

The Impact of Mahmoud Darwish's Diasporic Identity on His Poetry: A Post-colonial Study of Selected Poems

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the reflection of diasporic identity on Mahmoud Darwish's poetry. The study also examines the impact of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry on Palestinians' suffering in their homeland. As many are aware, immigration or displacement to another country and feeling sad due to being far from home can have an impact on a person's life. Mahmoud Darwish, who was exiled from Palestine, continued to resist compulsory displacement through his unwavering poetry. Despite leaving his homeland, he consistently maintained his Palestinian identity. This is clearly evident in his poems, where his resistance through poetry gained strength even while he was far away. The theoretical framework in this study is mainly based on the postcolonial perspective. Applying postcolonial theory in the analysis of Darwish's poems helps provide new insights into the ways how colonial histories continue to shape and influence the Palestinians' identities. In addition, it sheds light on how Darwish reflected his own experience as a Palestinian living in the diaspora. This hard experience as a diasporic individual, has largely shaped his poetic works. Finally, the findings of the study conclude that diasporic identity was widely portrayed in Darwish's poetry and showed the impact of exile and displacement on the construction of identity in his works.

Keywords: *diasporic identity, homeland, Mahmoud Darwish, poetry, post-colonialism*

Introduction

Being uprooted from one's homeland is one of the most profound hardships a person can experience. Immigration to a foreign land often brings feelings of sorrow and disconnection, as one is far from homeland. Mahmoud Darwish, a prominent poet who was exiled from his homeland Palestine, is a prime example of this kind of expatriation. He is often called the poet of resistance. Throughout his life, he continued to resist the brutal Israeli occupation through his poetry. This strong affinity of his Palestinian land remained rooted in its soil. Despite being physically distant from his homeland, his sense of identity remained deeply tied to it. His poetic voice of resistance only grew stronger in exile.

The current paper explores how Darwish's diasporic identity influenced his poetry and examines how his work reflects the struggles of Palestinians in their homeland. This paper will first present social and historical background of Mahmoud Darwish and the concept of diaspora, whereas the theoretical framework in this study is mainly based on the postcolonial perspective. The study has been constructed in three sections:

First, it provides a background about Mahmoud Darwish, identity, diaspora, and postcolonial theory. Second, it highlights the discussion and analysis of five selected poems. Finally, it exposes the conclusion of the paper.

Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008)

Mahmoud Darwish was born in Al-Birwa, a village in the Upper Galilee. When the Israeli Army occupied Palestine, Darwish and his family were forced to flee to Lebanon to escape the brutal attacks. Following the 1948 setback (The Nakba), Darwish experienced a profound sense of internal exile and a fractured identity. He was displaced from his homeland at the age of six with the establishment of Israel (Masood, 2020). When Darwish's family returned to their destroyed village, they were labeled as infiltrators; in official Israeli terminology, they were classified as "present-absentees".

As Darwish grew older, his defiant poetry frequently put him at odds with the Israeli authorities (Akter, 2018). Masood (2020) adds that Darwish later relocated to Haifa, where he was confined for ten years without permission to travel. He and his family were treated as internal refugees and aliens. In 1970, he left for Russia to study, and after that, he spent two years in Cairo. From Cairo, he moved to Beirut, where he stayed for another decade. Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, he fled to Syria, and eventually settled in Tunisia. Over the next ten years, he divided his time between Paris, Cyprus, and Tunisia. Darwish spent most of his life in exile, a matter which has deepened his national Palestinian identity.

Darwish's poetry steadily resists Israeli attempts to wipe out the Palestinian identity and history. Mena (2009), confirms that Darwish was regarded as the poet of his people, often seen as Palestine's Poet Laureate and a representative for those without a voice. He received several awards and was considered par excellence of the Palestinian National Poet. His poetry conveys a universal message rooted in particular, experiences of suffering, bridging the gaps between languages and nations, as it weaves national identity into a broader, universal context. During his time in Paris, he wrote many of his major poems, including *Fewer Roses* (1985), *I See What I Want* (1990), *Memory for Forgetfulness* (1995), *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* (1995), and *Bed of the Stranger* (1998). Throughout his career, Darwish published fourteen poetic collections, beginning with *Wingless Birds* in 1960 (Masood, 2020).

