Poetic Justice

Mahmoud Darwish's Vision of Palestinian-Israeli Coexistence in the Holy Land

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To many Palestinians and members of the Arab diaspora around the world, the poet Mahmoud Darwish (March 13, 1942-August 9, 2000) was a larger-than-life icon, a literary rock star who read his work to football stadiums filled with tens of thousands of people.[1, 2] Darwish's works, which focused on themes of exile and protest, reflected and shaped the development of Palestinian identity after the 1948 Palestine War. One of Darwish's most popular poems, "Identity Card," is a cry of defiance written soon after that war's end. The poem eventually spread throughout Palestine and even the larger Arab diaspora as a protest anthem.[3] Yet Darwish was a diplomat as well as a protester—his work sought not only to empower Palestinians, but also to "reach out to the other side" and to empathize with Israelis in the hope that they might empathize in return. Darwish arranged meetings between Palestinian and Israeli intellectuals, and published

essays on their discussions.[4] He was optimistic that, through mutual understanding, the two sides could eventually reconcile. "I do not despair," he explained to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*. "I am patient and am waiting for a profound revolution in the consciousness of the Israelis. The Arabs are ready to accept a strong Israel…all it has to do is open the gates of its fortress and make peace."[5]

In his poetry, Darwish often alluded to Andalus, a region in the southern parts of Spain and Portugal where Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted for centuries during medieval times. Classical Arab poets wrote of Andalus as a symbol of lost Paradise, and Darwish's contemporary poets often used Andalus as a metaphor for Palestine—another lost paradise of the past. "That's not my view," Darwish said when asked about the meaning of Andalus in his own poetry. "I have always said: Andalus may return." Palestine was and could be again "a meeting place of all strangers in the project of constructing human culture."[6]

This essay will explore the evolving ways in which Darwish's poetry sought to metaphorically return to Andalus, or to create a vision for Palestinian-Israeli coexistence in Palestine. The first section provides context by exploring Darwish's formative years. It will discuss the Palestinian literary tradition and the environment he was born into, as well as the personal influences on his writing. The section will focus on how his early immersion in Hebrew literature and his close relationships with Jewish Israelis allowed him to empathize with their own story of exile. The second section will analyze the portrayals—both empathic and critical—of Israeli characters in his poems. The third section shows how his later poetry evolved from a criticism of the conflict to a narrative that enabled both peoples to 'call Palestine home. This essay argues that Darwish's poetry was, in part, a quest to create a story of a Palestinian Andalus where both Jews and Arabs could peacefully, if not perfectly, coexist. It draws directly upon Darwish's poetry, previous scholarly discourses on his writings and life, news articles, and interviews with the poet. It must be noted that any analysis of his poems is based entirely on translation from the Arabic. Although multiple translations of his poetry have been consulted to ensure a well-rounded sense of his works, some of the meaning and power has inevitably been lost in translation.

Darwish in Context

Mahmoud Darwish was born on March 13, 1942 in the Palestinian village of Al-Birwa in Galilee. During the 1948 Palestine War, his family fled to Lebanon only to secretly return the next year. They were, too late, however, to be included in the Israeli census of Arabs, and were thus denied Israeli citizenship. The Darwish family also found that their village had been razed and repopulated with Israeli immigrants.[7, 8] Living as a refugee in his own homeland had a profound effect on Darwish, as it did on hundreds of thousands of other displaced Palestinians, leaving a "wound" he would never forget.[9]

Darwish's pain drove him early on into both poetic and political action. At nineteen, he published his first collection of poems, *Wingless Birds*, which voiced the anguish and anger of exile. He also became

Mahmoud Darwish reciting his poetry. Mahmoud Darwish Foundation.

involved in the Israeli Communist party Rakah, one of the few political parties that allowed Arab membership, and became the editor of its newspaper.[10]

Darwish was born into a literary tradition in which poetry and politics were not exclusive. Arab cultures have a long tradition of the "poet-warrior," dating to classical times when some of the most famous poets were or sought to be tribe rulers.[11] Arab-Palestinian poets of the generation before Darwish, including one of Darwish's inspirations Abdulrahmin Mahmoud, had vigorously protested British colonial oppression through their work and political activism.[12] Yet intellectuals of Darwish's generation, most notably the novelist Emile Habibe, also sought to work alongside Israeli activists.[13] Thus, Darwish was brought up in an environment that empowered poets to strive for both justice and peace.

