
Mahmoud Dervesh and The Palestinian Resistance: A Study of His Selected Works

Bilquees Dar

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ejells.2013/vol11n73541>

Published January 12, 2024

Citation: Dar B.(2023) Mahmoud Dervesh and The Palestinian Resistance: A Study of His Selected Works, *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol.11, No.7, pp.35-41

ABSTRACT: *Palestinian poet Mahmoud Dervesh (1941-2008) also called "the Poet of the Resistance" wrote poems of resistance integral to every Arab's consciousness which includes 30 poetry and prose collections, translated into 35 languages, making everybody hear about his love of his usurped homeland. His poetic works such as Olive Leaves (1964), A Lover from Palestine (1966), Siege for the Praises of the Sea (1984) and Why Have you Left the Horse Alone (1995) have largely defined the Palestinian resistance. In 1997 a documentary was produced about him by French TV directed by noted French-Israeli director Simone Bitton. Darvesh is the recipient of many international literary awards including the Lotus prize in 1969, the Lenin prize in 1983, France's highest medal as Knight of Arts and Belles Lettres in 1997 and the Moroccan Wissam of intellectual merit was handed to him by King Mohammad VI of Morocco. In 2001, he won the Lannan prize, a prize which recognizes people whose extraordinary and courageous work celebrates the human right to freedom, of imagination, inquiry, and expression for cultural freedom. Dervesh was a member of the Executive Committee of the PLO and as a result of his political activism, faced house arrest and imprisonment. He was also the editor in chief and founder of the prestigious literary review Al Karmel.*

KEYWORDS: resistance, exile, intifada, Palestine, Eden, diaspora, dervish, identity, refugee, Zionist.

INTRODUCTION

Mahmoud Dervesh is widely perceived as a Palestinian resistance symbol and chief spokesman of Palestinian opposition to Israel. His peerless poetry was enormously successful in drawing world attention to the plight of Palestinians and rallying millions of Arabs to their cause. A contemporary Arab poet, his poems are the most honest expression and the most tangible picture of the Palestinians, who live in alienation and refuge, bearing the burden of hardships and combat, in spite of the Zionist regimes attempts to practice their ethnic cleansing. No other poet captures the Palestinian consciousness and collective memory the way he does. He has been described as incarnating and reflecting "the tradition of the political poet in Islam, the man of action whose action is poetry". The power of his poetry could be explained by the sincerity of his emotions and the originality of his poetic images. About him the critic Frangieh

says: "Darwish has been a symbol of defiance in the Palestinian struggle against Israel occupation and his verses have been recited throughout the Arab world as an effective means in the political mobilization of the Palestinian people in the last 40 years particularly in the 1960s and 1970"(2000,129). Other critics like Nassar and Rahman state that Dervesh's earlier writings celebrates the theme of his homeland and earns him the label of the *Poet of the Homeland* (2008, 145). Mattawa another critic states: "The underlying facts of Darwish's life as a young man, such as the marginalized and oppressed status of his community, the state of linguistic and cultural siege under which they lived, the intertwining of poetry and politics and his familiarity with the literature of the colonizer, shaped him" ((2014,30). Carolyn Forche and Runir Akash in their introduction to *Unfortunately It Was Paradise* noted that, "as much as [Darvesh] is the voice of the Palestinian Diaspora, he is the voice of the fragmented soul" (2003, 231). Poet Naomi Shihab Nye on *Unfortunately It Was Paradise* says : "[T]he style here is quintessential Darvesh—lyrical, imagistic, plaintive, haunting, always passionate and elegant—and never anything less than free—what he would dream for all his people".

Dervesh used Palestine as a metaphor for the loss of Eden, birth and resurrection as well as the anguish of dispossession and exile. He borrowed from the Old and New Testament, Classical Arabic literature, Arab Islamic history and Greek and Roman mythology to construct his metaphors. His major works reflects his unhappiness with the occupation of his native land. Dervesh used myth to show that Palestine belongs to the Palestinians whose roots go back to the Canaanites, the most ancient inhabitants of Palestine and whose history predates the history of the Israelites in Palestine by many centuries. In his poem, *The Passport*, the poet uses the symbol of the passport to criticise the Israeli attempt to separate the Palestinians from their motherland. He says:

Do not ask the trees about their names
Do not ask the valleys about their mother
The sword of light cleaves from my forehead
From my hand gushes the river's water
All the hearts of people
Are my nationality
So take away my passport. (Dervesh 1973: 61)

Dervesh effectively captures the thoughts and feelings of Palestinians regarding the Arab Spring and also depicts both the political and emotional position of Palestinians on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the territory of Palestine. His first poetry volumes, *Leaves of the Olive Tree* (1964), *A Lover from Palestine* (1966) and *End of the Night* (1967) were published in Israel and are symbolic of the Palestinian resistance to Israel.