Diaspora

The term "Diaspora" originated in Greece. It comes from the Greek verb 'diaspeiro', which means "to disperse" or "to scatter" and has been in use since the 5th century B.C. (Thepboriruk, 2015, p.7). The concept of diaspora relates to immigration and dispersal, commonly referring to people living outside their homeland. It is a term of self-identification used by various groups whose members or ancestors migrated to different places. There are three key factors that define a diaspora: First, the relocation to two or more foreign locations after the

initial dispersal; second, the preservation of memories, visions, or myths of the homeland, motivating a commitment to its upkeep; and third, ongoing connections among the dispersed communities, driven by a shared ethnic or communal consciousness and solidarity. Additionally, beyond forced expulsion, other causes for the formation of diasporas include the search for work, trade opportunities, and colonization (Kafle, 2010).

According to Noman (2019), the term "diaspora" has its roots in Western history, originally referring to Jewish diaspora communities. Over time, it has come to encompass other groups like the Armenian, Greek, Chinese, Kurdish, Palestinian, Indian, and Sikh, whose experiences of displacement, cultural preservation, and resistance to assimilation have distinguished them from regular immigrants. The primary drivers of the Arab diaspora are wars and economic or social instability, with conflicts and security crises escalating across various Arab nations. As a result, millions of Arabs have been forced to flee the devastation of war, often resorting to illegal methods to reach foreign lands.

A crucial aspect of the Arab diaspora is the "Middle Passage", the difficult journey from the Arab world to places like Europe or the Americas, often marked by suffering, similar to the plight of Palestinians in 1948. This period marks the beginning of the Arab diaspora, when many Palestinians were expelled from their homeland in an event known as the Nakba in Arabic. The Nakba refers to the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, leading to the destruction of their communities and their forced displacement, replaced systematically by another population. This event is the primary cause of the Palestinian diaspora, with most refugees settling in Arab countries and living in camps, while others moved to foreign nations, unable to return home to this day (Noman, 2019).

Identity

According to Carter and Marony (2018), identity refers to an individual's internal designation that defines who you are as a unique person. This notion includes someone's morals, his role in a society, such as a social worker, or having a membership in a group, such as being a Democrat. These three components collectively come together to shape the self as a distinctive entity, composed of meaningful structures that differentiate one from others. These identities influence who we are, drive our behavior, and affect emotional outcomes in social settings (Carter & Marony, 2018).

On the other hand, Matsuda (2015), points out that identity has several key characteristics: it is not optional, it is multifaceted and constantly changing. It is shaped through socially shared resources used to create meaning, and it is both personal and social in nature. Additionally, identity cannot be taught, as each person possesses a unique identity (Matsuda, 2015).

Besides, Stets and Serpe (2019) add that identity consists of a set of meanings tied to the roles individuals hold in society (role identities), the groups they belong to (group identities), and the unique ways they view themselves (person identities). These meanings are the result of individuals reflecting on themselves

within these roles, groups, or personal identities. Broadly, identities help define an individual's position in interactions, shape their behavior, support the formation of stable social relationships, and enable social interactions.

The salience of an identity depends on how committed one is to it. Commitment involves social structure, as it refers to the extent of a person's connections to specific social networks. A person's placement in these networks reflects their position within the social structure. When an individual's connections depend on maintaining a certain identity, that identity becomes more salient. Therefore, the stronger the commitment to an identity, the greater its importance or salience Stets and Serpe (2019).

Furthermore, identity is shaped through social interactions with others and evolves within pre-existing "interpretations of the world" that align with people's experiences. The formation of identity is a specific, historically grounded process of interaction, which cannot be simplified to a single, deliberate choice like selecting from a menu or any other singular conscious action (Pierce, 2016, p. 9).

Based on his investigation, Romanovska (2019) concludes that many researchers acknowledge that "living place" plays a crucial role in shaping identity. Current observations suggest that the identity crisis is linked to globalization which is closely related to challenges surrounding national identity. The relationship between individuals and places has been extensively studied and is widely accepted as significant. Psychologists and cultural experts agree that people have a universal need to connect with a specific place. Home, in particular, is regarded as the most essential space for a person's existence. People typically shape their environments, imbuing them with personal, emotional, and symbolic significance. In return, places influence individuals and their characters, fostering a sense of belonging through this interaction (Romanovska (2019, p. 42). In general, people develop a group identity through their attachment to social groups, which forms their "social identity". This connection to groups shapes one's social or collective identity, fostering a sense of belonging. As a result, these social groups come together to form a national identity (Asgarli, 2019).

On the other hand, Thepboriruk (2015), argues that diasporic identities are shaped by the tensions that arise from various factors affecting individuals. These tensions occur between the language and culture of their homeland and that of their host country; between how ethnicity is expressed within their family and their larger community; and between their personal needs and the social constraints of their new environment (private versus public life). In addition, diasporic identities involve a sense of both closeness and separation, based on where we mentally position ourselves in relation to both our homeland and host country Thepboriruk (2015).