Darwish's upbringing also made him sensitive to Jewish culture, language, and to the plight of Jews as exiles through history. He came of age amidst a "new wave" of Palestinian poets for whom Hebrew was a second language, and who had been schooled in Hebrew literature, history, and theology. Furthermore, after 1948, a mutual trade embargo existed between Israel and Arab nations, and the Israeli government imposed a two-decade ban on Arab-owned presses and independent Arab publications. As a result, for Palestinians growing up in Israel during this period, Hebrew became, by necessity, their means of engaging with the outside world of poetry and literature.[14] Darwish was first exposed to many of his favorite poets through their Hebrew translations.

Darwish was drawn to the Hebrew biblical narrative and its symbols and frequently incorporated them into his work. In the Jewish narrative of exile, he saw a parallel with the Palestinian struggle; he recognized that Jews and Arabs were both history's victims of sorts, and were each merely trying to claim a physical and historical space for themselves. As he reflected in an interview with Israeli poet and critic Helit Yushurun, "Our tragedy is that we are all witnesses to a historical turning point, a new order in history and geography. That's why everyone is making claims."[15] Through recognizing a mutual struggle, he "learned forgiveness. Because in the end we are all exiles. The occupier and myself — both of us suffer from exile. He is an exile in me and I am the victim of his exile. All of us on this beautiful planet Earth, we are all neighbors, we are all exiles, we are all walking in the same human fate, and what unites us is the need to tell the story of this exile."[16] He also felt that Jewish culture was an integral part of his identity. As he saw it, "I am a son of all the cultures that have passed through the land—the Greek, the Roman, the Persian, the Jewish, the Ottoman. A presence that exists at the very core of my language."[17]

This does not mean that Darwish refrained from competing with Israeli writers to express greater suffering or love for Palestine.[18] But this competition was not rooted in disrespect or disregard for Jewish history; rather, he felt that "because of… political tension—which says that if Israel is here the Palestinians must be absent, and that if the Palestinians are here then Israel must be absent—we haven't accepted the fact that we are the products of similar conditions and have competed with each other over who is the greater victim."[19] He empathized with Jewish immigrants coming to Israel even as he felt that some of them wanted to erase his identity.

Darwish's empathy for Israeli Jews also stemmed from his personal relations with them. "I will continue to humanize even the enemy," he stated in an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*. "The first teacher who taught me Hebrew was a Jew. The first love affair in my life was with a Jewish girl. The first judge who sent me to prison was a Jewish woman. So from the beginning, I didn't see Jews as devils or angels but as human beings."[20]

Human Scale: Writing Israeli Characters

Reflecting his empathy for the Jewish exile, Darwish's poems portrayed sympathetic—if flawed—Israeli characters. In one of his more famous poems, "A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies," Mahmoud, a stand-in for the poet, converses with an Israeli soldier. On one hand, the soldier is a sympathetic character who "dreams of white lilies / an olive branch, / her breasts in evening blossom." Like any romantic man might, he

dreams about his mother, lovers, and—as symbolized by the olive branch—of peace. Yet the portrayal is also charged with criticism. The white lilies are nonnative to Palestine, just like the soldier. As the poem develops, it becomes clear that this character loves Palestine in a conceptual way, and that his heart is as removed from it as the white lilies on his mind:

Homeland for him, he tells me, is to drink my mother's coffee,

to return at nightfall.

I asked him: and the land?

I don't know it, he said.

I don't feel it in my flesh and blood,

as they say in the poems.

Suddenly I saw it

as one sees a grocery store, a street, newspapers.

I asked him, do you love it?

My love is a picnic, he said,

a glass of wine, a love affair.

—Would you die for it?

—No!

All my attachment to the land is no more than a story or a fiery speech!

They taught me to love it, but I never felt it in my heart.

I never knew its roots and branches, or the scent of its grass.

- And what about its love? Did it burn like suns and desire?

