

# Identity and Alienation: A Study of Mahmoud Darwish's 'ID Card' and 'Passport'

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**Abstract**— *The aim of this paper is to understand the concept of identity in a specific perspective. The perspective is to understand a state that has been occupied, colonized and how it responds by language and poetry and resists occupation. The country is Palestine and the author is one of the greatest poets of Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish. Both the definitions and philosophical summaries have been provided to these two words and then they are used to understand two famous poems. The researcher has selected two poems of Darwish: "ID Card" and "Passport". ID Card" appeared in his collection Olive Leaves in 1964, when Darwish was 23 years old.*

**Keywords**— *Identity, alienation, resistance, Palestine, occupation, imperialism.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Alienation is a familiar theme in the poems of Mahmoud Darwish and this theme is defined as emotional isolation or detachment from others or as a way of thinking in exile. In the select poems of Mahmoud Darwish, the reader finds the speech, eloquence and the message of the poems reflect the continually alienated atmosphere of a person, his native people, his land, his neighbors. The situation in which how the people of the land experience isolation from their own land and identity is deeply portrayed through imagery and terse metaphors. The speech, narrative and the tone of the characters or the poet himself feel physically and psychologically separated from themselves. This paper is a study of Darwish's select poems and their relationship with the real world that they represent. By Identity, the researcher means personal traits, beliefs, and characteristics as Khalil Hasan Nofa defines it in his article "National Identity in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry":

Identity can be generally defined as a set of distinct personal and behavioral characteristics, attributes, beliefs, and desires that define an individual as a member of a certain group. That is, your identity can be closely related to your beliefs and values and how you may see and respond to the world, i.e., your ideology.

Moreover, identity can be glossed as the aspects or attributes of a person that form the basis of his / her dignity, honor, and pride. (66)

To put it differently, identity is one's feeling about one's self, character, goals, and origins. Carolyn Forché and Runir Akash noted in their introduction to *Unfortunately It Was Paradise* (2003), "as much as [Darwish] is the voice of the Palestinian Diaspora, he is the voice of the fragmented soul" (xvii). Forché and Akash commented also on his 20th volume, *Mural*, as they write:

Assimilating centuries of Arabic poetic forms and applying the chisel of modern sensibility to the richly veined ore of its literary past, Darwish subjected his art to the impress of exile and to his own demand that the work remain true to itself, independent of its critical or public reception. (xvii)

Mahmoud Darwish saw many different experiences in life regarding his identity as well as the country he belongs to also witnessed many effects of colonization which shook the Arab world, and Muslims in general. The colonization of Palestine by deception is perceived to be a tragedy from different angles and to a better understanding of Darwish's writing; it is useful to interpret his poems while remembering the socio-historical background of the author and the country he belongs to.

One of the main events in Palestinian history is the event of 'Nakbah,' which occurred in 1948 and at that time, Mahmoud Darwish was six years old; his family left Palestine to Lebanon. After that, they infiltrated back to their village to find it all ruins and destroyed. Najami and Ajjawi write in their article "Mahmoud Darwish, A Poet who attempted to be":

When the "Nakbah" of 1948 occurred, Darwish was six years old; he left Palestine with his family to Lebanon. Later they infiltrated back to his village to find it all ruins. Darwish underwent the experience of being exiled in his homeland. He witnessed the cruel actions of the authoritarian Jewish policy that kills, imprisons,

and destroys homes. He, himself, was subject to prison and was sentenced to house arrest several times in his life. He also witnessed the 1967 "Nakbah" and wrote five books of collected poems from within the Palestinian land. Those books granted him vast public recognition that the Palestinian poetry became associated with three Palestinian poets on top of whom was Mahmoud Darwish. (276)

#### Analysis of Poems and Critical Interpretation

The researcher has selected two poems of Darwish: "ID Card" and "Passport". "ID Card" appeared in his collection *Olive Leaves* in 1964, when Darwish was 23 years old. Darwish talks of identity in a direct way and even resists occupations straightly alluding or being afraid of censorship or administrative intimidation. Palestinians are by origin and by identity Arabs. This fact can be understood by looking at Arabs as being a group of different states and yet the people living therein sharing the same language, history, geography, values, and inheritance. Mahmoud Darwish in 1969 wrote his famous poem "Write Down, I am an Arab" and now named as "Identity Card." This poem within its charismatic eloquence became a manifesto for the resistance movement for years to follow. This poem is still read extensively and recited by many generations in Palestine and the Diaspora. The power of the poem originates from two perspectives, one of which is celebrating Arabism and the other is portraying the pain of being an Arab in contemporary era. Ahmed Masoud writes in "Remembering Mahmoud Darwish – How the Revolution was Written":

This poem comes as a turning point in the development of the Palestinian literature of resistance. It was the first poem to announce a challenge to and a refusal of the political environment that Palestinians had been living under since 1948. The poem talked not only about Arabism as a subject to be proud of, but also ended with a strong political message that encouraged people to resist. "But when I am made hungry, then I will eat the flesh of my oppressor, beware of hunger and anger" is a line which announces that Palestinian patience had run out. The poem was celebrated in Palestine but also across the entire Arab world, mainly for its celebration of Arabism before Palestinianism – a concept cherished by Arab nationalists who stressed on the primacy of pan-Arabism over regional nationalisms. The poem celebrates Arabic culture and puts it forward as being ideal regardless of the hardships Arabs face. (par.24)

Darwish portrays this Arabic identity in his poem "Identity Card":

Record!

I am an Arab

You have stolen the orchards of my ancestors

And the land which I cultivated

Along with my children

And you left nothing for us

Except for these rocks...

