



## *The Voice of a Country of Called 'Forgetfulness': Mahmoud Darwish as Edward Said's "Amateur"*

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**Abstract:** This is a study of two close friends: Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish—cosmopolitan and humane Palestinians who were fellow compatriots in the fight for the Palestinian cause. Both resigned from the PLO in the wake of the Oslo Accord as a sign of protest to the agreement. However, this was mostly true on Said's part. Darwish said he was a poet; of what use was politics to him? This paper tries to answer this question by exploring the dynamic interplay of poetry and politics in what Said would call Darwish's 'amateurism.' Said's 'amateur' is an intellectual who remains extraordinarily committed to truth and justice through all her/his efforts. An 'amateur's' relentless task is to 'speak truth to power.' In order to perform the task, s/he combines the traits of Gramsci's '*organic intellectual*' and Benda's '*cleric*' in her/himself. Like the *organic intellectual*, s/he persistently challenges hegemonies through advancing progressive ideas and as a Bendaesque moral force, s/he acts against all kinds of subjugations and aggressions. The author argues that an 'amateurish' breaking of barriers took place when Darwish the poet turned into a Palestinian spokesman out of his passion to speak truth to the occupying Israeli power. Consequently, his art and his politics of universal human freedom vis-à-vis Palestine became so inextricably interlinked that he started to fill football stadia with his poetry recitation. Whether he wanted it or not, politics thus became an integral part of Darwish's artistic project.

Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish is a landmark figure of the modern world literature. Fittingly, there has been an increasing interest in his great artistry. Understandably, his world recognition on a phenomenal scale advances the Palestinian cause to a great extent. Serene Huleileh writes:

Born on 13 March 1941 in Al Birweh, a quaint village in the Galilee, Mahmoud Darwish went on to live a life that is a poignant example of how far talent and determination, combined with a precarious life, can carry an individual from a simple background into the interna-

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tional halls of fame.<sup>1</sup>

He attended 'International halls of fame' more than once, by winning France's highest medal as Knight of Arts and Belles Lettres, Prince Claus Awards, and the Lannan prize for Cultural Freedom, among many others. My aim here is to project how the poet from 'a simple background' achieved the high accolades by dint of a resistance that Edward Said calls 'amateurism.'

Darwish's modest background reveals a common Palestinian plight. With the birth of Israel, he was ousted from his homeland at the age of six. When the family returned to their erased village, they were declared infiltrators; in official Israeli term, they were 'present-absentees.' As he grew up, he was increasingly in trouble with the authorities for his resistant poetry. Consequently, he left Israel in the 1970s and roamed across various Arab cities. After Israel's 1982 massacre in Beirut, he took refuge in Paris, where his poetic life flourished to the fullest. Naturally, because of being a 'wandering exile,'<sup>2</sup> the Israeli colonialism and American imperialism that uprooted him became key questions in his writings. But as his eminence suggests, his poetic voice achieved greatness by broaching the questions through his idealism of truth, justice, and human emancipation.

This is exactly where Said's idea of 'amateurism' comes in view. Said believes that when intellectuals are confined to their professional knowledge and its perimeters, they are in real danger of being separated from the historico-political world. In order to oppose this withdrawal and the consequent neutrality, Said wants intellectuals to be 'amateurs' in the French meaning of the

1. Serene Huleileh, "'I am not mine," Mahmoud Darwish: The Expropriated Poet', Mahmoud Darwish... In the Presence of Absence, <http://www.mahmouddarwish.com/ui/english/ShowContent.aspx?ContentId=8> [accessed: 6 April 2010].

2. Edward Said, 'On Mahmoud Darwish', Grand Street 48 (Winter 1994), p.112.

term:

Asked why he used the term amateur rather than 'generalist,' Said replied that he was drawn to the literal meaning of the French word, which means a love of something—'very involved in something without being professional.'<sup>3</sup>

This does not, however, mean that Said nullifies professionalism in a cynical way. Neither does this imply that his 'amateur' has to be a righteous hermit. On the contrary, Said's 'amateur' has a profession to begin with; but s/he is an engaged intellectual, who transcends the boundary of her/his expertise to be involved in a greater politico-cultural struggle. As Said explains above, this happens because of her/his love for and the commitment to a particular cause. S/he is neither 'just a friendly technician' nor 'a full-time Cassandra,' then.<sup>4</sup> Her/his steadfast task is not to produce plain prophecies, but to 'speak truth to power'<sup>5</sup> through her/his writing. Said further explains that the 'amateur' fulfills this role in two ways. First, s/he works as Gramsci's 'organic intellectual' through the counter-hegemonic writing. Secondly, the twentieth-century French philosopher Benda becomes a role model for her/him. Like Benda's 'cleric', s/he always struggles to uphold the universal values of truth, justice and freedom.<sup>6</sup>

