, and the direct occupation of Palestine by the Zionist power began.

The settlement of waves of European Jews and the resulting displacement of many Palestinians from their homes had empowered this minority at the expense of a majority of the native population, who were Arabs (Moslems and Christians). After the end of the British mandate, the United States took over as Israeli sponsor, providing unlimited military, financial, and political aid to the Jewish settlers in general and to the Zionist settlers in particular. This support allowed groups such as the Jewish Agency, and Zionist organizations such as the Hagana, together with Zionist terrorist groups such as the Irgun Zvei Leumi, the space and time to take aggressive actions against the native people of Palestine, evacuate them from their land, and kill many of them. These groups were active in Palestine between 1943 and 1948. According to Ilan Pappé, “Special units of the Hagana would enter villages looking for ‘infiltrators’ ... and distribute leaflets warning the local people against cooperating with the Arab Liberation Army (ALA). Any resistance to such an incursion usually ended with the Jewish troops firing at random and killing several villagers.”<sup>iv</sup> This atrocity was an approved daily practice by the Hagana. This group, which means “defense,” transformed into “a fighting force ... after World War I when mass immigration started...” The “Watchmen” of this transformed group were prepared to “seize the country by force and establish the Jewish State.”<sup>v</sup> The second group, Irgun, which means “national military organization,” launched

armed attacks on the Palestinians and engaged in carefully planned movements of sabotage and violence under the guise of “the Jewish Resistance Movement.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, the Israeli State was established at the expense of

Palestinian lives and settlements. The Palestinian dilemma became an international question, with two major wars (1948 and 1967) and several smaller Israeli-Palestinian military conflicts, massacres, expulsions, and dispossessions of the Palestinians. Between 3,000,000 and 4,000,000 Palestinians have been victims of these wars and other ethnic cleansing activities since 1948. The number of martyrs grew to more than 7,000 during the first and second Intifadas, to reach around 100,000 by 1948. According to *Al Muqtama Magazine*,<sup>7</sup> 15,000 Palestinians were killed and around 840,000 were either evacuated by the Israeli forces or fled to nearby countries. Pappé refers to this action by the Israeli forces as the “de-Arabisation” of the Palestinians (157).<sup>8</sup> The situation remains tense and rife with conflict even today. The Arabic-language literature of Palestine has been written in response to the conflict, constituting both a record and a source of resistance.

### **Israeli invasion and Palestinian nationalism**

After the 1948 war and the declaration of the Israeli State, the program of dispossession continued, extending not only to the land, but also to all aspects of Palestinian identity. Menachem Begin (1913-1992), former leader of the Zionist militant group, the Irgun, and Israeli prime minister from 1977 to 1983, claimed the whole land from the sea to the Jordan River (the current border with Jordan) and beyond, denying the Palestinians the historical right to their homeland. He stated that “The Jewish homeland, the area which covers both sides of the Jordan, is a complete historic and geographic entity” that belonged to the Jews.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Begin described the Arabs’ defensive war of 1967 as an “invasion,”<sup>10</sup> in an attempt to conceal the

reality of the conflict and to deny Palestinians the right to resist. The claimed needs of Israeli state security were put forward to justify the continued dispossession of lands and homes by force, in violation of the United Nations resolutions on partition. The holy city of Jerusalem was a main target of the Zionists, who attempted to obliterate its Arabic and Islamic identity. West Jerusalem was made the capital of the newly established state, and 84% of the city was put under occupation.<sup>vi</sup> Native Palestinians were expelled from it, changing the city’s demographic nature and establishing the first seeds of the Israeli apartheid against the Palestinians. This continued for years; in 1967, for instance, Palestinian East Jerusalem was besieged by Israeli troops, who occupied the area surrounding the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Western Wall, which is also known as the Buraq Wall and has a special sacredness for Moslems. However, Palestinians’ solidarity defeated the occupiers and shattered the efforts to force the Palestinians to leave the place under threat. The displaced people returned; their awareness of the power threatening their identity gave them the strength to resist and to deepen their ties to the land and the holy places. Groups of men and women were formed to guard the Al-Aqsa Mosque day and night.

The pillage of the land by the Israeli regime extended to the Palestinian culture as well; the Arabic language, as an icon of Palestinian identity, was targeted by Israel. As part of claiming the place as a national homeland for all Jews, in 1948, the names of villages and streets in Arabic were changed to Hebrew names in an attempt to obliterate the real identity of the place. Alteration of the names of places extended to the name of Palestine itself. Menachem Begin intentionally used to stress the sounds “sh” in “PaleStine” instead of “s” to make it sound as a Hebrew name. After the 1967 war, either “Paleshteniem” or “Phalestinien” were used to refer to the Palestinians, implying that they lack intellectuality and artistic values. According to Ebrahim

Abdulkareem, in an article in The Centre of Al-Aqsa for Documentary Studies (2008, par. 8; <http://www.aqsaonline.org/news.aspx?id=580>), this was an attempt to manipulate the referential word to the place in the service of “Jewishizing” the place and changing its identity. Moreover, the Israel regime banned the use of Arabic on public transit and at security checkpoints to force Palestinians to speak Hebrew.

However, in direct reaction to these efforts to fight and obliterate every Palestinian element, the use of the Arabic language flourished as an act of resistance. “Identity Card,” a poem by Darwish in 1964, for example, became a Palestinian anthem. The first line reads: “Write down, I am an Arab.”<sup>vii</sup> The poem stresses on the Palestinian national identity and expresses the Palestinian rejection of the occupier’s attempts to conceal this fact. The Arabic language remains representative of the Palestinian identity and the language of the official religion in Palestine, Islam.

