



RESEARCH PAPER

A River Dies of Thirst: Darwish's Gloomy Prognosis of Dispossessed, Displaced, and Trauma-afflicted Exiled Palestinians

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ABSTRACT

The paper applies the theory of transnationalism to Mahmoud Darwish's *A River Dies of Thirst*, exploring how his poetry reflects the traumatizing experiences of Palestinians, their perpetual displacement, and their lost identity. As a poet Darwish personally underwent psychological, physical, and emotional suffering in exile when Zionists imposed forced expulsion. His poetry is teemed with Palestinians' heart-wrenching narratives of the dispossession of their belongings and the irreparable loss of their loved ones. A translation approach analyzes Darwish's depiction of exile, fragmented identity, and territorial loss, focusing on how contemporary geopolitics influences these experiences. The Study finds that Darwish's poetry powerfully expresses the Palestinian reality of landlessness, forced diaspora, and the diminishing of their homeland, creating a profound sense of loss and dislocation.

KEYWORDS

Deracination, Diaspora, Dispossession, Expatriation, Landlessness

Introduction

Mahmoud Darwish is a Palestine-born phenomenal poet who uses his poetic abilities to voice millions of diasporic and fragmented souls: uprooted from their ancestral homeland. His poetry is fraught with agonizing resonance and traumatic affliction of the poet's personal life which he spent as an exile in Beirut and Paris; eye-witnessing his country's cartographic reduction and ethnic cleansing of his people by Zionists, and so "it seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism, which has made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely" (Said, 2000, p. 130). He is thus truly an unacknowledged national poet of a diasporic nation: forcedly barred from developing any affiliations with nationalistic sentiments.

A River Dies of Thirst: Journals, is a translation of his Arabic book, *The Trace of the Butterfly*, written eight months before his death. His last book aptly synthesizes the poet's lifelong ventures into the realm of poetry and presents before his readers the voice of an observant who has been sipping from the cup of Palestinian's blood-stained history; repressing all apocalypses as traumas, the traumas that he now eventually voices out to give vent to incessant pain he bore into his heart since decades, 'Touched by death, the hand of the master liberates the mass of material that it previously shaped', quoted in *The Guardian* by Fady Joudah (2009, p. 4). With his poems, prose poetry, and journals he replicates Palestinians' past euphoria, annihilated present and uncertain future of robbed identities and exiled lands, and readers are left wandering terra nullius of conflicting

emotions. It is part of the poet's dire aspiration to recreate, though in imagination, the essence of what is lost, what is robbed. If it were not for the longing for a lost paradise/ there would be no poetry/ nor memory/ and eternity would be no consolation (Darwish, 2009, p. 110).

Literature Review

Many acclaimed writers have addressed the transnational experiences of displaced, and marginalized communities, detailing their struggles with re-orienting themselves and reshaping their identity. Both Edward Said (2000) and Homi Bhabha (1994) made seminal contributions to literary studies, emphasizing how the narratives of the displaced, contribute to the formation of hybrid identity, and how their memories of their homeland become the symbolic space of yearning and loss. Said's work on the Palestinian experience, particularly in *Reflections on Exile*, argues that exile leads to a complex negotiation between place and identity. These themes are prominently addressed in Darwish's poems who became the voice for the Palestinians scattered across the globe. Barahmeh (2019, p. 204) argues that Darwish's poetry transcends national boundaries, embodying a form of transnationalism where the homeland is remembered and reconstructed through language. The exiles suffer at multiple levels. With snatched territories, they are challenged to find for them the space for living. Moreover, assimilation into the host country's culture is an uphill task. They naturally suffer marginalization at cultural, religious, political, and educational levels. Apart from these physical challenges the exiles also go through immense psychological pressures for losing their loved ones. The trauma of having watched spectacles of mass murders, parents, siblings, friends, and relatives burning alive, doesn't spare them ever.