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial literature in a theoretical parlance is defined as the literature which belongs to the countries that once have gone through the bitter and biting phase of European Colonialism. In other words, postcolonial literature is the literature that has been written in the Third World Countries like Asia, Africa, South America, and other erstwhile colonized spaces based on the theme of subjugation and resistance. Bill Ashcroft et al. (1989), define postcolonial literature in the context of the following countries:

...Literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all postcolonial literatures. What each of these literatures has in common beyond their specific and distinct regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power... (Ashcroft et al., 1989, p. 2).

Furthermore, the term postcolonial refers to the period following colonization. Colonization has left a lasting influence on the political, economic, and cultural aspects of postcolonial nations and societies. Its effects continue to shape both former colonial powers and their colonies in the present. In this context, some critics state that postcolonial theory is a method of analyzing not only works of literature, but also culture and history that emphasizes the negative consequences of colonization. For instance, Wallascek (2015) argues that the concept of the postcolonial encompasses both the period "after colonization" and the idea of going "beyond colonization", making these two aspects inseparable (Wallascek, 2015, p. 220).

Similarly, Dizayi (2019) argues that postcolonial theory, or postcolonialism, examines the influence and legacy of colonialism from the post-World War II era to the present. It explores the socio-political, psychological, and political effects of colonialism's aftermath. Additionally, it focuses on how newly independent societies navigate the challenges of self-determination while resisting and rejecting colonial social and political structures (Dizayi, 2019, p. 28).

According to Hashim and Ahmed (2014), postcolonial theory is well-established framework which tackles issues such as the pursuit of identity, resistance, displacement, the loss of land, homelessness, and the interactions between the colonized and the colonizers. In addition, postcolonial theory serves as a tool of resistance, allowing for the challenge of any oppressive or discriminatory actions, no matter the context or historical period. It represents an ongoing and enduring fight, intertwined with the broader experience of humanity (Rukundwa & Van Aarde, 2007, p. 1171).

Accordingly, postcolonial theories can be seen as a group of related ideas that share social, political, and moral concerns about the history and lasting impact of colonialism, focusing on how it continues to affect people's lives, well-being, and opportunities (Browne, Smye and Varcoe, 2005).

Discussion

In this research paper, some of Darwish's selected poems have been highlighted in this context. The study critically focuses on the selected poems from a postcolonial perspective. These poems are as follows:

"مطر"
يا نوح
ههني غصن زيتون
ووالدي حمامة
إنا صنعنا جنة
كانت نهايتها صناديق قمامة
يا نوح
لا ترحل بنا
أن الممات هنا سلامة
أنا جذور لا تعيش بغير أرض

Oh Noah!
Give me an olive branch
And my mother a dove
We made a paradise
Its end was trash cans
Oh, Noah!
Do not take us away
Death here is safety
I am roots that do not live without land.

These verses express the meaning of identity, belonging and diaspora. As in many of his works, Darwish uses symbols to express the Palestinian issue and suffering of exile. Here olive is a symbol of peace in the Arab and Palestinian culture and it is the most important symbol of Palestinian land and identity. Darwish asks for the olive branch which means his desire for stopping the war, bringing peace and belonging to the land. Moreover, mentioning "my mother" refers to the nostalgia for the homeland and return to the roots, as the mother symbolizes the core of heritage and identity.

إنا صنعنا جنة كانت نهايتها صناديق قمامة

This stanza reflects the suffering of Palestinians due to the war. Darwish portrays how Palestinians made their homeland as a paradise, which was a beautiful land before The Nakba and the occupation, but it ends with destruction and displacements that turned paradise into a dark and a pariah place. Indeed, it refers to the diaspora and the loss of the beautiful homeland that has turned into ruins and memories.

يا نوح لا ترحل بنا

Noah may refer to the prophet Noah who believed in Allah that saved him from the flood. Darwish asks not to take them away, which refers to the diaspora. He does not want to leave again, but to stay or come home soon. Here Darwish reflects the suffering of Palestinians who are forced to leave their homeland.

أن الممات هنا سلامة

In a similar way, Darwish prefers to stay in his homeland, even if it means death, rather than living in a diaspora and exile. Death in the homeland is safer and more peaceful than living away from it.

أنا جذور لا تعيش بغير أرض

This phrase directly summarizes the issue of diasporic identity. The roots here refer to the deep belonging for the homeland, his forefather's land. Darwish clearly expresses the impossibility of living away from his homeland where diaspora means uprooting roots of identity and belonging.