Dervesh's poems were considered "a threat to the sword" by the Israeli government and he was harassed for writing and reciting poetry expressing his strong sense of Palestinian identity. Since there was no end to these harassments, he was forced to leave in 1970 to first Moscow and then Egypt and finally Beirut until Israel invaded it in 1982. After escaping Beirut he became a wandering exile living in different Arab capitals and finally moving to Ramallah, a

step closer to his home during the Palestinian *Intifada*. Dervesh wrote three extraordinary poems of resistance like *Mohammad*, *The Sacrifice* and *A State of Siege*, describing the siege of Ramallah and the Palestinian land in profound images that invoke daily life in a vivid way. He says:

A woman asked the cloud:
please enfold my loved one
My clothes are soaked with his blood
If you shall not be rain, my love
Be trees
Saturated with fertility, be trees
And if you shall not be trees, my love
Be a stone
Saturated with humidity, be a stone
And if you shall not be a stone, my love
Be a moon
In the loved one's dream, be a moon

Dervesh's life in exodus helped him to ignite the poetic flame within him and it became the source of his literary creation. However, despite his geographical separation from his homeland, Dervesh continued to disrupt the *status quo* through the medium of poetry and described his exile thus: "Absent, I come to the home of the absent," and when he was asked who he is, he responded, "I still do not know." His answer can best be understood in his words: "Perhaps like me you have no address" while more questions follow and linger heavy with pathos over the human condition. He says:

What's the worth of a man
What is the worth of such a man?
Without a homeland, without a flag,
without an address?

Dervesh wrote not only the Palestinian declaration of independence (1988) but many other poems of resistance, which have become integral part of every Palestinian's consciousness. He lived in alienation and refuge and his poems are the most tangible picture of Palestinians combat and in spite of the Zionist regimes attempts to practice ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, the exclamation of this poet makes everybody hear about his love of his usurped homeland and hope for the future. He often personified his beloved motherland Palestine itself as a mother or a cruel beloved. In *A State of Siege* (2002), Dervesh explored the multiple reoccupations of Ramallah and the resulting sense of Palestinian isolation. However, he foresaw a peaceful coexistence achieved through dialogue between the two cultures. He says:

They fettered his mouth with chains,
And tied his hands to the rock of the dead
They said: You're a murderer.

They took his food, his clothes and his banners,
And threw him into the well of the dead
They said: You're a thief.
They threw him out of every port,
And took away his young beloved
And then they said: You're a refugee (*A State of Siege*)

Dervesh's poem, *Identity Card*, recognized as one of his most famous and influential poems and a powerful example of how skilled he was at articulating the emotions of the Palestinian political position on the land of Israel and one of the most powerful Palestinian anti-oppression poems ever written. The boisterous reaction the poem received, inspired Palestinians to turn it into a protest song and was regarded by many scholars as one of the igniting factors of the first *Intifada*, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza territories. *Identity Card* was resonated by so many in the Arab Spring at the time by the repetition of the line. He says:

RECORD!!!
I am an Arab
You have stolen the orchards
of my ancestors
and the land
which I cultivated
Along with my children
And you left us with those rocks
so will the State take them
as it has been said ?
Therefore
Record on the top of the first page:
I do not hate man
Nor do I encroach
But if I become hungry
The usurper's flesh will be my food
Beware beware of my hunger
and my anger!!
Write down!
I am an Arab
And my identity card number is fifty thousand
I have eight children
And the ninth will come after a summer
Will you be angry
Write down!
I am an Arab

Shai Ginsburg, an associate professor of Asian & Middle Eastern Studies at Duke University, spoke upon the meaning of the recurring line and its impact: *The Designation Palestinian*, gained popularity in the 1960s, but achieved its current almost-universal status only in the late 1980s, with the first Palestinian *Intifada*...Until that point, many, including the most notable politicians, intellectuals, writers and artists, still referred to themselves as Arabs” (Ginsburg, 80). About Darwish's work, the poet Naomi Shihab Nye has said, "Mahmoud Darwish is the Essential Breath of the Palestinian people, the eloquent witness of exile and belonging, exquisitely tuned singer of images that invoke, link, and shine a brilliant light into the world's whole heart. What he speaks has been embraced by readers around the world—his in an utterly necessary voice, unforgettable once discovered"(Nye, 112).

Dervesh constantly defies any strict definition of what he is or wants to be. His poem, *Passing in Passing Words* again expresses the same sentiment that Arabs are the original inhabitants of the land of Israel. He says:

So leave our land. Our shore, our sea
Our wheat, our salt, our wound
Take your portion of our blood and go away
My father... descends from the family of the plow
Not from a privileged class
And my grandfather...was a farmer
Neither well-bred, nor well-born!