Palestinians exist in a liminal space – they are neither fully accepted in their host countries nor able to return to their homeland. Darwish's work reflects this dichotomy, where Palestinians oscillate between longing for a past: they cannot reclaim and negotiating an unstable present. *A River Dies of Thirst* is a poignant example of transnational literature that captures the complexities of identity and belonging in the context of displacement and exile. Darwish's poetry and journals illustrate the impact of geopolitical conflicts on personal and collective identities. His work is a testament to the resilience of the Palestinian spirit and the ongoing struggle for recognition and belonging in a world that marginalizes and silences their voices. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, combined with Edward Said's perspectives on exile and identity will also serve as valuable contributions to this research. Before presenting the findings on Darwish's poetry, it is essential to briefly address Palestine's history and the underlying causes of the widespread trauma experienced by its people.

Palestine is a country where springs are all colored red; the birds only sing melancholic songs; and her olive trees die a barren death. The place, where not only humans are massacred, but nature is trampled with equal indifference. Many of the Palestinian writers have been writing in harmony with tragic and traumatic experiences they had during events that took place in 1948: a reason why their literature is fraught with transnational themes of displacement, exile and identity. Palestinians are the oldest civilization; it's a country where Muslims, Jews, and Christians have been from centuries coexisting with absolute peace. The problem started when Jews voiced their religious segregation to support the apartheid system. Exiles, as they were, contrived coercive displacement of millions of Palestinians from their ancestral land, demolished their houses and massacred them for material reservoirs. It was this tragedy, in Arabic called Nakba that made Zionists efface and destroy 419 villages of the natives between the years 1947 to 1949. The illegal settlers made the oldest civilization nameless and landless and also engineered the war of tactics through mass media, spreading the myths around the globe

and people like Ben-Zion Dinur, Israeli education minister, proclaiming, "In our country there is room only for the Jews. We shall say to the Arabs: Get out! If they don't agree, if they resist, we shall drive them out by force" quoted in an article at "Queers against Apartheid." The current Israel war with Palestine is a synonymous intentional struggle to burn the people, houses, hospitals, mosques, and cities, hence Palestine is being effaced from the world map.

Material and Methods

Transnationalism offers a lens to understand how individuals and communities maintain multiple ties across national boundaries, navigating identities and cultures simultaneously. With the increasing spread of globalized communities, the theory of transnationalism surfaced in the late 20th century to explain how individuals, especially migrants, steer life across multiple nations, often maintaining connections with their home countries while integrating into new societies. Unlike traditional notions of migration, which emphasize assimilation into a host country, transnationalism highlights how people live across borders, creating hybrid identities, cultures, and economic relationships that span nations. This theory emerged in response to the growing mobility of people, ideas, and capital, facilitated by advancements in communication technologies and transportation. Transnationalism also reflects the complexities of belonging in a globalized world, where individuals may feel connected to more than one country or culture, yet may not fully belong to any particular nation. The Palestinian experience, as depicted by Darwish, is one marked by an absence of both physical and symbolic belongings.

This ethnic cleansing and genocide of guiltless Muslims inflicted on their existence wounds which are both mental and physical, a wound that Freud describes as trauma. Cathy Caruth explores in "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History" that literature of an age doesn't only explore the traumatic experiences of the sufferers but it wells for more depth. It makes the readers see how the development of such trauma takes place, which grows over time, cancerous.

Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language (Caruth, 1996, p.17).

Darwish's poetry follows a similar pattern: it reveals the traumas. It recounts the untold stories of their origins, showing how they take hold with a torturous grip, spreading through an individual's body and mind. In his poems, prose poetry, and journals, he does more than depict the catastrophes; he captures the suppressed growth of these painful traumas, which profoundly affect the bodies, minds, and spirits of those who suffer.