### **Colonial Israeli stereotypes of the Palestinians**

The aggressive occupation of the Palestinians was encouraged by negative stereotypical images created to justify acts of humiliation and oppression. Moreover, the Israeli regime maintained a consistent policy of cleansing against the Palestinians, forcing them to evacuate their homes and farms under violent inducements. With the destruction of Palestinian houses, the Israelis destroyed the positive image of the Palestinians as people with normal homes and lives as well. They deliberately obliterated Palestinians’ real character, dismissing all positive elements. Instead, they created an alternative, distorted image, one characterized by racialized contempt, as all non-Israelis

are sometimes referred to as “the different” or *al-aghiar* اغيار. They impose the claim that Palestinians are “carnivorous” and live to annihilate the Jews, and therefore, deserve extermination.<sup>viii</sup> According to former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir’s famous 1969 remark, the Palestinians “did not exist” as a nationality. Therefore, they deal with the “‘Palestinian’ identity (as) ... a shallow ... political veneer that developed in response to Zionism, that it serves today as a hostile tool kept sharpened for use against Israel, and that Palestinian Arab culture is, at most, a ‘dialect’ of a larger Arab culture”

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([www.myjewishlearning.com/article/who-are-the-palestinians/](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/who-are-the-palestinians/)). Moreover, Maureen Meehan commented on the report of Daniel Bar-Tal, a professor at Tel Aviv University about the Israeli elementary school curriculum:

textbooks tended to describe acts of Arabs as hostile, deviant, cruel, immoral, unfair, with the intention to hurt Jews and to annihilate the State of Israel. Within this frame of reference, Arabs were delegitimized by the use of such labels as ‘robbers,’ ‘bloodthirsty,’ and ‘killers.’... Bar-Tal pointed out that Israeli textbooks continue to present Jews as industrious, brave and determined to cope with the difficulties of ‘improving the country in ways they believe the Arabs are incapable of’. ([www.wrmea.org/1999-september/israeli-textbooks-and-childrens-literature-promote-racism-and-hatred-toward-palestinians-and-arabs.html](http://www.wrmea.org/1999-september/israeli-textbooks-and-childrens-literature-promote-racism-and-hatred-toward-palestinians-and-arabs.html))

Palestinians who remained in the face of all this persecution and stigma were marginalized in all aspects of life. At the same time, Israel counterfeited an image of the history of the Jews who came from different nationalities in Europe, manipulating their suffering to gain claims of sympathy for having been victimized by others. Part of this forged image is the manipulation of the Holocaust, which is still a controversial issue in spite of the insistent Zionist

reference to it as a justification for the claiming of Palestine. Edward Said stated that “[t]here’s the economic suffocation of the Palestinians taking place.... Then the Israelis are trying to project an image of beleaguered victimhood ... the most unscrupulous kind of propaganda, basically blaming the victim.”<sup>ix</sup>

### **Darwish’s approach to Palestinian nationalism and resistance**

As early as the British Mandate, works of literature backed Palestinians’ defense of their homeland in the face of Israeli attempts to distort their image. The conflict with the Israelis became a prominent theme, mainly in poetry, which was a way to maintain a cohesive national entity and autonomy within the land: a voice for the Palestinians to speak for themselves and to restore and preserve their long relation to the land and its history.

The early literature dealing with the Zionist occupation of Palestine, though it discusses certain political issues, is mostly concerned with the suffering of the Palestinians under the new colonizers and with preserving the threatened existence of the Palestinians on their own land. The poetry of the late 1930s and 1940s, for example, often addresses Palestine as a mother whose freedom deserves the sacrifice of her children and celebrates martyrs and the brave deaths of the people. Some of these poets are Ibrahim Tuqan (1937-1941), Abdulraheem Mahmoud (1913-1948), and Abdulkareem Alkarmy, also known as Abu Salma (1909-1980). All wrote poetry for the love of Palestine and in support of its defense against the occupier. Most of them wrote during the Mandate period, and the early years of Israeli occupation. Solidarity of the nation and unity with the land was the core message of their poetry. Although the poetry of this period was didactic



to a great degree, and almost romantic in subject and style, it still flourished parallel to the rise of military resistance. Later, after the mass killing and evacuation of the Palestinians known as Nakba among Arabs—which means “the catastrophe—and the May 1948 declaration of Israel as a state on the ruins of a large part of Palestine, a new trend in resistance literature began to appear, although the term “resistance poetry” was not coined until the 1960s. It was first used by Ghassan Kanafani in *The Palestinian Resistance Literature under Occupation: 1948-1968*. Before the 1968 publication of Kanafani’s book, in 1960, Darwish’s first poetic work appeared, titled, *Wingless Birds* (عصافير بلا أجنحه). The main subject matter of these poems was the recent history of Palestine. Writers in general, and Darwish in particular, focused on the suffering of the people in their conflict with the Zionist invasion and the consequences of the Israeli atrocity: violent evacuation, planned massacres, and genocide. Later, poetry with a clearer nationalistic sense started to find its way into the Palestinian literature under the umbrella of “resistance poetry.” It reflects the shared humanist and cultured nature of the Palestinians, contrary to the negative image forged by the Israelis to justify their brutality.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, poets from Arab countries other than Palestine, driven by the Balfour Declaration, showed a sense of responsibility towards Palestine under the British Mandate. They felt directly involved and thus wrote poetry on the Palestinian question as early as 1917. Wadi’ al-Bustani (1886-1954) was a Lebanese poet who had devoted his poetry to supporting the Palestinian quest for independence. Through his poetry, as well as through his social and political activity, he always showed an interest in the Arab dream to unite in defense of Palestine, which was a central topic in his poetry. Moreover, his poetry showed deep concern for strengthening national unity between Arab Muslims and Christians, which is an inherent unity reflecting one national history and culture.