I argue here that an 'amateurish' breaking of barriers took place when Darwish the poet turned into a Palestinian spokesman out of his passion to speak truth to the occupying Israeli power. Consequently, his art and his politics of universal human freedom vis-à-vis Palestine became so inextricably interlinked that he started to fill football sta-

3. Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 48.

4. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 52.

5. Said, *Representations*, p. 63.

6. Said, *Representations*.

dia with his poetry recitation, whether it was in the Arab or the Western worlds. Thus politics is never far from artistic purity, at least as Said's 'worldliness' testifies. Therefore, being a Saidian 'amateur,' Darwish writes combining Gramscian 'organic' intellectualism with Benda's idealistic predisposition. His counter-hegemony resists Israeli-American nullification of his usurped nation. Simultaneously, like Benda's cleric, he advances the Palestine issue through the universal principles of truth and justice.

As for Darwish's rebellion against Israeli colonialism, it is worth emphasizing here that the core of both Said and Darwish's counter-hegemonic writings against Israel are formed through revolting against the coloniser's non-recognition. In *Orientalism*, Said challenges the constitution of an Oriental's identity shorn off his/her humanity. In the same way, the core of Darwish's poetry is formed by resisting the absence of his conqueror's recognition of his people as humans. 'Write down, I am an Arab!'<sup>7</sup> was his famous poetic outcry against this. The poem 'Identity Card' starting with this statement not only earned him enormous popularity in the 60s but also the title of the 'resistance poet.' Even though Darwish rejected the label and refused to recite this poem later on in life, his poetic oeuvre always remained a resisting project to give voice to the voiceless Palestinians. Starting with the 1960s' fiery poems 'till the more aesthetically polished late poems, his lyrics always defied the degradation of the Palestinian identity as a non-existent one.

Naturally, the reassertion of his nation's denied identity is a predominant theme in Darwish's poetry. Being one of the media of the nation's self-expression, Darwish's poetry brings out the bleak reality of occupation:

The beloved sun never rose  
in spite of the day's insistence...

7. Mahmoud Darwish, *Selected Poems* (Cheadle: Carcanet, translated by Ian Wedde and Fawwaz Tuqan, 1973), p. 25.

How long eyes have searched for it  
& are still waiting...  
& thousands of eyes stare skywards  
without direction.  
Beyond the eyes they have thrown up  
walls with high foreheads  
to keep the sun from them...<sup>8</sup>

The poignant description gives us a continuing sunless picture of the occupied territories, where 'thousands of eyes' are 'star(ing) skywards without direction.' Darwish puts his poetry at the forefront of his occupied people's struggle against this dark situation. He calls himself a 'destitute poet as [his people's] caravan leader,' hoping that 'the sun's wounds will guide the caravan' by 'rak(ing) out the rubble of the wall!'<sup>9</sup> The poet is eerily prophetic here, as he symbolises the non-freedom of his people through 'the wall.' Though his poem, 'The Festival & the Sun,' appeared in 1960 in a collection called *Birds without Wings*, it perfectly foreshadowed Israel's so-called 'security wall' in West Bank built in 1994.

Despite the walled-in condition, Darwish's resistance is fuelled by an invincible hope. The hope is boldly expressed in his verses, which turn upside down the usual death and destruction associated with a Palestinian identity in a dominant discourse:

Twenty songs about sudden death...  
each song: a tribe  
We are in love with causes for falling  
in the streets.  
O noble city of ours bloated with  
defeat...<sup>10</sup>

Palestinians are dying on the streets without any records. Darwish notes, however, that every 'tribe' has its fair share on the festivity of reasonless death brought upon them by their occupying lords. Despite being ironic about the grave scenario,

8. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 22.

9. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 23.

10. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 73.

he asserts that people still 'longed to survive,' though they were habituated to the 'customary'<sup>11</sup> mourning and repeated funerals for their deceased kinsmen. He further stresses that the instinct to be alive is a strong one, which makes people withstand the humiliation and sufferings of occupation. That is why he chooses to be a determined optimist and describes how the deaths make them value the bravery of their kindred. The persecution of the inhabitants of his 'city' and the deep loss of the survivors become part of its everyday reality. Hence, Darwish's ironic appreciation goes to the bloodshed committed in his 'city,' i.e., homeland symbolised by the 'cross,' because it rescues the 'city' from being non-distinct! Thus its dwellers paradoxically realize how valuable an uninterrupted lifespan is. Once again, this perception preserves the people's fighting spirit:

I thank you O cross of my city  
I thank you:  
you taught us the colour of carnations &  
courage.  
O cross O bridge spanning the gulf for  
us  
from childhood's gaiety  
to old age: now  
we are discovering the city in you ah!  
our beautiful city!<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, Darwish's resistance is contained above by allowing death to be defeated by the steely resolve of the people to live and value life and also by the audacity to turn death's regular visit amongst them into an ordinary feature of their life. In fact, such a resolve in the face of the unceasing 'hurricane' of destruction that started off with the Nakba (catastrophe of 1948 that marked the beginning of their dispossession) and continued amidst the 'tears,' 'wound,' and 'bleeding' of the occupied Palestine is Darwish's foremost oppositional strategy

11. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 74.

12. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 74.

against the settler's colonials' insistence on their being a lesser people:

So be it  
I must feel proud  
of you O wound of my city  
& of you O image of lightning  
in our sad nights.  
Because the street glowers in my face  
you must protect me from the shadow  
& the glances of hate.  
I shall go on serenading happiness  
somewhere beyond the eyelids of  
frightened eyes.<sup>13</sup>

As a 'caravan leader' of his people, Darwish's support to the cultural resistance against the denied Palestinian existence continues through creating powerful images that are predominantly rooted in their reality, tradition, and life. Against Israeli repression and defeat, they create the vanguard of national pride and self-assurance through the poet's fundamental belief that despite the sufferings inflicted by Israel's settler-colonialism, occupation, and domination, 'the Phoenix, or the Green Bird—as it is called in the Palestinian folk song never ceases to be reborn out of his ashes.'<sup>14</sup> Green, therefore, is an important resisting symbol in his poetry. For example, references to olives are ever-present in the poems. The persona speaking out in 'Identity Card' says that 'to me the most delicious food / is olive oil and thyme.'<sup>15</sup> In the same poem, the Palestinian records:

My roots  
gripped down before time began  
before the blossoming of ages  
before cypress trees and olive trees...  
before grass sprouted.<sup>16</sup>

13. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 50.

14. Mahmoud Darwish, 'The Madness of Being a Palestinian', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 15, 1 (Autumn 1985), p.138-139.

15. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 25.

16. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 24.

Darwish's very last poem, 'The Dice Player,' brings the green back as usual:

O land "I love you green," green. An apple waving in light and water. Green. Your night Green. Your dawn, green. So plant me gently, with a mother's kindness, in a fistful of air. I am one of your seeds, green...<sup>17</sup>

Discernibly, green does not only stand for the land of olives, basils and thymes, it speaks of an agrarian country on the Mediterranean coast that never ceases to exist in grandeur in its people's minds, despite lacking recognition in the dominant discourse.

As noted before, Darwish's whole oeuvre can be seen as an oppositional project against that discourse. Darwish started off as a forerunner in the dissenting group that was writing in the '60s in Israel in the teeth of Golda Meir's infamous proclamation that 'there are no Palestinians.'<sup>18</sup> From the very beginning, then, his job was to discover the 'image of lightning' in the midst of the 'hurricane' blowing over the country as a result of the longest standing occupation in modern history. Unlike the dominant Israeli discourse, however, his counter-hegemony is an attempt to 'serenade happiness' by upholding the hope of survival for his people, rather than spreading hatred for the occupying force. Therefore, Darwish, like Said, speak of the possibility of resistance under impossible circumstances. 'The Lantern of Wounds' makes it clear:

17. Darwish quoted in Mourid Barghouti, "He is the son of all of you", *The Guardian* Saturday 16 August 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/aug/16/poetry> [accessed: 3 December 2010].

18. Meir quoted in Gerald Butt, 'Profiles: Golda Meir', BBC News Tuesday April 21 1998, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/events/israel\\_at\\_50/profiles/81288.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/events/israel_at_50/profiles/81288.stm) [accessed: 3 December 2010].