Results and Discussion

In Palestine, Zionists have created a distinct kind of barter system where identities, possessions, lands, family, happiness, and life are exchanged with anonymity, dispossession, landlessness, loneliness, traumas, and death. Darwish presents through the poem, 'The Girl/The Scream' a spectacle of the acute misery of the non-existent nation. It paints the picture of a little girl, relishing in the lap of Mother Nature on the sea shore who has a whole family and a house of two windows and a door, to call her own. This perfect picture of happiness is suddenly blood-tainted when war shells slay many passersby down but the girl is rescued by a miracle and holding her father's hands, she tries rushing back

to the heaven of her safety i.e. her home for she is deeply traumatized by the feeling of being contaminated after experiencing a bombing. But the hand she is holding doesn't move for he has already sacrificed his life for hers, and all that remains of him in the world is his shadow cast against the sunset. Her miraculously saved life was paid for with the life of her father. She screams over that undeserved, treacherous murder but her screams don't echo for there is needed silence for the echo to be heard and who can imagine silence when the atmosphere by the seashore is replete with a million cries? Even the death of her father fails to put an end to the miserable life of that little girl and her screams are heard echoing through the blasted spaces.

She calls out: 'Father Father! Let's go home, the sea is not for people like us!'

Her father doesn't answer...

Her voice carries her higher and further than

the seashore. She screams at night over the land

The echo has no echo

So, she becomes the endless scream in the breaking news (Darwish, 2009, p. 3).

This scream is, 'the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically re-leased through the wound (Caruth, 1996, p. 15). Every flower, every animal, and every man, anything that belongs to Palestinians' part of the world is butchered and trampled, at the end they have no right to choose for themselves not even between life or death. No home guarantees life: for death defeats it in a violent combat. Life dies a perpetual death and so do peace and hope. As mentioned in the poem, the same little girl lives to this consciousness that the world of seas and water blues is no longer a luxury to be called theirs; nor do they have any escape from impending death which may hunt them anywhere.

These sudden assaults by death, form constant states of paranoia in Palestinians' minds and such catastrophes leave indelible impacts and gain perpetual existence by becoming repressed and unvoiced traumas. To be traumatized is simply like being possessed by an image, says Caruth, and Darwish is possessed by this image of homes on fire: the trauma he acquired since childhood when his people died for no fault.

The image of a house, that bears a microcosmic feeling for an individual, is used as a recurring symbol in Darwish's poetry. In a journal entry, "The House as Casualty" he offers a poetic reflection on the natives' state of homelessness in exile, despite their homes still existing in the land from which they were uprooted – a condition to which modern humanity, and especially Muslims, seem fated. The leftover houses they have at their native place, when bombed by air strikes, turn into, "A mass grave of raw materials.' A place where, 'every object there is being in pain - a memory of fingers, of a smell, an image. The houses are destroyed just like their inhabitants. The memory of objects is killed: stone, wood, glass, iron, and cement are scattered in broken fragments like living beings'" (Darwish, 2009, p. 12). This is how, in transnational poetry, we have the reality of the things reverted. The house: an emblem of security and peace becomes an epitome of chaos, flux, and dilapidation. Those who survive carry the traumatic memories of their erased generations, while those who die experience a double death, having never truly lived in their lifetime. It is the yearning for life against the flux that Darwish expresses in his poem

'If Only I Were a Stone,' a yearning for an ideal state where death and effacement can be resisted.

If only I were a stone - I said - Oh if only I were

some stone so that water would burnish me

green, yellow - I would be placed in a room

like a sculpture, or exercises in sculpture (Darwish, 2009, p. 6).

It's neither in the microcosmic shelter of homes that the traumatic and exiled can find peace; nor in the patches of land: forcibly ascribed as their boundaries. Nothing provides them with security, a sense of belonging, and meaning in life. When the creatures of flesh and blood are cursed to dilapidation and personified into nothingness; the yearning to become a stone can be a way to deceive death. These stones, unlike humans, can resist effacement. Humans can live as stones for stones might not pose any threat to the despotic Zionists.