Dervesh's poem *The Cypress Tree* inventively uses a fallen Cypress tree as a metaphor for the land that is being taken away from Palestinians and explores all that is affected by this tree falling down. A minaret is compared to the Cypress tree and the tree is unceremoniously sped over by vehicles, thus a brilliant metaphor for the sentiments that he and several other Palestinians feel concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The fallen tree is symbolic of the past society that Dervesh longed for in *Sonnet V*, with the vehicles driving over the tree being the outside countries conducting a proxy invasion in the Arab Spring by instigating the government of Israel. The pigeon represents all Palestinians who refuse to be shoved out of their homeland. He says: The Cypress broke like a minaret... The vehicles sped over its branches... The Cypress broke, but the pigeon in a neighboring house didn't change its public nest. Dervesh was imprisoned several times and was frequently put under house arrest. His reputation all over the world as a highly esteemed poet is partly due to the fact that he affirms an open conception of what being an Arab is. Arab, to him, is not an identity closed unto itself, but pluralism totally open unto others:

And its heroes
And history makes fun of its victims
Takes a look at them and passes by
This sea is mine
This moist air is mine

And my name-
Even if I spell it wrong on the coffin –
Is mine
As for me,
Now that I am filled with all the possible
Reasons for departure –
I am not mine.
I am not mine
I am not mine...

REFERENCES

- Mahmoud Darwish. Poets.org. Academy of American Poets, n.d. Web. 17 Oct. 2016.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. *Bitaqat Huwiyya, [Identity Card]*. 1964.
- Mahmoud Darwish. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 17 Oct. 2016
- Karkar, Sonja. *The First Intifada – Historical Overview, American Muslims for Palestine* N.P., 10 Dec. 2007. Web. 17 Oct. 2016.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. *Sonnet V. The Butterfly's Burden*. N.P.: Copper Canyon, 2007. Print.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. *The Cypress Broke, The Butterfly's Burden* Copper Canyon, 2007, Print
- Atwat, A. (1998). *National trends in contemporary Palestinian poetry*, (1st edition), Beirut, Dar Al-Afagh and Al-Jadidah.
- Darwish, M.A. (2000a). Full poetic works, (2nd edition), Part I, Baghdad, Darolharirah for Printing and Publishing.
- The Butterfly's Burden*, Copper Canyon Press, Washington, 2007
- Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 2003
- Antoon, Sinan. *Mahmoud Darwish's Allegorical Critique of Oslo*. Journal of Palestine Studies. Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 66-77. University of California Press, 2002. Web
- The Adam of Two Edens*, Syracuse University Press, 2001.
- Al-Mādi, *The Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish: Political and Poetic Ideology*, Beirut: Arabic Foundation of Publications and Research, 2013.
- Frangieb, B, 2008, *Modern Arabic Poetry: Vision and Reality*, eds Hala Khamis & Najat Rahman.
- Khamis, H & Rahman, N, 2008, *Mahmoud Darwish: The Exile's Poet*, Olive Branch Press.
- Naqash, R, 1969, Mahmoud Darwish: *The Poet of the occupied land*, Dar al Hilal
- Anderson, Benedict. (1991). *Imagined Community*. London: Verso.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. (2002).
- Daghamin, Rashad Ahmad. (2013). Postmodernism, Modernism and His story: Mahmoud Darwish's Identity Card. International Journal of Advanced Studies, 59-65.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. (2000). Interview. The Politics of Poetry. Newsweek International, 20 March, 62.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. (2003). *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*. California: University of California Press.

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

- Dhllon, Balraj. (2010). *Subaltern Voices and Perspective: The poetry of Mahmoud Darwish*. Journal of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society. Graduate Studies Association, 9(1).
- Harrow, Barbara. (1987). *Resistance Literature*. Methuen: New York and London.
- Kanafani, Khassan. (2013). *literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*. Rimal Publications.
- Mena, Erica. (2009). *The Geography of Poetry: Mahmoud Darwish and Post national Identity*. Journal of Sociology of Self-Knowledge, V. 11, special issue, 111-118.
- Parmenter, Barbara McKean. (1994). *Giving Voice to Stones: Place and Identity in Palestinian Literature*. Austin: U of Texas.
- Rahman, Najat. (2008). *Literary Disinheritance: The Writings of Home in Work of Mahmoud Darwish and Assia Djebar*.UK: Lexington Books.
- Rooke, Tetz. (2008). *In the Presence of Absence: Mahmoud Darwish's Testament*. Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies, 8
- Al-Naqash, Raja. (1969). *Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet of the Occupied Land*. Beirut: Dar al Hilal.