The Sultan grew angry  
& the Sultan occupies all pictures  
& the backs of postcards  
& on his forehead is the tattoo of slaves.  
Then he shouted: 'It is ordered!  
Execute this poem!  
Execution Square is the anthology of  
stubborn poems.'<sup>19</sup>

Colonial power seems to be absolute as 'The Sultan's' image saturates the prevalent discourse (he 'occupies all pictures' '& the backs of postcards') and enslaves all institutions ('& on his forehead is the tattoo of slaves'). This alludes to the fact that Israel wields overwhelming power over the occupied people. Even so, Darwish explains how ironically the '[e]xecution Square' becomes 'the anthology of stubborn,' i.e., dissenting poems. It is because they are like 'the lightning' that 'cannot be locked in a stalk of maize';<sup>20</sup> they are as true and alive as the forces of nature. Besides, just as 'a stalk of maize' is not an enclosure for something as powerful as 'the lightning,' so is a blockade not a restriction for something as forceful as resistant poetry.

Darwish insists that these are the

... songs that have the sun's logic  
& the history of streams  
& the temperament of earthquakes  
that they resemble a tree's roots:  
should they die in one land  
they will blossom in every land!<sup>21</sup>

Once again, the images highlight the unstoppable natural force of the voice of resistance. They are no mere figurative language, for Darwish's poetry remained the source of inspiration for Palestinian resistance against Israel's power to curb it mercilessly. Provenly, the vigour of the resistance never dies, because the 'wounds' inflicted

19. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 55.

20. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 55.

21. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 55.



by Israel's colonial policies of subjugation, abasement and extirpation paradoxically work as the 'lanterns'<sup>22</sup> assisting the subdued people to walk their way through the endless tunnels of torture. Thus the poet's 'red song' is 'an ember'; even in prison, it creates 'the fire of revolution,' which defies '[t]he Sultan's' sway.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the poet not only 'ordained' his 'heart' to 'the call of the tempest' of revolution, his verses keep it 'roar(ing)'<sup>24</sup> against the all-powerful authority.

Thus Darwish's 'early fierce poetry registered his resistance to existential and cultural erasure practised by an apartheid colonial state.'<sup>25</sup> In writing against the regular death and destruction, terror and brutality, and painful sufferings of the occupation, his lines speak more directly to the 'masters':

Don't make a moral of me twice!  
 My masters! O my masters the  
 prophets  
 don't ask the trees about their  
 names  
 don't ask the valleys about their  
 mother...  
 all the hearts of the people  
 are my nationality  
 so take away my passport!<sup>26</sup>

Darwish defies his colonial masters who have taken away his political identity. Even from 'the detention room,' he challenges them as they imprison him for his poetry by declaring that he does not require pen and paper for writing, for 'poetry is heartsblood/salt of bread/vitreous body of eye.'<sup>27</sup> With the verse that gets written in his mind and body, Darwish defies 'the fetters':

I shall state this  
 in the detention room  
 in the bath-house  
 in the stable  
 under the whip  
 under handcuffs  
 undergoing the torture of chains:

One million swallows  
 On my heart's branches  
 Compose the war song.<sup>28</sup>

The design of the first stanza is noticeable. Every line gets a bit away from the starting point of the previous line so as to create the impression that every oppression that the line names is lesser than the previous one, especially as they all fall like cards under the stormy pronouncement the poet makes in the second stanza. In other words, Darwish is saying that the colonial authority can try to undermine his dignity through imprisonment, tortures, and bureaucratic tools like the passport, identity cards, etc., but his 'war song' will always rise above this sort of 'existential erasure.' His words retrieve the lost land and reinscribe it on the cultural map of the world. In 'A Lover from Palestine' the poet says it unambiguously: he 'opened door and window' to their 'stormy night,' i.e., the occupied state asking the night to turn back because 'I have appointments with words & light.'<sup>29</sup> What did the appointed time produce? Obviously, it recreated the land of Palestine whose 'eyes are a thorn in my heart' and 'speech' was 'like the swallows fluttered from my house.'<sup>30</sup>

That is how sheer anger of dispossession does not overshadow the beauty of his poetic imagination. His images are the fulcrum to determine that his verses contain his politics, not the other way round. Therefore, his poetry is not overtly political. Everyday death, destruction and violence of

22. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 55.

23. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 55.

24. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 55.

25. Sinan Antoon, 'Farewell Mahmoud Darwish', *Al-Ahram Weekly* 910 (14 - 20 August 2008), <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/910/fr1.htm> [accessed: 16 December 2008].

26. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 62.

27. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 70.

28. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 70.

29. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 64.

30. Darwish, *Selected*, p. 62.

occupation are alluded to in the poetry. But they are present as a background and not cited as facts. Nor does Darwish let the grim reality of checkpoints, continuous seizures of land, increasing settlements, and so on crush his poetic sensibility. For example, he is never as direct as Noam Chomsky, who plainly states in an interview that Gaza 'is a hell-hole. They don't want it.'<sup>31</sup> Darwish rather speaks poetically:

The earth is closing on us, pushing us  
through the last passage, and  
we tear off our limbs to pass through.  
The earth is squeezing us. I wish we  
were its wheat so we could die  
and live again. I wish the earth was our  
mother  
So she'd be kind to us.<sup>32</sup>

The depressing picture of Gaza as 'the last passage' and the sadness of West Bank's ever shrinking territory ('the earth is squeezing us') and the cruel reality of losing land are all evoked without compromising the beauty of the lines. In fact, their suggestive power and beauty are such that they exemplify what Tagore calls, the light that springs from the source of darkness.

Clearly, Darwish's anti-colonialism is signified by his opposition to the darkness of the occupation. At the same time, he situates the Israeli enmity against them in a bigger context of imperialism fed by an Orientalist style East-West divide. Here as well, Darwish shares a viewpoint advanced by Said. Said explains:

... the roots of European anti-Semitism and Orientalism were really the same... that the Semites, whether Muslim or Jew, were not Chris-

31. Noam Chomsky and Christopher J Lee, 'South Africa, Israel-Palestine, and the Contours of the Contemporary World Order', From Occupied Palestine, <http://fromoccupiedpalestine.org/node/1244> [accessed: 14 February 2010].

32. Mahmoud Darwish et al, *Victims of a Map* (London: Al Saqi, translated by Abdullah al-Udhari, 1984), p.13.

tians and not Europeans, and therefore had to be excoriated and confined. What then occurred is that the Zionists took on the view of the Orientalists vis-à-vis the Palestinians; in other words the Palestinians became the subject for the Israeli Orientalist, just as the Muslim and others have been the subject for the colonial or imperial Orientalists.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 proves the strength of the imperialist hegemony dividing the East from the West. Having been emboldened by the US support, the Western-ally Israel carries out one of the heinous massacres of the eastern (read, 'inferior') Palestinian refugees in Shabra and Shatila camps, among many other atrocities, of course. Beirut killing proves how far the Israeli subjection of the Palestinian 'others' could go. Palestinians' confinement in Beirut refugee camps was not enough; Israel needed to excoriate and uproot them even from their exilic shelter in Lebanon in order to make their absence permanent. Darwish's exquisitely written commemoration of Beirut, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, inevitably acts as a counter narrative to this process of otherization aiming at the erasure of a whole race. More importantly, he surely agrees with Said in showing the deep historical root of the imperial notion of the East-West enmity, as he claims in the memoir that the Palestinian resistance is

... correcting the ink of a language that (from the siege of Acre in the Middle Ages to the present siege of Beirut whose aim is revenge for all medieval history) has driven the whole area east of the Mediterranean toward a West that has wanted nothing more from slavery than to make enslavement easier?<sup>34</sup>

33. Edward Said, *Power, Politics and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 48.

34. Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forget-*

Arguably, Darwish focuses on the crusades, rather than anti-Semitism, as the source of Western imperialism. History's irony is unmissable in any case. The Jews, who were the 'others' of the Christian West, are now their 'representative' in the East to the extent they adhere to the Zionist colonial agenda, as they are taking revenge on their behalf for their defeat in Acre during the crusades by now punishing Saladin's race.

Darwish's point is that Western imperialism has historically wanted the enslavement of the Levant in one form or another. And that is simply why the American propaganda machine's drumbeating of Israel's virtues overwrites the cruel facts about the invasion. As Said argues, the forceful suppression of a Palestinian experience in Lebanon ensures America's triumphalist exoneration of Israel's crimes in Lebanon.<sup>35</sup> So powerful the exoneration turns out to be that being Palestinian inevitably means facing the cruelty of life through denied rights, needs and opportunities, as the poet records in the memoir. The denial goes so far as to overwrite the Palestinian identity as a tag to the Israeli one. 'The world isn't interested in me,' Darwish tells one of his interviewers. 'It notices me only because it is interested in you.'<sup>36</sup> That is why the poet protested the Tel Aviv protest of the Israeli aggression in Lebanon. Lest it sounds perplexing since the Israelis were announcing their solidarity with the suffering Palestinians, Darwish explains the ground of his protestation:

I didn't rejoice over the demonstrations in Tel Aviv, which continues to rob us of all our roles. From them the killer and the victim, from them the pain, and the cry; the sword, and the rose; the victory, and the de-

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fulness (Berkeley: University of California, translated by Ibrahim Muhawi, 1995), p. 11-2.