However, Mahmoud Darwish’s works are most representative of this nationalistic poetry. At the same time, his personal experience may stand for that of the majority of the Palestinians. He suffered exile very early in his life; he was only six years old when his village, al-Birwa, was invaded in 1948, and his family fled to Lebanon believing that they would return in a few days but stayed in exile for two years before returning to the ruins of their village. This early experience of exile and the suffering of his people become the main subject matter of his poetry. In *Wingless Birds*, he shows commitment to the cause of his homeland. His poetry represents Palestinians’ intimate relation to the land, praising their loyalty and devotion, idealizing their commitment to the cause of their country’s freedom, and focusing on their persistence in trying to fulfil the national dreams of independence. Although he is addressing the Palestinians both inside the homeland and in the growing diaspora, the message to the occupier is clear, as well: “Live wherever you like, but do not live among us.” In *Those Who* (عابرون في كلام عابر), he says: *Pass Between Fleeting Words* (

ايها المارون بين الكلمات العابرة

احملوا اسمائكم و انصرفوا

و لنا الماضي هنا

ولنا صوت الحياة الاول  
ولنا الحاضر، والحاضر، والمستقبل  
ولنا الدنيا هنا.... و الاخرة  
فاخرجوا من ارضنا  
من برنا...من بحرنا  
من قمحنا ..من ملحنا...من جرحنا  
من كل شئ و اخرجوا  
من مفردات الذاكرة  
1! ايها المارون بين الكلمات العابرة

In defense of this poem, Darwish told his Jewish friends that, “I said what every human being living under occupation would say, ‘Get out of my land,’” as quoted by Adam Shatz.<sup>x</sup> Darwish never included this poem in any of his anthologies; maybe it was because he believed that being a Jew in Palestine was not a crime, but occupying the land in the name of the Jewish God was.

Regardless, in this poem, he insists on what he believes in the presence of the occupiers is temporary. They have no right to this place, no place in its history. Those rights belong to the Palestinians, despite the systematic ethnic cleansing committed against them. Almost all of Darwish’s poems are known for their remarkable spirit of national resistance. He believed that good poetry must approach the ordinary man and support his cause in life:

قصائدنا بلا لون  
بلا طعم بلا صوت  
إذا لم تحمل المصباح من بيت إلى بيت  
وإن لم يفهم البسطا معانيها.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “You, who are passing through passing words / Carry your things and leave

We possess the first voice of life, present and future / We possess the life here and the life after / Therefore, get out of our land / from the seacoast and the sea, from our wheat, our salt and get out of our wound, get out of everything and get out of the vocabulary of our memory / You, who are passing through passing words.”

<sup>2</sup> “Our poems are colorless, tasteless and voiceless, if they don’t carry light from house to house, and if the simple people don’t understand their meanings.”

Darwish's poetry evoked national feelings by dealing with the ordinary life of the Palestinians and focusing on their unique relation to their homeland. In his early poems, the image of the Palestinians is that of decent and romantic people who used to enjoy moonlit nights, love songs, and young romance, until the destructive invasion disturbed their idyll and forced them to look back with longing to daily activities that retreated to the background, such as collecting olives, cultivating the soil, and planting lime and elder trees on their farms. These nostalgic days are depicted in Darwish's prose work *Journals of the Ordinary Grief* (يوميات الحزن العادي); however, the occupation was overwhelming, giving way to the new activity of cultivating their own history and indulging in recording their harsh daily experiences. In *Journals of the Ordinary Grief*, the grief is not only that of Darwish, the author, but of all Palestinians. They began fulfilling their responsibility to take up the struggle with the occupation. With Darwish's writings, Palestinian resistance literature came to a turning point, enhanced by his metaphorical approach to the suffering of his people—particularly in the 1980s and 1990s when his succession of dramatic poems distinguished by their epic approach to the history of the conflict appeared. Edward Said stated the following about recording the memories kept alive in local history: "Memory is a powerful collective instrument for preserving identity.... And it's something that can be carried not only through official narrative and books, but also through informal memory. It is one of the main bulwarks against historical erasure. It is a means of resistance."<sup>xi</sup>

Accordingly, in *Journals of the Ordinary Grief*, Darwish narrates the Palestinian tragedy as a local one; characters and events were depicted through the perspective of the poet himself, a real Palestinian character who has been through this suffering and whose grief is that of his people. He was keen to write the real heroic story of Palestine, not by forgetting about the people's dreams, love, and happiness, but through looking at their dilemma from a national perspective. Therefore, he wove the tragic history of Palestine into a humanitarian tragedy. His approach adds a wider dimension to the struggle. Like Yeats' metaphorical treatment of national issues, as in *The Wandering of Oisín* (1889), where, through the character of Oisín, he evokes the Irish sense of nationality and the possibility of a revival of the Irish character and nation, Darwish developed a metaphorical approach to the national character and the struggle toward independence. For him, "Palestine is ... a metaphor—for the loss of Eden, for the sorrows of dispossession and exile, for the declining power of the Arab world in its dealings with the West" (Shatz).<sup>xiii</sup> Despite his full commitment to the cause of his people, Darwish's poetry addresses the power of peace, not that of war. He equally believes in the power of language to resist the hostile claims of the occupier. In an interview with Raja Shehadeh published in *The Guardian*, Darwish described one of his poems, "State of Siege," saying it depicted "the victory of the permanent, the everlasting, the eternal," the people on the Palestinian land, "over the siege and the violence," the brutality of the occupier (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/aug/07/mahmoud-darwish-poetry-palestine>).<sup>xiii</sup> However, even with this humanitarian approach to the Israeli presence on the land, where he is not rejecting the Jews as human beings living on the land but rather their claim of the land and its history, his poetry remains a threat to the Israeli settlers. Throughout