Looming shadows of death hinder Palestinians from cultivating nationalistic sentiments toward the patches of land they possess after its cartographic tradition by Israeli plunderers. Living in conditions of extirpated democracy, violation of boundaries, and one's rights to one's life, peace of mind becomes an implausible reality. Their freedom is mocked, when they are slain in the mornings, and when they sleep at night, "...death takes them away from their drowsiness into a sleep without dreams" (Darwish, 2009, p. 4). Denied of their rights to live, they are lingering at the borders of life and death: a place where the "call to prayer rises to accompany the indistinguishable funerals" (Darwish, 2009, p. 4) and fathers, with their own hands, bury their sons, and grandsons in the mass graves. The killed has no identity and is further hurled into nothingness when his body is buried into the indistinguishable heap. When alive: lived an anonymous life; when dead: died an anonymous death.

Darwish refers to the Israelites as "blood-sucking mosquitoes" (p. 14), waiting for darkness to fall so they can swoop down in their war jets, silencing all screams and cries forever. No measures of defense can help Palestinians escape their impending death, as they are tracked by their foes using satellites and spying equipment, causing their inevitable detection and killing. To evade this unjust killing the poet suggests in "The Mosquito" that "There's only one way you can bargain with it to make a truce: by changing your blood type" (p. 14). Only then, they can breathe freedom: a luxury denied to natives for the last 80 years. In several other poems, Darwish also addresses the suffering of Muslims worldwide, whose massacres, like those of the Palestinians, go unheard and unnoticed by the deceptive international organizations that profess to safeguard peace and uphold the pillars of justice in the world. Taking us to the past, the poet makes the readers meet the most famous historical figure of Nero, the last Roman emperor, who is notorious for his authoritarian rule. By juxtaposing his tyranny with the oppression spread to the Muslim-populated parts of the world, the poet brings into the limelight, that the extent of inhumanity, cruelty, and animalism directed toward Muslims, cannot be traced in any book of history. He directs his questions toward readers to imagine and introspect,

What's going on in Nero's mind as he watches Lebanon burn?

And what's going on in Nero's mind as he watches Iraq burn?

And what goes on in Nero's mind as he watches Palestine burn?

And what goes on in Nero's mind as he watches the world burn? (Darwish, 2009, p. 9)

It is a sweeping act of ethnic cleansing against Muslims, and Darwish seeks to raise awareness among his readers about this grim reality. In Palestine, 'Nothing proves that I exist when I think, as Descartes says (p.7). In Iraq, 'victims are fragments on roads and in words. Their names are tufts of letters disfigured like their bodies' (Darwish, 2009, p. 98); in Lebanon, 'doves in the skies...playing with the smoke which rises from the nothingness' (Darwish, 2009, p. 11). In today's age, we see Syria, Afghanistan, and Kashmir, the countries where racial extermination, propped by the Global agenda of Muslims' extermination is at full work. Muslims as a race are perpetually destined for violence and landlessness. Hence humanity in totality is cursed with bloodshed, violence, and chaos. No rescue can be made until the heavens shower mercy and general forgiveness, "the right of return to paradise is encompassed by nothingness and divine mysteries. The only smooth road is the road to the abyss, until further notice . . . until the issuing of a divine pardon" (Darwish, 2009, p. 109).

Having outlined the poet's traumatic memories and reflections on the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Muslims, attention now shifts to Darwish's poems that explore themes of exile and the deep longing for things imbued with the essence of home. These works are marked by a profound despair, driven by the alienation and loss of familiar comforts in the context of forced migration. Edward Said in his essay "Reflections on Exile" demarcates the painful and afflicting experience of the people who undergo conditions of exile. It is 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,' (p. 131) and that 'true exile is a condition of terminal loss,' (p. 131). It is this feeling of 'terminal loss' that Darwish underscores in his poem *A River Dies of Thirst*. The poet experienced this rift between him and the land when Israeli military troops drove him and his family away from the place, they were rooted in. The river referred to in this poem is probably the river Jordan, explored by Christopher Costigan in 1835 along with the Dead Sea. The river has been the source of life, fertility, and food for millions of Palestinians. It brought dates to the villagers living by its side, infused trees with life with its waters, and hence it sang gongs of mirth with its rhythmic waves. It bore a significant place in the lives of Palestinians whose living and survival were associated with its waters. But this blissful state and euphoria couldn't last long as Israel, bent on dispossessing the natives, disallows them of even their water rights. They began operating pumping stations at the tributary sources of its river, leaving the river gradually drying up, "...they kidnapped its mother/ so it ran short of water/ and died, slowly, of thirst" (Darwish, 2009, p. 36). The native residents are left with a river thirsty for water—a river they can no longer relate to, one that accentuates their suffering from dispossession, disassociation, and displacement in exile. During wars, such transformations take place that human connections and identities can no longer be asserted. It evokes feelings of anguish and acute distress, about dispossession extending beyond the usurpation of land to include the heinous plundering of natural resources. This is part of their sinister designs to threaten a nation they perceive as dangerous. The same situation is faced in our parts of the world where Hindustan has threatened our rivers, holding back the water flow illegally, leaving only a little water in their veins. The rivers still exist but can no longer be part of those memories associated with life, fertility, and most importantly, the feel of Mother Nature.