35. Edward Said, 'Permission to Narrate', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, 3 (Spring 1984).

36. Stuart Klawans, 'Godard's Inferno', *The Nation* 279, 21 (Winter 2004), p. 40.

feat...<sup>37</sup>

Darwish alludes to the victimhood of the holocaust that Israel has been rather abusing since its birth to get Western support for their subjugation of Arab people. The pain of the paradox is understandable. Israel's aggression is so extensive that it overshadows the subjugated people's ability to express their own opposition to their defeat. That is why Darwish writes the counter-hegemonic memoir to give voice to his voiceless people.

Arguably, in a Bendaesque way, truth, justice and humanism remain the source of the Darwishian warfare against the marginalisation and dehumanization of the Palestinians. And what is the truth that the poet upholds? To know the answer to that, we have to listen to Raja Shehadeh, a prominent Palestinian lawyer and writer, who met the poet in Ramallah for an interview during Israel's invasion of the occupied territories in response to the second Intifada (Palestinian mass uprising). Darwish talks to him during a short cessation of the incessant curfews. He describes his new poem, 'A State of Siege,' to Shehadeh as 'a poet's journal that deals with resisting the occupation through searching for beauty in poetics and beauty in nature.'<sup>38</sup> Therefore, beauty, not the horror of the attack, is the truth that inspires him to knit a strong hope in an otherwise bleak war diary. That is why we are told not to expect the poem to be a journalistic report or a detailed record of the invasion. Rather, the beauty emanates from the pieces of feelings, fragments of thoughts, and strings of emotions with which Darwish represents the collective suffering of his people. As with most Darwish poems, the personal is political here:

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37. Darwish, *Memory*, p.109-110.

38. Darwish quoted in Raja Shehadeh, 'Mahmoud Darwish – a Poet of Peace in a Time of Conflict', *The Guardian* Friday 7 August 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/books-blog/2009/aug/07/mahmoud-darwish-poetry-palestine> [accessed: 6 November 2009].



(To a reader :) Don't trust the poem,  
 this daughter of absence,  
 she is neither speculation  
 nor intellect,  
 she's chasm's sense.<sup>39</sup>

The poet is relaying how it feels to be on the mouth of an abyss, especially when he realizes *why* he and his people are thrown at the chasm. Since the reality of their presence in any shape or form questions the story of their 'absence' dominantly made known by Israel, the siege, invasion and attack are its repeated effort in making this 'absence' true. That is why Darwish ironically says that his poetry must be the 'daughter of absence,' since he never exists 'officially.' This is Darwish's paradoxical way of asserting the plain truth of their existence in opposition to the power's pressure on them to fit into the hegemony it maintains.

Darwish depicts the materialistic effect the hegemony creates in their life through describing the pain of losing the Palestinian land and identity in an intimate way. In *Memory*, Darwish records their forced expulsion and his grandfather's subsequent longing for his land to convey the enormity of the injustice done to them:

We came from the villages of Galilee. We slept one night by the filthy Rmesh pool, next to pigs and cows. The following morning, we moved north... My grandfather died with his gaze fixed on a land imprisoned behind a fence. A land whose skin they had changed from wheat, sesame, maize, watermelons, and honeydews to tough apples. My grandfather died counting sunsets, seasons, and heartbeats on the fingers of his withered hands. He dropped like a fruit forbidden a branch to lean its age against.<sup>40</sup>

39. Mahmoud Darwish, *The Butterfly's Burden* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, translated by Fady Joudah, 2007), p. 167.