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Darwish's lifetime, the Jewish public continued to refuse to hear him; there was an outcry when one of his poems was introduced into the Israeli school curriculum (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/aug/07/mahmoud-darwish-poetry-palestine>).<sup>xiv</sup> His poetry disturbed the occupier's claims about the land and its history. "Identity Card" is a poem written in reply to an Israeli soldier asking him about his identity, which became an anthem for all Palestinians and, consequently, for all Arab nations, for its early awareness of the common sense of nationalism that was growing among the Palestinians, as well as among the rest of the Arabs, as one nation or people. This was evident with the increasing number of Arab volunteers participating in the defense of Palestine during and after the Nakba. While expressing his pride in his nationality, Darwish affirms to the Israeli soldier that he is "patient and tolerant" despite the brutality of the invader. He represents all Arabs, "with no name no surname," and offers a voice to his "silenced" community. In the poem, he stresses the fact that the presence of the occupier is the source of anger that gives the people the will to survive and to defend their homeland:

سجل  
أنا عربي  
أنا اسم بلا لقب

صبورٌ في بلادٍ كلُّ ما فيها  
يعيشُ بفترة الغضب.<sup>3</sup>

He shows how Palestinians' roots reach back to the birth of the land itself:

جذوري ...  
قبلَ ميلادِ الزمانِ رستُ  
وقبلَ تفتحِ الحقبِ  
وقبلَ السُّروِ والزيتونِ  
وقبلَ ترعرعِ العشبِ.<sup>4</sup>

He connects his family existence on Palestine to the first activity in human history, asserting the relation of his ancestor to the land:

أبي.. من أسرة المحراثِ  
لا من سادةِ نجبِ

<sup>3</sup> "Register, I am an Arab / I am a name without a title, patient in a country where everything has a tantrum."

<sup>4</sup> "My roots were settled before the history, and before the flourishing of ages, before the cypress and before the olive / before the blossoming of the grass."

The poem becomes an icon of national feeling, as Darwish creates an amalgam of homeland family history and Arabic language as one entity using language as an icon of identity. In the poem, he refers to the Arab custom: “Distinguishing marks: I wear a headband on top of a keffiyeh.” (*Identity Card*). The keffiyeh here is a symbolic reference to their nationality, where custom is another sign of the Arab identity. He stresses his identity as an Arab and then refers to the “looting act” committed by the invader who is “yet” unable to loot the “stones.” These stones will remain as fossils witnessing Palestinians’ relation to the land and history. In “Identity Card” he says:

أنا عربي  
سلبتْ كرومَ أجدادي  
وأرضاً كنتُ أفلحُها  
أنا وجميعُ أولادي  
ولم تتركْ لنا.. ولكلِّ أحفادي  
سوى هذي الصخورِ  
فهل ستأخذُها!<sup>6</sup>

Referring to “Arabic” as an identity is one of the referential symbols to emphasize further ties to the motherland. Although Darwish held an Israeli ID, for him, papers remain only papers, and he remains Palestinian: an Arab person from Palestine. Darwish always felt exiled with the presence of the occupier, even during the years he was in Palestine; however, before the 1970s, he was able to create an image of his own land. He stated: “I’ve built my homeland, I’ve even founded my state—in my language.”<sup>xv</sup> The Arabic language can serve as not only a national identity, but also a religious identity, though Darwish makes very little or no clear reference to Islam as a religion. Instead, besides being an icon of nationality, the Arabic language stands as a source of security against attempts at obliteration. It refers to its people and their history, it stands for survival. Darwish himself, in response to a question by Shehadeh on whether he felt he had “made a contribution to the Palestinian national struggle,” said that “The poet can contribute to the development of a nation in language. He can empower people, make people more human and better able to tolerate life” (<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/mahmoud->

<sup>5</sup> “My father was a member of the spade family, he wasn’t a noble man, and my grandfather was a farmer who taught me the loftiness of the sun before I learned to read books.”

<sup>6</sup> “I am an Arab, you raped my grandfather’s farm and a land I used to possess, me and all my sons.

All you left me and my grandsons are these stones! Are you taking them as well!?”

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darwish/).<sup>xvi</sup> *أنا لغتي* (“I Am My Language”) is a poem perfectly written by Darwish to stress language as an identity and a national entity. The poem’s first line announces the poet’s pride in being an “Arab.” Darwish looks at language as having a body, a spirit, a voice, and feelings. Its liveliness denotes the continuity and liveliness of its people; its being is the poet’s own being. It is on the basis of this original identity that Darwish and many other Palestinians are subjected to segregation, discrimination, persecution, oppression, imprisonment, and even killing, though they may carry Israeli official papers. Writing poetry for Darwish becomes a revolutionary act, a means to defend his rights and the rights of his people. When writing, he assumes the role of the whole community, looks at history from the community perspective, and narrates their common experience from the massacres to the refugee camps. Throughout, he states they must keep solidarity and strong ties to the land. References to certain folkloric activities are similarly manipulated to emphasize this solidarity, as well as the long-term presence of the Palestinian on the land. In *Ahmed Alzater*,<sup>xvii</sup> for example, he says:

وأنا البلاد و قد أتت  
و تقمصتني  
و أنا الذهاب المستمر إلى البلاد  
و جدت نفسي ملء نفسي<sup>7</sup>

They continue to live, challenging attempts to eradicate them from their land. They adore even dying on it. In *My Darling Wakes Up*,<sup>xviii</sup> *تنهض من نومها حبيبتني* he says:

بطاقة التشريد في قبضتي  
زيتونة سوداء،  
و هذا الوطن  
مقصلة أعبد سكينها  
إن تذبحوني، لا يقول الزمن  
! رأيتكم<sup>8</sup>

In order to reveal the falsehood of the Zionist claim and to assert the independent, solid identity of his nation, Darwish turns back to the history of the original indigenous population of Palestine, digging for the roots of the Palestinians in the place where they have lived for

<sup>7</sup> “I am the country which embodied me. I am the endless journey to the country I found myself in fullness.”