He looked straight at me and said: I love it with my gun.[21]

The poem implies that everything the soldier does *not* feel for the land is what burns in the heart of the poem's character Mahmoud (both the character and the poet himself). Thus, the reader is meant to both relate to the soldier's simple, almost childish conception of Palestine—picnics and his mother's coffee—and to feel exasperation that his feelings do not compare to the profound love experienced by the fictional and real Mahmoud. Darwish also portrays the soldier's complex feelings towards killing:

How many did you kill?

—It's impossible to tell. I only got one medal.

Pained, I asked him to tell me about one of the dead.

He shifted in his seat, fiddled with the folded newspaper,

then said, as if breaking into song:

He collapsed like a tent on stones, embracing shattered planets.

His high forehead was crowned with blood. His chest was empty of medals.

He was not a well-trained fighter, but seemed instead to be a peasant, a

worker or a peddler.

Like a tent he collapsed and died, his arms stretched out like dry creek-beds.

When I searched his pockets for a name, I found two photographs, one of his

wife, the other of his daughter.

Did you feel sad? I asked.

Cutting me off, he said, Mahmoud, my friend,

sadness is a white bird that does not come near a battlefield.

Soldiers commit a sin when they feel sad.

I was there like a machine spitting hellfire and death,

turning space into a black bird.[22]

The soldier then goes on to describe his first love and faraway cities. By the end, the audience finds the soldier both sympathetic and repulsive. He seems to have no choice but to block sadness from his mind while killing. He also shows discomfort when Mahmoud asks him to describe the murder, and remembers tender details about his victim, including the photographs of his wife and daughter in his pockets. Yet the soldier's capacity for empathy only goes only so far; when asked to quantify the

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death he has caused, he thinks in terms of medals. If the soldier is a metaphor for Israel, Darwish is challenging Israel's unequivocal claim to the Holy Land by questioning the nature of their love for it, and by calling out the brutalities committed in their effort to secure it. Yet he brings the conflict down to the scale of a friendly conversation, showing that the greater Palestinian-Israeli conflict is comprised of individuals who simply want better lives for themselves and those they love. In this view, empathy between the two groups is difficult, but possible.

In addition to friendship across lines, Darwish also looks at the conflict from the perspective of romantic love. Rita, a pseudonym for a past Israeli lover of his, recurs frequently in his poetry. Poems such as "Rita and the Rifle" and "Rita's Winter," echo his sentiment that Jews and Arabs in Palestine are both victims of history and of a vicious cycle of exile, and that the two groups might coexist without these negative forces. In "Rita and the Rifle," for example, Mahmoud mourns a touching and passionate romance brought to an end by "the rifle," which symbolizes the conflict between the lovers' peoples.[23] "Rita's Winter," meanwhile, is a heartbreaking dialogue that takes places between Rita and Mahmoud shortly before she leaves him. Early in the poem, Rita expresses that the love between them is something deeper and more powerful than the forces of conflict that divide their respective sides. Rita says:

And yours are the stags, if you want, the stags and the plains

and yours are the songs, if you want, the songs and the astonishment

I was born to love you

a mare who makes a forest dance, and carves your unknown in corals,

I was born a woman to her man,

…

I was born to love you,

I left my mother in the ancient psalms cursing your people and the world

I found the city guards feeding your love to the fire

And I was born to love you.[24]

Rita essentially declares that she was born to love him before even her people. She is willing to abandon her mother and her mother's hatred for Palestinians,

The tomb of Mahmoud Darwish in Ramallah, Palestine. Wikimedia Commons 2011.

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and to call the land ("the stags and the plains") his if only they can be together. But she later despairs:

There is no land for two bodies in one, no exile for exile

in these small rooms, and exit is entry:

We sing between two chasms in vain…we should depart and clarify the path

yet I can't and you can't

…

Take me to a faraway land

Take me to the faraway land, Rita sobbed, this winter is long…

> **And she broke the ceramic of the day against the iron window-pain**
>
> **…**
>
> **then she went barefoot to the unknown, and departure reached me.**

In this poem, the two lovers' hearts have the capacity for coexistence. But they are fighting against historical and political forces that drive their people apart. Here, Darwish once again puts the tragedy of Israeli-Palestinian tensions on a human scale and depicts it through the interactions of two complex and highly relatable characters.