So will the State take them

As it has been said?!

Therefore!

Record on the top of the first page:

I do not hate people

Nor do I encroach

But if I become hungry

The usurper's flesh will be my food

Beware...

Beware...

Of my hunger

And my anger! (op.cit)

In this poem, famously known as 'ID Card', Darwish has espoused the symbolic identity of an ordinary 'Palestinian' who is a victim of 'Zionist oppression' being interrogated by an Israeli official. Salman Hilmy in his article published by Washington Report under the title "ID Card by Mahmoud Darwish— A Translation and Commentary" writes:

The verses empower the peaceful dispossessed Palestinian with an assertive identity and a confident voice that defy continuous humiliations at the hand of the occupier. Although the poet was fluent in Hebrew, he ignores the official's language by omitting his questions from the poem and replies only in Arabic to underscore his own and Palestine's cultural and national identity. The poem's power lies partially in its stark language, uplifting tone and simple, direct images, which endow the speaker with a kind of primal nobility. (par.2)

Khalil Hasan Nofal in his article "National Identity in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry" writes:

Darwish uses his poetry to quest and express his sense of identity throughout various phases as a Palestinian, as an Arab, and as a human. As a Palestinian and as an Arab, he depicts his sense of Palestinian and Arab identity as belonging to a homeland. He portrays this sense as homeland, language, culture, traditions, values, history, geography, roots, and environment because all Arabs share the sense common language, the same culture, the same traditions,

values, and heritage, the same roots, the same culture, the same history, and geography. (76)

The other poem famous for resistance, Identity, and human rights is "Passport" and in Arabic, the title of the poem is "Jawaz-us-Safar". The poem follows:

They did not recognize me in the shadows  
That suck away my color in this Passport  
And to them my wound was an exhibit  
For a tourist Who loves to collect photographs  
They did not recognize me,  
Ah . . . Don't leave  
The palm of my hand without the sun  
Because the trees recognize me  
All the songs of the rain recognize me  
Don't leave me pale like the moon!  
All the birds that followed my palm  
To the door of the distant airport  
All the wheatfields  
All the prisons  
All the white tombstones  
All the barbed boundaries  
All the waving handkerchiefs  
All the eyes  
were with me,  
But they dropped them from my passport  
Stripped of my name and identity?  
On a soil I nourished with my own hands?  
Today Job cried out  
Filling the sky:  
Don't make an example of me again!  
Oh, gentlemen, Prophets,  
Don't ask the trees for their names  
Don't ask the valleys who their mother is  
From my forehead bursts the sword of light  
And from my hand springs the water of the river  
All the hearts of the people are my identity  
So take away my passport! (op.cit)

Marwan A. Hamdan in "Mahmoud Darwish's Voicing Poetics of Resistance: A Receptionist Review" writes:

Here, Darwish evokes the image of the passport to defy the Israeli attempts to extirpate the Palestinians from their land of birth and nationality. In addition, the evoked images of the sword, light, hands, and water metaphorically suggest the sense of resistance. Further, Hamoud Ahmed (2012) views in these lines "the seeds of resistance" manifested in "the bonded elements of nature and human identity" (172)

Language, as it can be explained, is a system of suggestive signs and codes that are used in different situations and purposes. Similarly, the concept of

resistance in creative and cultural production becomes an absolute human principle, especially in the Arab region, which in contemporary time is trying to find its roots and accomplish its identity, modernity, and freedom. 'Literature of resistance' or 'resistance literature' is a cultural resistance that precedes, accompanies, and follows the resisting act which may be in many different forms like fiction, drama, poem or a short story. Among these genres, the concept of resistance poetry accompanies the concept of 'fighting' and 'resisting' the 'incorrect narrative' propagated by the colonizer with available weapons in wars, battles and other forms of foreign occupation. Darwish explains it as:

Our poems have no color If the big ear, the lalties, fail to understand them, They are worthy of being disposed of. And become immortal by our silence (Darwish, A., 2000, p. 28).

Darwish states that 'odes' or 'poems' that are not useful for the purpose of educating the community should be thrown away. Ideal poetry is a poetry that is intelligible to the public so that people can learn from it. Otherwise, it is better to remain silent. Similarly, Samih al-Qasim is of the opinion that one should not be afraid of showing or celebrating one's identity and especially the poet must be strict upon these important issues of human rights violation, colonization and he must not be afraid of being put in prison. Poetry has long served as a promotional medium in the literature and poet acted as the language of his own tribe. Thus, in the resistance literature, poetry has never been not far from its mission. Samih al-Qasim states that the function of poetry is to teach social, political, and revolutionary issues. According to him, poetry is not just for joy and pleasure. So, poetry, in his opinion, is a symbol for humane movements and social and revolutionary activities. It can be also used as a tool for training and educating people in the community. He says:

They have put you behind bars. But is it really possible to imprison you? Are you going to be hanged at the dawn light? They have put you behind bars. But are the prison walls are so powerful to suppress your poetry? (Samih al-Qasim, 12)

## II. CONCLUSION

Darwish's power of words and the way he wrote his fierce 'poems of resistance' and for the 'love of his motherland' landed him in prison five times and he was also placed under house arrest by the Israeli military authorities on numerous occasions. His well-known poem "Identity Card" (1964) became famous because of the refrain it contains that transcends oppression and colonization with a warning about consequences and the bravery of the subjugated population. The refrain is

“Write down, I’m an Arab!” hardened Palestinian resistance against Israeli attempts to wipe out Palestinian identity and history by Zionist ideological discourse.

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