<sup>8</sup> “The diasporic card is in my fist, a black olive / and this homeland is worshiping its knife / If you kill me, Time won’t say I saw you.”

centuries; he enriches his writings with the legendary and mythical symbols, stories, and heroes, both Arabian and Canaanite. *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone* (1995), one of his last poetic works, is rich in references to heroes and mythical characters that stand for the national Palestinian image. The ancient history of Palestine is seen dragged into the present. Although Darwish's longer poems such as *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone* and "Jedariah" (2000), are highly suggestive of his own life story, the image of Palestine hovers over every line of these poems through the national heroes represented in them. He cannot speak of his personal experience as separate from that of his nation.

In this way, for years after the traumatic events of 1947-48, Darwish moved from his personal experience across the threshold of his poems' subject matter; the experience of the Palestinian families at that time in places like Deir Yassin was the essence of his poetry for years. Although the history of Palestine under occupation is full of bloody events, Darwish's approach to it tended to be humanistic in nature. While rejecting the image of the Palestinians fabricated by the occupier, his defense of his fellow citizens and assertion of their national identity is sustained by the way he "writes back" their history. He believes that literature is equally capable of communicating their dilemma to the rest of the world as the act of fighting. Thus, his poetry evokes the history of Palestine back to the period of Canaan, to resist the invader's attempt to overshadow the real identity of Palestine's history and consequently deprive the invader of a nationality. In adapting such a universal approach toward the Palestinian question, Darwish prefers to place their tragedy within that of a wider human experience, rather than merely lamenting their suffering. He manipulates different materials to assert the identity of his people—folklore, history, myths, legends, and language—to preserve the real image of the Palestinians and to assert their independent identity in the face of all the pain, and even extermination, they have been subjected to since the occupation.

*Memory for Forgetfulness* (ذاكرة للنسيان) was written in 1982 after the brutal invasion of Lebanon by Israel, followed by the massacre of Palestinian refugees at Sabra and Shatila in Beirut and their evacuation from this nearest point to their homeland to the world-wide diaspora: to Tunis and beyond. This evacuation deprived the Palestinians of the right to live close to their land.<sup>xix</sup> Thus, the dream of return becomes more difficult, more complicated and demanding, and requires further efforts to achieve it. According to Darwish himself, his literature is part of these efforts.<sup>xx</sup> After this Palestinian tragedy, he was heartbroken and saw the exile of the Palestinians as the defeat of Troy, after which Ulysses started his journey away from home to regain his lost land. In contrast, Darwish starts writing to open new channels for hope by dramatizing the Palestinian dilemma and making it universal. Thus, he expands the historical and mythological ways of approaching their tragedy. Therefore, Darwish is "likening the Palestinian experience abroad to an epic voyage of the damned."<sup>xxi</sup> This approach to the legendary dimension of Palestinian modern history is depicted in *Memory for Forgetfulness*. By the end of the civil war and the Palestinian evacuation, the Palestinian tragedy had entered into a new stage, that of exile. The fighters left Beirut and their families behind and entered into diaspora. Darwish skillfully manipulates this legendary journey to intensify the idea of a national return and the will to survive the persistent attempts at one's extermination and destruction.

The legendary journey of Ulysses is also recalled more directly in *Praise of the High Shadow* (مديح الظل العالي), in the description of the journey out of Beirut. However various the forms Darwish's hero takes, all are closely connected to the life of the Palestinian people in the homeland. There is also a vast range of images presented in a historical framework: prophets, gods and goddesses, places and fossils, birds and animals, and plants and flowers, recollected from religious books, Islamic, pagan, and Christian; from history and mythology; and from the folklore of the Palestinian nation itself and from the rest of the Arab world. In fact, the metaphorical references to names and places in Darwish's poems are manipulated to strengthen this national sense of the Palestinian identity. Therefore, the hero in Darwish's works is deeply rooted in the history of the place and carries its features; the poet's concept of Palestinians' suffering, as one ring in the chain of the universal tragedy, enhanced their image as an indigenous group in the geographic and historical area. By doing so, he gave the all-important humanitarian dimension to their struggle and added a brick to the wall of the nation's struggle for existence, widening its scope to refer to not only the Arab region, but also the world.

In contrast, in *A Memory for Forgetfulness*, after lamenting the refugees' tragic exit from Beirut and the long and painful journey into the wide sea, Darwish gives a sentimental description of a Palestinian, "Kamal," who is a character dreaming of going back home. Kamal imagines how he would manage to reach the shore at Haifa and awaits the chance to enter, unnoticed by the invaders. Through this dreamy, imaginative return, Darwish provides a detailed description of the places where Kamal, the survivor-hero, would pass while entering the city and how he would react to them. He describes stones Kamal would step on and others he would avoid even looking at because of the painful memories they are associated with. He gives minute details of the bakery and the smell of the bread, the arch and the water running beneath it, the stairs crossing three streets that he would run across to reach the port and feel the breeze of the sea. He would visit all his neighbors and would shake hands and apologize for his long absence.<sup>xxii</sup> Despite the grief and sense of helplessness Darwish suffered after the Beirut events, he was able to dramatize this scene of return and emphasize the image of survival it holds, which is guaranteed by the solidarity of this nation on this particular land.