In addition to the river Jordan, which environmentalists predicted would dry up by 2011, Darwish also alludes to the ongoing issue of water scarcity that Palestinians are forced to endure under Israeli control. They, with their illegal settlements at the part of West Bank, which has 80 percent of water aquifers, shut off the valves in summer whenever the water supply runs low. Hence plunderers may have gallons to swim in; the owners at

the village site hardly possess enough water to quench their thirst. The people who survive death from bombs, shells, and guns, are killed with thirst and starvation. It is incredible, how once happily living civilization is reconfigured by Zionists as the people of the stone age.

Another act of pillage against Mother Nature is the enemy's destruction and uprooting of olive trees, which serve as a lifeline for millions of Palestinians, representing their assets and cherished possessions. The Olive tree by its very color, as Darwish (2009) mentions in his Journal, "is neither green nor silver. She is the color of peace if peace needs a color to distinguish it" (Darwish, 2009, p. 107). She has a history of being revered even when Romans invaded, they didn't harm her chastity but the Israeli soldiers molested her, "surround her with bulldozers and uproot her. They crush our grandmother so that now her branches are in the earth and her roots in the air" (p. 107). The trees erected by heavens to guard natives, vowing them food and shelter, and the river running through their terrain, playing the music of life: are the images cherished, and lamented by all diasporas who, out of their human limitation, cannot resurrect this imagination which is torn apart by apartheid maniacs. According to an estimation, more than eleven thousand trees were ground, to starve the natives of both food and deprive them of all of the belongings that formed a crucial part of their definition as a Palestinian nation.

After robbing the natives of their valuable belongings and generating a sense of exile by grotesquely disfiguring their homeland, they next plan for their expulsion while claiming land rights that never belonged to them. In "The Exile Finds its Way" the poet in the tone of pessimism poses questions to the self by saying, "The exile looks around to see which way to go/ and words-memories escape him/ In front is not in front of him/ behind is not behind (Darwish, 2009, p. 135)."

It is the liminal space between deterritorialization and reterritorialization, Deleuze's and Guattari's terms to explain the appropriation of lands by the imperial processes, that creates a real traumatic experience for the exile. It is the recognition of 'the tragic fate of homelessness in a necessarily heartless world' (Saeed, 2000, p. 136) that exile experiences the angst of existence. The sense of belonging, the sense of being rooted in sediment geographies, when threatened, leaves the expelled in limbo, a liminal space where he can neither afford to retain the memories of a deprived past nor can walk ahead, for the future lies hazed by uncertainties and incredulities. The bereaved and helpless exile staggers in a state,

which produces the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation, and community. At this extreme, the exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments. To live as if everything around you were temporary and perhaps trivial is to fall prey to petulant cynicism as well as to querulous lovelessness (Said, 2000, p. 136).