"آدم الجنتين"
أنا آدم الجنتين فقدتهما مرتين
فاطردوني على مهل
واقتلوني على مهل
تحت زيتونتي مع لوركا

I am the Adam of two Edens lost to me twice
Expel me slowly
Kill me slowly
Under my olive tree
With Lorca

These verses explain that continuity of exile and uprooting from the land. In addition, they embody the Palestinians alienation which extends across time, making the Palestinians identity an oppressed and exiled identity like Adam after his exclusion from paradise. In most of his works, Palestine is used as a symbol

alluding to the loss of Eden. Moreover, mentioning Lorca brings to mind that the Palestinian issue, identity or diaspora is not just a political issue, but a human suffering that transcends the boundaries of time and place.

"مقعد في القطار"
كل أهل القطار يعودون للأهل
لكننا لا نعود إلى أي بيت
نسافر بحثاً عن الصفر
كي نستعيد صواب الفراش

All the passengers go back to their families
But we do not go back to any home
We travel in search for zero
To regain the rightness of the bed

In these verses, Darwish explains the experience of diasporic identity in his poetry. It can be seen that people usually travel and return back to their families and homes, but for the Palestinians, they cannot return to their homes due to occupation or displacement. There is a sense of loss of place and identity. In addition, using the word "zero" (الصفر) is used as a symbol for something that does not exist or as a starting point. Using "travel" in this line means searching for stability that has been lost as if the Palestinians are traveling in a whirlwind of wandering without finding a clear destination. Furthermore, the word "bed" is used as a symbol of stability, safety and a very simple thing that person owns, but for the Palestinians, it is an unattainable dream. They are trying to restore a place which makes them safe and secure.

In general, Darwish shows the suffering of the Palestinians in losing their spatial identity and feeling alienated. Continuous immigrations and displacements make it possible to return home, making the Palestinians live in a state of constant search for stability and identity that is lost by diaspora.

"من أنا دون منفى"
صرنا طليقين للكانتات الغريبة بين الغيوم
وصرنا طليقين من جاذبية أرض الهوية
ماذا سنفعل ماذا سنفعل من دون
منفى وليل طويل يحدق في الماء

We have come free to the
Strange creatures among the clouds
And we are free from the gravity
of identity's land
What will we do what will we do without
Exile, a long night staring at the water

In this stanza, Darwish explains how the Palestinians are forced to adapt to new conditions, such as living in exile and being away from the homeland. "Among clouds" (بين الغيوم) symbolizes the unstable life where they live between two worlds and not linked to fixed roots in a world full of loss and negation.

وَصَرْنَا طَلِيقِينَ مِنْ جَاذِبِيَةِ أَرْضِ الْهَوِيَةِ

Here Darwish expresses a state of separation from the land and separation from the original identity due to exile and dispersion.

مَاذَا سَنَفْعَلُ مَاذَا سَنَفْعَلُ مِنْ دُونِ مَنْفَى وَلَيْلٍ طَوِيلٍ يَحْدَقُ فِي الْمَاءِ

Darwish is questioning what he would do if there was no exile. It became an integral part of his life, as if he could not imagine existence without exile. Although the exile is painful, it became familiar for them as refugees.

Conclusion

Mahmoud Darwish is undoubtedly one of the most influential Arab poets, who dedicated his life to conveying the message that living in the diaspora, especially due to political issues, is constantly challenging. A person may face inner conflicts regarding his identity, torn between staying in the host country or returning to his homeland. In his poetry, Darwish clearly portrays diasporic identity and illustrates the impact of exile and displacement on the construction of his nation's identity.

Darwish's poetry is the production of his personal experiences with the Nakba and exile. These painful experiences have shaped his works. In addition, the revolution and Israeli occupation have deepened his national Palestinian identity. His poetry is still an icon of resilience, liberation, resistance and identity. He proves himself as the voice of all Palestinian people as well as all oppressed humanity in the world who longs for freedom, peace and justice.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.A., & M.D.; Methodology, A.A; data collection, M.D.; data analysis, M.D.; writing—original draft preparation, M.D.; writing—review and editing, A.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study can be accessed by making a reasonable request to the corresponding author. Since our research is in the field of literature, the data was collected from books, academic journals, and online resources. Furthermore, this is a qualitative study, so it does not need any samples, statistical analysis, surveys, questionnaires, images, or similar research tools.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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We solemnly declare that this research has not been sent or published anywhere. It has also been conducted independently and it is the result of our own mutual efforts. There is no external assistance, whether academic, editorial, or financial, was received during the conception, execution, or writing. All sources of information have been appropriately acknowledged and cited.

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