40. Darwish, *Memory*, p.88.

Their ever known land of bountiful 'wheat, sesame, maize, watermelons, and honeydews' turned into a place of 'tough apples,' which was foreign to them. Their life withered away by waiting for a return to the homeland; peace became 'forbidden' in their life. Thus the natural aspirations of a human life were denied, destroyed and disallowed to them, just because another people had a simultaneous claim on their land. Apart from the deep humiliation of the dis-possession, the loss of land destroyed a whole way of life. Darwish depicts the up-rooting in plain terms:

I belong there... I was born as everyone  
 is born.  
 I have a mother, a house with many  
 windows, brothers, friends, and a  
 prison cell  
 with a chilly window! I have a wave  
 snatched by seagulls, a panorama of  
 my own.  
 I have a saturated meadow. In the deep  
 horizon of my word, I have a moon,  
 A bird's sustenance, and an immortal  
 olive tree.<sup>41</sup>

Having been thrown outside the land, they lose the last remnant of connection to it, which increases the longing for it. Therefore, viewed from exile, even the 'prison cell/with a chilly window' of the usurped homeland does not seem worthy to be lost. The deep attachment to the land that Darwish portrays reflects the scale of injustice related to its loss: 'This land is the skin on my bones, /And my heart/ Flies above its grasses like a bee.'<sup>42</sup> This indomitable love signifies that regaining the homeland is synonymous with achieving justice for Darwish and his people. This is why his verse keeps on asserting their right by defying

41. Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise* (Berkeley: University of California, translated by Munir Akash et al, 2003), p. 7.

42. Mahmoud Darwish, *The Music of Human Flesh* (London: Heinemann, translated by Denys Johnson-Davies, 1980), p.28.

power's denigration of it: 'I have lived on the land long before swords turned man into prey.'<sup>43</sup>

Thus the poet clings onto the land, which he always felt to be rightfully theirs, despite power's repeated attacks on them to turn this into a lie. The truth is that a group of people simply cannot 'remove' another people from a land just because they want to establish their 'superior' claim on it, or because they 'feel' that it belongs solely to them. And this is what Darwish sets out to explain to the world when he asks,

Has any other nation ever known so many expulsions, passed through so many exiles, or faced so many massacres without being rewarded with a homeland... I mean its own homeland?<sup>44</sup>

The force of the question can only be disregarded if humanity becomes foreign to itself. Darwish states this clearly in a prose piece written against the Ramallah Siege of 2002: 'From this day on, he who does not become Palestinian in his heart will never understand his true moral identity.'<sup>45</sup>

We have to realize the historical context of such a demanding statement. Darwish represents a dispersed people whose land, identity, wealth, dignity, security, culture, and society and nationhood—everything related to a human existence on earth—evaporated in a nightmare called the Nakba. However, the reality is that there has been no waking up from the nightmare. That is why Darwish writes in his last poem:

I am fortunate that I am a divinity neighbor...  
It is my misfortune that the cross is the eternal ladder to our tomorrow!<sup>46</sup>

43. Darwish, *Unfortunately*, p. 7.

44. Darwish, *Madness*, p. 139.

45. Mahmoud Darwish, 'A War for War's Sake', *Al-Ahram Weekly* 581 (11 - 17 April 2002), <http://weekly.ahram.org/2002/581/fr2.htm> [accessed: 29 March 2010].

46. Fayeq Oweis, 'The Dice Player by

The absurdity of the injustice ushered in by the Nakba and its continual aftermaths are brought to light by Darwish through the irony that being a 'divinity neighbor' translates into being a lesser human for him. Indeed, to the Israelis, returning to their Biblical home was not an act of colonization. But for the Palestinians, it makes little difference whether or not religion was on the side of their 'others'; because the Israeli authority did to them exactly what colonizers do to their subjects:

What difference was it to them whether  
It was Isaac or Ishmael who was  
God's sacrificial lamb?

Their hell was Hell itself.<sup>47</sup>

Besides, when the 'Hell' breaks loose, the realm of the physical enters the act of resistance. The Arabs use their bodies against the occupier out of sheer desperation of a collective punishment that they never deserve in the first place. This is how crime is begetting crime in the peace-deprived land. However, Darwish insists:

The martyr clarifies for me: I didn't  
search beyond the expanse  
for immortal virgins, because I love life  
on earth, among the pines and figs, but  
I couldn't find a way to it,  
so I looked for it with the last thing I  
owned:  
blood in the lapis body.<sup>48</sup>

Evidently, Darwish's humanism does not allow him to valorise the martyrs through a religious argument. Rather, his secular consciousness brings a humanistic focus on the situation to explain the paradox

Mahmoud Darwish', Knol (August 2008), <http://knol.google.com/k/the-dice-player#> [accessed: 20 July 2010].