A Return to Andalus: Envisioning Coexistence

Given his empathetic portrayals of both Israelis and Palestinians, what future did Darwish envision for them? How could he, as a poet, create a narrative they could both share? The members of the Jewish diaspora migrating to Israel based their claim to the land on the concept of Zionism, which declared the land a homeland for ethnic Jews and thus "was instrumental in positioning Palestinians as indisputable Others."[25]

As a mature poet, Darwish decided to challenge the Zionist story using language as divine as the Bible's. In a poetics essay published in 1999, Darwish voices his realization that "the Other [Israel] has a Creation narrative that has become one of the sources of knowledge for humankind: the Bible. Given this, how could we have written a less mythic narrative?" In this same essay, Darwish declared a mission to write a narrative for Palestinians through his later poetry. But Darwish did not want to define being Palestinian in an ethnic or other inherently exclusive manner—rather, he discussed it in terms of a mixture of different peoples and cultures:

"I am on a quest for my identity according to the laws of crossbreeding, of the shock and cohabitation of all identities. I want this hymn to take root in the open space of history. I don't know where this quest will lead me, but I know that its origin is the multiplicity of cultural origins. In such a project, poetry comes up against cultural racism and rejects any culture based on purity of blood. Aren't we the children of a region that from time immemorial has been the theatre of interactions, both positive and negative?"[26]

Poems from his later collections, especially *Ara Ma Urid* (I See What I Wish To See, 1990) and *Ahada-'ashara Kawkaban* (Eleven Planets, 1992), contain many epic-style poems that incorporate Christian, Jewish, and Muslim parables with references to Canaan and Andalus.[27]

Taking pride in every Palestinian being a "son of all the

cultures that have passed through the land," Darwish believed that Palestinians could again welcome Jews, this time as the state of Israel, into their homeland.[28] Several of these poems address "strangers" who are cautiously welcomed into the land of the speaker. In *A Canaanite Stone at the Dead Sea*, the speaker states:

Stranger, hang your weapons in our palm tree
and let me plant my wheat in Canaan's sacred soul.
Take wine from my jars.
Take a page from the book of my gods.
Take a portion of my meal,
take the gazelle from the traps of our shepherd's songs.
Take the Canaanite woman's prayers
at the feast of her grapes.
Take our methods of irrigation, take our architecture.
Lay a single brick down and build up a tower of doves
Go ahead, be one of us, if that's what you want.
Be a neighbor to our wheat fields.
Stranger, take the stars of our alphabet from us
And together we'll write heaven's message
to man's fear of nature and man's fear of
mankind itself.
Leave Jericho under her palm tree
but don't steal my dream, don't steal
the milk of my woman's breast
or the ant food dropped in the
crack's in the marble![29]

This unnamed narrator is willing to accept the "stranger" into his land so long as this stranger does not destroy or steal what its natives have. Note however, the native is welcoming the stranger into his land and his people's ways. Darwish still sees Palestinians as having the primary right to the land, since they already had an established presence in Palestine and are the ones engaged in welcoming. Nevertheless, despite Darwish's inevitable and recurring sense of Palestinians having a "truer attachment to the land," in this poem the narrator presents the possibility of a peaceful Andalus.

Conclusion

Throughout his life, Mahmoud Darwish believed that Israelis and Palestinians could peacefully coexist. His education and his personal relations with Jewish Israelis taught him to empathize with the Jewish history of exile, and to relate to their stories despite tensions between them and "his" Arab-Palestinian people. He was positive that there could be mutual empathy between the two sides. He publically expressed confidence in a peaceful futurem and a return to the metaphorical Andalus of his poetry.

In his writing, Darwish actively worked to pave the road to this Andalus. His earlier poetry, such as "A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies" and poems about his ex-lover Rita depict Israelis with empathy and even tenderness. Through descriptions of everyday encounters between the people on both sides, he showed on a human scale how both Israelis and Palestinians were affected by the conflict.