In *Praise of the High Shadow*, another work on the Israeli invasion of Beirut, Darwish borrows the heroic mythical survival of the goddess Annat to convey how the nakedness and helplessness of the city left the Palestinian refugees exposed to further suffering. The *Odyssey* is again recalled, employed as an objective correlative to the Palestinians' siege in Beirut. In this way, Darwish turns their suffering into an epic and unites their tragedy with the tragedies of other heroic characters and nations.

### **Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone: A national song**

Darwish's *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone* (لماذا تركت الحصان وحيداً) was written in 1995 in reaction to the Oslo Accords, which left Darwish completely disappointed. He realized how serious the threat was after seeing the rights the Palestinians gave up according to this treaty. Moreover, what was worse than these elements of the treaty were the claiming of the Palestinian land and the use of language as well. The Israelis used the language of victimhood

and the victim role as cover from which to legislate and “pass” their crimes against the occupied. Darwish always believed that language was more powerful than politics, and that threat to an identity is equally great from words as from weapons. Darwish mentioned that the writing of the book was triggered by a speech Yitzhak Rabin gave in Washington:

عندما استمعت إلى خطاب اسحق رابين في  
واشنطن، ألمني كثيراً أنه سرق اللغة الفلسطينية  
.....، تكلم عن زملائه الشهداء تكلم عن  
شرعية علاقته بالأرض بلغة جمالية. كنت أعتقد أن  
اللغة الفلسطينية كانت تحاول أن تكسر السيف على  
ذلك المنبر، على منبر التعبير عن الضحية فكان  
رابين هو الذي تقمص شخصية الضحية ولذلك هذا  
جعلني أقول أنني أخشى أنهم سيسرقون أيضاً لغتنا.  
وبالتالي ذهبت للدفاع عن ماضي ولغته وعن لغتي  
أي لغة الضحية<sup>9</sup>  
(رولى الزين رحيل-أطول-نحو-الأمل).

Although he was then a Minister of Cultural Affairs in the Palestine Liberation Organization, Darwish rejected the treaty and resigned from the Palestinian government in 1993; he then left for Paris where he continued his own efforts to defend his people’s right to the place and its history. His main goal was to keep hope and dreams of freedom awake in the Palestinian spirit. The tool with which he did so continued to be resistance poetry, to back the Palestinians’ efforts to seek their national identity. Darwish’s nationalistic poetry supports Palestinians’ will to resist obliteration and to strengthen their relation to their roots in Palestine. Darwish believed that a biographical poem would be capable of achieving such a revival: narrating history would inspire the Palestinians to continue defending their right to existence on their own land. The book is about the “right of return” to the place, the right the treaty denied the Palestinians in the diaspora. The “Ultimacy of the Cactus” (“أبد الصبار”) is a poem that deals with the collection’s main subject: a dramatic dialogue between a father and his son on leaving their home to escape from the atrocity of an invasion. The father leaves the horse alone in the house, and his son asks him why. The father’s answer reveals the importance of keeping one’s home

<sup>9</sup> “When I listened to Rabin’s speech in Washington I was deeply hurt, for he stole the Palestinian language. About his martyr colleagues ... he spoke about his legal relation with the land in an aesthetic language. I thought the Palestinian language was trying to break the sword on the platform where the victims’ feelings were expressed. It was Rabin who embodied the victim’s identity. Therefore, I would say that I am afraid they may steal our language as well. Consequently, I want to defend my past and its language, and to defend my language, the language of the victim.”



alive by not leaving it alone. It shows his concern about the safety of home even while they are away and reveals his belief that they will return soon. He carries the keys in his pocket.

إلى أين تأخذني يا أبي ؟  
إلى جهة الريح يا ولدي ...  
يقولُ أبُّ لابنه : لا تَخَفْ . لا  
تخف من أزيز لِرصاص ! التصقْ  
بالتراب لتتجو ! ستنجو ونعلو على  
جَبَلٍ في الشمال ، ونرجع حين  
يعود الجنودُ إلى أهلهم في البعيد .

ومن يسكنُ البَيْتَ من بعدنا  
يا أبي ؟  
سيبقى على حاله مثلما كان  
يا ولدي !<sup>10</sup>  
(لماذا تركت الحصان وحيدا<sup>xxiii</sup>)

The key to his home is likened to his own body. He touches the key to ease his worries:

تَحَسَّسَ مِفْتَاحَهُ مثلما يتحسَّسُ  
أعضاءه، واطمأنَّ . وقال له  
يا ابني تذكر ! هنا صَلَبَ الانجليزُ  
أباك على شوك صُبَّارة ليلتين،  
سوف تكبر يا ابني ، وتروي لمن يرثون بنادقهم  
سيرة الدم فوق الحديد ....<sup>11</sup>  
(لماذا تركت الحصان وحيدا<sup>xxiv</sup>)

<sup>10</sup> "Where are you taking me, father?"

Windward son.

.....

A father saying to his son ... don't fear the whizzing bolts! ... stick to your roots to survive, you will survive and you will mount the top of the hell in the north. And we will return to the families far away.

Who will live in the house after us father?

It will remain as it is, son!"