It is the condition of being wounded physically, mentally, and spiritually when a native faces expatriation without any breach of the law. The challenge is not mere rehabilitation but also acceptance among the new people. It is through this turmoil that refugees face hindrances in amalgamating with other communities for all their disgust of being sent to exile is inverted to their selves. When they step ahead the chains of the past don't let them move, but if they stay motionless, hung long in those spaces, neither moving back nor ahead, they might face self-annihilation.

This rift of being stuck between disassociation and association is also explored in a poem, "I Walked on My Heart", where the poet says, 'I have tired of identifying with things

when space has broken into pieces and I have tired of your question: "Where shall we go when there's no land there, and no sky" (Darwish, 2009, p. 39). Our identity is made up of many associations: our family, our culture, our people, our values, and our religion. The loss of identity hence means fragmentation of the self into plurality, and the identity assembled of these fragments is an image of a distorted self and distorted mind. This distortion hence is not easy to counter. At the moment of redefining the self, the displaced strive to familiarize themselves with the new sky and the new land but nothing is offered to them as substitute inhabitation: no land to form ties with, or to live at and no sky to shelter them: hence they are hurled into the spaces of liminality, a final destination of dispossessed, displaced and fragmented souls.

Accepting the fated destination poet is seen making a truce with his self-dilapidation, a truce that may not guarantee peace but puts a full stop to the tormenting unrest of aching existence. "Identity is what we bequeath, not what we inherit, what we invent, not what we remember. Identity is the distorted image in the mirror that we must break the minute we grow fond of it" (Darwish, 2009, p. 145). This discarding of identical affiliations and detachment from the self is crucial if one has to move forward. Hence the exile, refugees, and émigrés develop depersonalization as a last resort to come to terms with their distorted existence.

Conclusion

In "A River Dies of Thirst," Mahmoud Darwish poignantly captures the anguish and despair of the Palestinian experience, evoking themes of loss, displacement, and the enduring impact of trauma. His reflections on the thirst for justice and identity resonate deeply in the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As the violence continues, the sentiments expressed in Darwish's work—such as the pain of dispossession and the yearning for a homeland—remain profoundly relevant. The imagery of a river dying of thirst symbolizes not only the physical struggles for resources and survival but also the emotional and cultural drought faced by Palestinians as their history and identity are continually threatened.

The current conflict aggravates these feelings, as the cycle of violence leads to further destruction of communities and cultural ties, much like the disfigurement of the land that Darwish laments. As both sides grapple with the complexities of identity, memory, and loss, Darwish's poetry serves as a haunting reminder of the human cost of war and the urgent need for reconciliation and understanding in a region marked by deep-seated wounds.

Humanity now stands on the verge of collapse. The Jews, who once endured global anti-Semitism and the horrors of the Holocaust, suffering immense violence and loss, have turned against innocent Palestinians—displacing them from their lands, seizing their possessions, and erasing their generations. Mahmoud Darwish' through his book: *A River Dies of Thirst* registers his protest and resistance to the mythical constructs of lies; the enemies have been spreading for a long to the world. Through his verses, he paints the anguish of the tormented Palestinian souls, delving into his mind to uncover the buried traumas of violent memories. He offers a glimpse of his once-cherished past and shattered present, imprinting upon the people a lasting truth—that a transnational man is not truly a man, but a mere shadow of one, for so much within him dies. What remains is but the ghost of lost identities, stolen land, and plundered possessions.

We travel like everyone else, but we return to nothing. As if travel were a path of clouds. We buried our loved ones in the shade of clouds and between roots of trees. We

said to our wives: Give birth for hundreds of years, so that we may end this journey within an hour of a country within a meter of the impossible! We travel in the chariots of the Psalms, sleep in the tents of the prophets, and are born again in the language of Gypsies. We measure space with a hoopoe's beak, and sing so that distance may forget us. We cleanse the moonlight. Your road is long, so dream of seven women to bear this long journey on your shoulders. Shake the trunks of palm trees for them. You know the names, and which one will give birth to the Son of Galilee. Ours is a country of words: Talk. Talk. Let me rest my road against a stone. Ours is a country of words: Talk. Talk. Let me see an end to this journey (Darwish, 2013, p.11).

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