47. Mahmoud Darwish, *The Adam of Two Edens* (Syracuse, NY: Jusoos and Syracuse University, translated by Husain Haddawi et al, 2000), p.177.

48. Darwish, *Butterfly's*, p. 163.

that those who 'love life' destroy it willingly, since they 'couldn't find a way to it.'

To me, Darwish's universal humanism paves a way forward in lifting both the Israelis and the Palestinians out of their hells in the 'holy' land. Naturally, he renounces meaningless violence on both sides arguing that hostile actions from them simply keep prolonging 'the age of barbarism.' Once again, irony is his weapon:

The martyr is the daughter of a martyr  
 who is the daughter of a martyr ...  
 And nothing happens in this civilized  
 world,  
 the age of barbarism is over,  
 and the victim is nameless, ordinary  
 and the victim... like truth... is relative  
 etc., etc.<sup>49</sup>

Endless repetitions of violence triggering off counter-violence irrevocably perpetuate the mutuality of trauma and destroy the desire for peace. Since Israel's military violence starts the process off, it drives away any possibility of human connection between the two groups who are destined to share the same place:

(To another killer): Had you left the fetus  
 for thirty days, the possibilities would  
 have changed:  
 the occupation might end and that  
 suckling  
 would not remember the time of siege,<sup>50</sup>

It is no exaggeration, therefore, that Darwish's aesthetics is immersed in his humanism. For instance, the verse below shows how he brings some piece of the sky nearer to his tormented people:

When the fighter planes disappear, the  
 doves fly  
 white, white. Washing the sky's cheek

with free wings, reclaiming splendor  
 and sovereignty  
 of air and play. Higher and higher  
 the doves fly, white, white. I wish the  
 sky  
 were real (a man passing between two  
 bombs told me)<sup>51</sup>

When 'the fighter planes' and the 'bombs' become the dominant reality under the sky, Darwish wants his suffering people to look above. After all, like the 'man passing between two bombs,' the rest of the nation wants some respite from the suffering and a scope to get away from the heat and madness. Darwish's poetry materializes that scope through the sky, air, and its free birds above the conflict-ridden world, where peace reigns in abundance. Thus his humane verses give the people an opportunity to inhale the peace from above and lift their spirits up for survival.

The fact is that amidst the trauma, rage, injustice, and violence, something has to soothe the wounded Palestinian hearts. Something has to pave the way for the healing process so that they can start believing in reconciliation. Something has to be the source of strength for them. That is why Darwish's poetry creates a calming effect by knitting the beauty of nature in his verses in order to keep the hope for a better future alive amidst the most impossible situation: 'Alone, we are alone to the dregs, / had it not been for the visits of the rainbow.'<sup>52</sup> However beaten and low the Palestinian life may be and however abandoned they may feel, 'the rainbow' never forgets to visit them to lighten their sorrow. Therefore, Darwish never ceases to

... whisper to the shadow: If  
 the history of this place were less  
 crowded  
 our eulogies to the topography of

49. Darwish, *Butterfly's*, p. 167.

50. Darwish, *Butterfly's*, p. 131.

51. Darwish, *Butterfly's*, p. 129.

52. Darwish, *Butterfly's*, p. 133.

poplar trees... would've been more!<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, the poet's humanist imagination always emphasizes the greatness of 'the topography of / poplar trees' over history's quarrel about who should live in the vicinity of the trees. Since the quarrel is most shockingly overshadowing the lush beauty 'the topography' offers, Darwish cannot rhapsodise about the quarrel to intensify it in any way. After all, the history of the land has already been too 'crowded' with claim and counter-claim. And so, emotional outpourings will simply worsen the situation by excavating more and more wounds. Therefore, Darwish employs beauty in a therapeutic way by assigning it the task to heal the unhealable wounds from within.

I wrote twenty lines about love  
and imagined  
this siege  
has withdrawn twenty meters!...<sup>54</sup>

Evidently, sustaining the inner strength of his people by singing the song of common humanity of both the besieged and the besieger is the ultimate Darwishian way of fighting against the forces of darkness. Should I need to reiterate that such an 'amateurish' way of fighting against the political darkness is a fundamental requirement in every individual, who is worthy to be called an intellectual?

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53. Darwish, *Butterfly's*, p. 137.

54. Darwish, *Butterfly's*, p. 151.