<sup>11</sup> "He checked the keys as if checking his own body, and felt comfortable, and said: oh son, remember, here the British crucified your father on the thorns of cactus for two nights.

You will grow up, son ... and you will narrate—for those who will inherit their guns—the story of blood on iron!"

The son wishes to continue narrating to the coming generations the story of struggling for a free national identity. However, he still asks for more clarification:

- لماذا تركت الحصان وحيداً ؟  
- لكي يُؤنس البيت ، يا ولدي ،  
فالبيرتُ تموت إذا غاب سَكَّانُها ...  
..... . و يقولُ  
أب لابنه : كُنْ قوياً كجدك!  
وأصعدُ معي نلَّةَ السنديان الأخيرة  
..... ، فاصمُدْ معي  
لنعودُ.  
- متى با أبي ؟  
- غداً . ربما بعد يومين با ابني!<sup>12</sup>  
(لماذا تركت الحصان وحيداً<sup>xxv</sup>)

The father and son belong to the land they were forced to leave, and they believe that they will definitely return one day. Because of the sentimental relation of Arabs to horses, the horse was assigned to guard the house; it is amiable and reliable. Shaouki Buzaié commented on Darwish's poem as a plan to rehabilitate the national memory of the Palestinians.<sup>xxvi</sup> The horse, for Arabs, is a symbol of reliability, loyalty, dignity, glory, and chivalric characteristics. Moreover, the presence of the horse is a reference to heroism and bravery connected to the image of the horsemen in the memory of the Arab nation. In the poem, the horse is left alone in the house as a substitute for its inhabitants, there to maintain its life and defend against intruders. This is a reference to the speakers' own memoir and to all that reminds him of the place he has left. It enhances the sense of belonging and depth of nostalgia. At the same time, through the dialogue between the father and the son, light is shed on the minute details of their daily life and the intimate relation between father and son (old and young generations), on the one hand, and, on the other, between them and their home. The scene Darwish depicts in this dialogue not only revives the son's relation to and emotions toward the place but is also meant to create a similar feeling among the Palestinian readership. The poem's technique is skillfully designed to give the poet suitable situations and space to depict as much of the Palestinian folklore and tradition, and the history of the nation, as possible.

The book takes the form of a series of connected narratives, each including a cluster of names of heroic figures, prophets, knights, and legendary creatures; reference is made to certain historical places and heroic actions as well. All the symbols employed in the poems bear close

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<sup>12</sup> "Why did you leave the horse alone father?"

To soothe the house son ... houses die when deserted.

A father telling his son: be strong as your grandfather, and mount the last 'oak' to keep resisting with me so that we return.

When father?

Tomorrow, or maybe after two days oh son!"

relations to the ancient history of Palestine as well as her recent history; in this way, Darwish reconnects the people of Palestine to their roots and asserts their national identity. For example, in “I Saw My Ghost Approaching” (رأيت شبحي قادماً من بعيد), the speaker gives a list of images he is still carrying in his memory since the time he was forced to leave his home. He remembers the details of his home as if he were looking from its balcony; old friend, night's supply of drink and bread, novels, music discs, and olive trees. He also sees soldiers destroying the trees of the place, an action that reflects the weak or non-existent emotional relation of the Israeli soldier to the place and its plantation. The speaker, in contrast, is deeply rooted in the place; he “sees whatever he wants”; the memory of the homeland places is carried within him.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Myths connected to the history of Palestine are also revived in the poems included in *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone*. For example, in “Annat Phases” (أطوار أنات), one of the most metaphorical poems, Darwish recalls the Canaanite myth of Annat, the beloved goddess who stripped herself of everything except the will to be born repeatedly. In the poem, Annat is a Palestinian herself, who never dies. By recreating a connection between Annat, as a legendary character, and the Palestinians, Darwish is reviving the Palestinian roots and replanting them into their Canaanite soil.

In the poems in *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone*, there are consistent references to the invasions and raids against Palestine across history, to famous battles, and to heroes who participated in establishing that history. The Palestinians, as well as Palestine itself, were always able to survive all invasions and to preserve the intimate relations among themselves, binding themselves together as one entity enjoying one national identity rooted in the land, thereby able to return to where they belong. This historical aspect to the Palestinian story is also employed by Darwish in poems other than those in *Why You Did You Leave the Horse Alone*. For example, in the symbolic poem *The Tragedy of the Narcissus and the Comedy of the Silver*, he enhances the idea of return through the highly suggestive metaphorical title, with “narcissus” as a symbol of rebirth and new beginnings and “silver” referring to truth and reality. The word “returned” is a key reference to two returns: of the Palestinian land to its history, as revived through modern Palestinian literature, and of the people to the task of resistance, marked by the first intifada in the late 1980s. Similarly, in “There is a Cloud in My Hand” (في يدي غيمه), one of the poems in *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone*, the idea of return is evoked through the action of “saddling horses”: getting ready for the journey of return or the journey of the returning Palestine. A Palestinian is the hero who can survive even if he is stripped of all his weapons and kept away from his homeland.

“The Well” is another poem in *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone* that focuses on some allegorical references romanticizing the Palestinian history and thus weave it within that of the history of the region: the epic of Gilgamesh, goddesses of plantations, the story of the prophet Yusef (Joseph) with his brothers, and symbolic reference to the dead people who used to live near the well or recurrently visit it. In addition to the connotation of the water itself as a source of life and rebirth, the stones in the well are fossils that indicate the history of the place and its relation to its residents. The well represents the survival of the villagers, who used to sit by the water reciting folk songs and narrating tales of legendary characters and mythical creatures, connected thereby to the suffering and survival of Palestine.