A manuscript page of the Qur'an written in Al-Andalus in the twelfth century. Wikimedia Commons

Later in life, he sought to "create a genesis" for Palestinians that also included a place for Israelis. Fellow poet Zakaria Mohammed described his later works as "a conversation between him and the Israelis to find a spot where they can reconcile."[30] Darwish's epic poems incorporating Christian, Muslim, and Jewish stories and references to Andalus challenge the monopoly of any one culture on the land. They also told stories of people cautiously welcoming "strangers" onto their land in exchange for respect.

Despite Darwish's inclusive vision, Israel's reception to Darwish has been reluctant at best. He was jailed five times during his lifetime for the contents of his poetry. When he joined the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1973, he was banned from Israel, and was only allowed to return in 1996. He was banned again during the al-Aqsa uprising, and was not even allowed to visit his mother when she was hospitalized with stomach cancer.[31, 32]

However, Israel is slowly becoming more open to his poetry. In 2000, Education Minister Yossi Sarid proposed that five of his poems would be an optional part of the multicultural curriculum. There was an uproar, but the announcement signaled that the political and cultural climate had reached a stage where the idea could be considered. Today, several volumes of his poetry been translated into Hebrew, and newspapers are increasingly asking for translations of his works.

Furthermore, Darwish did live to witness some peace-making between Israel and Palestine. In fact, he wrote the Algiers Declaration, the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Statehood in which the PLO accepted coexistence with Israel through a two-state solution.[34] Of course, it has been hard for Israelis to listen to Darwish's Palestinian voice when it carries the possibility of challenging their right to the land they have fought so hard to inhabit. In spite of this, however, it seems the younger generation in Israel is finally reaching out and responding to those poems of Darwish that speak to them, to the Palestinian perspective, and to the possibility of a modern Andalus. ✦

Endnotes

1 Khaled Mattawa, Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet's Art and His Nation (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 15, 16.

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3 Mattawa, Mahmoud Darwish, 7-13.

4 Ibid., 53.

5 Reuters and Zvi Bar'el, "Palestinian Poet Mahmoud Darwish Dies at 67,"Israel News Haaretz, last Modified August 10th, 2008, http://www.haaretz.com/palestinian-poet-mahmoud-darwish-dies-at-67-1.251462

6 Mahmoud Darwish, interview by Helit Yushurun,"Exile is So Strong Within Me, I May Bring It to the Land," Journal of Palestine Studies 42 (2012): 46, accessed December 12, 2016.

7 Maya Jaggi, "Poet of the Arab World," The Guardian, last modified June 7th, 2002, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jun/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview19

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9 Jaggi, "Poet of the Arab World."

10 Ibid.

11 Mattawa, Mahmoud Darwish, 24.

12 Ibid., 23

13 Ibid., 21.

14 Ibid., 27.

15 Mahmoud Darwish, interview by Helit Yushurun,"Exile is So Strong Within Me, I May Bring It to the Land," Journal of Palestine Studies 42 (2012): 46, accessed December 12, 2016, http://www.palestine-studies.org/jps/fulltext/162552

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Jaggi, Poet of the Arab World.

19 Mahmoud Darwish, interview by Helit Yushurun,"Exile is So Strong Within Me."

20 Jaggi, Poet of the Arab World.

21 Darwish, Mahmoud, "A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies," trans. Denys Johnson-Davies. White Rose eTheses Online. Accessed December 12, 2016 http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/7703/2/Appendix1%20The%20poems%20and%20their%20translations.pdf

22 Ibid.

23 Khaled Mattawa, Mahmoud Darwish, 55.

24 Mahmoud Darwish, If I Were Another, trans. Fady Joudah (New York: Farray, Straus and Giroux Books, 2009), 91-92.

25 Mattawa, Mahmoud Darwish, 61.

26 Mahmoud Darwish et al., "I Discovered That the Earth Was Fragile and the Sea Light," boundary 2 26, no. 1 (1999): 83, accessed December 12, 2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/303855?seq=1#fndtn-page_scan_tab_contents

27 Collected in Mahmoud Darwish, The Adam of Two Edens: Selected Poems (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 77-76.

28 Darwish, interview by Helit Yushurun,

29 Darwish, The Adam of Two Edens, 77-76.

30 Jaggi, "Poet of the Arab World."

31 Ibid.

32 Mattawa, Mahmoud Darwish, 50.

33 Jaggi, "Poet of the Arab World."

34 Ibid.