Darwish's employment of symbolic language and his referential use of myths and legends helps to address and maintain the cohesion of the collective memory of the Palestinian community as one nation, inside the homeland and in the diaspora. It intensifies their sense of belonging to their land and enhances their ability to resist obliteration, thus helping keep alive their efforts to achieve freedom and independence. According to Mohamed Baroot, in a chapter on "Darwish's Dynamic Symbol" published in 1998, Darwish charges his "dynamic symbols" with genuine patterns of the "Palestinian subconscious collective feelings."<sup>xxviii</sup> Baroot believes that Darwish's choice of such symbols has transmogrified them into a pattern of higher intensity that refers the "collective national entity"<sup>xxix</sup> to its early sources, converting the modern Palestine into a new Canaan, and equally representing the Canaanites as Palestinians. Thus, he establishes a symbolic relation between the past and the present: the Palestinians of yesterday and the struggling Palestinians of today crystalizing their relation to the same homeland.<sup>xxx</sup> This is also applicable to all other references to legends and myths in his longer poems of the 1980s and 1990s. In 2009, Baroot elaborated on his 1998 argument, emphasizing that Darwish's later symbolic reference transfers the local and national to a legendary and an international space, creating a "legend of Palestine."<sup>xxxi</sup> Similarly, Michael Saadah believes that Darwish's poetic excellence has placed Palestine, the land and the people, and the history and the culture, on the fire of regained freedom, when Palestine becomes their lost Paradise.<sup>xxxii</sup>

### **3. CONCLUSION**

This study has examined Mahmoud Darwish's poetry as a case study of the manipulation of the idea of nationalism as a path to resistance. It showed that Darwish's approach to *nationalism as anti-colonialism* served as a multifaceted device. On the one hand, it enabled him to place the Palestinians' tragedy within a wider human tragic history, and on the other hand, it helped him assert the Palestinians' right to resist attempts at their obliteration. His treatment of the nationalist elements in his poems of the late 1980s and 1990s played a major role in enhancing Palestinians' national identity and legitimizing their continuing resistance. Darwish's main technique for doing so was recalling the history of the place where the Palestinians, as part of a wider Arab nation, live. While narrating the tragedy of Palestine through a cluster of references to local and universal legends and myths, Darwish evokes a sense of identity of the place and reconnects it to the identity of the Palestinians. Moreover, the nationalistic approach to the Palestinian tragedy creates a weapon parallel to those used by the armed resistance, but one that is more peaceful and humane, as per Darwish's poetic creed.

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<sup>i</sup> Pappe, *Ethnic Cleansing*, 158, 148, 156, 173.

<sup>ii</sup> Pappe, *Ethnic Cleansing*, 158, 148, 156, 173.

<sup>iii</sup> Exile Is So Strong Within Me, I May Bring It To the Land: A landmark 1996 interview with Mahmoud Darwish, *Journal of Palestine Studies Vol. 42*. 2016/13.

<sup>iv</sup> Pappe, *Ethnic Cleansing*, 55–56.

<sup>v</sup> Hadawi, "Bitter Harvest," 67.

<sup>6</sup> Hadawi, "Bitter Harvest," 72.

<sup>7</sup> Marah, "100 thousand Martyr on the way to Palestine" 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2016. pars. 3 4,

<sup>8</sup> Pappe, *Ethnic Cleansing*, 157.

<sup>9</sup> Hadawi, "Bitter Harvest," 97.

<sup>10</sup> Hadawi, "Bitter Harvest," 98.

<sup>vi</sup> Hadawi, "Bitter Harvest," 107.

<sup>vii</sup> Darwish, "Identity Card," 1,2.

<sup>viii</sup> Almasery, *Mawosoaat Alyahoodiyah wa Alsahiyuniyah*, 373.

<sup>ix</sup> Barsamian and Said, *Culture and Resistance*, 73.

<sup>x</sup> Shatz, "Poet's Palestine," par. 18.

<sup>xi</sup> Barsamian and Said, *Culture and Resistance*, 182–83.

<sup>xii</sup> Shatz, "Poet's Palestine," par. 1.

<sup>xiii</sup> Shehadeh, "Mahmoud Darwish, A Poet of Peace," par. 4.



- xiv Shehadeh, "Mahmoud Darwish, A Poet of Peace," par. 8.
- xv Shatz, "Poet's Palestine," par. 21.
- xvi Shehadeh, "Mahmoud Darwish," par. 25.
- xvii Darwish, "Ahmed Alzater." 30-33
- xviii Darwish, "Habibty Tanhad Men Nomeha"
- xix Darwish, *Thakerah Ielnisyaan*, 64–65.
- xx Darwish, *Thakerah Ielnisyaan*, 66, 74, 170-71.
- xxi Shatz, "Poet's Palestine," par. 14.
- xxii Darwish, *Thakerah Ielnisyaan*, 210–13.
- xxiii Darwish, *limaatha tarakt alHesaana waHiidan*, 32-33.
- xxiv Darwish, *limaatha tarakt alHesaana waHiidan*, 33.
- xxv Darwish, *limaatha tarakt alHesaana waHiidan*, 33–34.
- xxvi Buzaie, "Tawama," 118.
- xxvii Darwish, *limaatha tarakt alHesaana waHiidan*, 11–15.
- xxviii Baroot, "Mafhoom Alramz," 56.
- xxix Baroot, "Mafhoom Alramz," 56.
- xxx Baroot, "Mafhoom Alramz," 56.
- xxxi Baroot, "Mafhoom Alramz," 56.
- xxxii Saadah, *Mahmoud Darwish Asey ala Alnisyan*, 19.