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# **The Nexus of Faith and Resistance: Religious Elements in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry**

## **Hubungan antara Kepercayaan dan Penentangan: Unsur-unsur Keagamaan dalam Puisi Mahmoud Darwish**

Homam Altabaa\* and Nurul Nabihah binti Azmi

### **Abstrak**

Palestinian poetry portrays the multifaceted experiences of Palestinians following the Israeli occupation in 1948. The works of Mahmoud Darwish are prominent as they embody the pain, resilience and resistance of Palestinians. The use of religious elements to frame their struggles is common in the works of Palestinian poets, including Mahmoud Darwish. However, there are not any specific studies that focus on religious elements in his distinguished poetry collection, *Lesser Roses* (1986). In this study, religious elements in selected poems in the *Lesser Roses* collection are analysed to add a new dimension to the field of postcolonial literature as well as to the research of Palestinian poetry by looking at the significance of religious elements in the poems and how they are used to convey unique Palestinian experiences. The analysis reveals that Darwish uses religious elements from the narrative and ritual religious dimensions to portray exile, dislocation, and counter-discourse in the poems. The poet adapts various religious elements from multiple faiths to convey the themes of suffering and resistance that resonate with Palestinians' struggles.

**Keywords:** Mahmoud Darwish, Palestinian Poetry, Religious Elements, Postcolonial Literature.

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### **Abstrak**

Puisi Palestin menunjukkan kepelbagaian pengalaman rakyat Palestin berikutan pendudukan Israel pada tahun 1948. Karya-karya Mahmoud Darwish adalah penting kerana karya-karya beliau menggambarkan kesakitan, ketabahan dan penentangan rakyat Palestin. Penggunaan unsur-unsur keagamaan untuk memaparkan perjuangan rakyat adalah perkara yang tidak asing dalam karya penyair-penyair Palestin termasuk Mahmoud Darwish. Namun begitu, belum ada kajian khusus yang memfokuskan kepada penggunaan unsur-unsur keagamaan dalam koleksi puisinya, *Lesser Roses* (1986). Dalam kajian ini, unsur-unsur keagamaan dalam puisi-puisi terpilih daripada koleksi puisi *Lesser Roses* dianalisis untuk menambah dimensi baru kepada bidang kesusasteraan pascakolonial serta kajian puisi Palestin dengan melihat kepada kepentingan unsur-unsur keagamaan dalam puisi dan bagaimana unsur-unsur tersebut digunakan untuk menyampaikan pengalaman-pengalaman unik rakyat Palestin. Analisis menunjukkan bahawa Darwish menggunakan unsur-unsur keagamaan daripada dimensi naratif dan ritual keagamaan untuk menggambarkan pengalaman buang negeri, dislokasi, dan wacana-balas dalam puisi. Penyair yang dikaji ini didapati mengadaptasi pelbagai unsur-unsur keagamaan daripada pelbagai agama atau kepercayaan untuk menyampaikan tema penderitaan dan penentangan yang berkait rapat dengan pengalaman perjuangan rakyat Palestin.

**Kata Kunci:** Mahmoud Darwish, Puisi Palestin, Unsur Keagamaan, Sastera Pascakolonialisme.

### **Introduction**

Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) published thirty poetry and prose collections, including *Leaves of Olives* (1964), *I Love You, I Love You Not* (1972), and *The Butterfly's Burden* (2006). His works were translated into various languages, and over a million copies of his collections were sold. Darwish won many awards for his literary works. Darwish's poetry is profound in meaning, which is achieved through the

use of symbolism that transcends one's senses. It is not a wonder that Darwish was first known as one of the pioneers of creativity in Arab poetry before being a national poet. Regarding his religious views, Darwish was born into a Muslim land-owning family. However, he was known to be secular. Mahmoud Darwish believed in pluralism, that every religion has the right to exist in Palestine. He also expressed his hope for the force of secularists to be stronger than fundamentalists.<sup>1</sup> His belief in secularism was reflected in his affiliation with communism and with the Palestinian National Movement, which was on the secular side. Mahmoud Darwish opposed the fundamentalist Islamic movement, Hamas.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, he was well acquainted with religious scriptures. Besides using religious references from the mentioned texts, Mahmoud Darwish also included Greek and Roman mythology and deities from the ancient Canaanite religion in his works. The Hebrew Bible specifically had an influence on Darwish's works from the beginning of his career.<sup>3</sup> He acknowledged that he studied the Bible in Hebrew due to his proficiency in the language. However, he did not consider religious texts from a religious perspective as he was more interested in their literary aspects.<sup>4</sup> His knowledge of various scriptures is evident in the poet's reference to religious figures and narratives in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity in his creative writings to draw a clear picture of the plight of the Palestinians. Therefore, Darwish's inclination to use religious elements in his writings did not necessarily reflect a personal theology but was rather a device to support the Palestinian cause.

### Statement of the Problem

This research examines religious elements in the poems of Mahmoud Darwish from the *Lesser Roses* (1986) collection. Mahmoud Darwish used religious elements differently across his life and classified them in stages according to the context of his life: first stage (1964-

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Shatz, "A Love Story Between an Arab Poet and His Land. An Interview With Mahmud Darwish," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 3 (2002): 76.

<sup>2</sup> Muna Abu Eid, *Mahmoud Darwish: Literature and the Politics of Palestinian Identity* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Khaled Mattawa, *Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet's Art and His Nation* (Syracuse University Press, 2014), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Helit Yeshurun, "'Exile Is so Strong within Me, I May Bring It to the Land' A Landmark 1996 Interview with Mahmoud Darwish," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 42, no. 1 (September 1, 2012): 69.

1967), second stage (1982-1993), third stage (1993-1999), and fourth stage (1999-2008).<sup>5</sup> This collection is specifically chosen as it is published in Darwish's second stage of life, which is considered crucial as Darwish faced the siege of Beirut, an event that caused the Palestinians to share a collective sense of abandonment by the Arab nations. Furthermore, numerous studies have examined the religious elements in Darwish's poetry. However, there is not a specific study conducted on these elements in the *Lesser Roses* collection. The poems selected in the collection are listed below:

i. *Give Birth to Me Again That I May Know*

ii. *My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?*

iii. *Last Supper Lingers*

In the collection, numerous religious references can be identified, such as prophets, religious figures, and quotations from religious scriptures of different religions. For this reason, it is essential to explore the religious elements found in Darwish's work to understand how religious elements from different religions allowed Darwish to express his message of the Palestinian experience.

## **Literature Review**

### **I. Religious Elements in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry**

Echoing other Palestinian poets, Mahmoud Darwish uses religious elements to create a deeper understanding of the Palestinian cause and struggle. The poet uses religious elements in his works, including references from the religious scriptures, holy places, Sufism, and death. Mahmoud Darwish's works contain references to religious scriptures, such as the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the holy Quran.<sup>6</sup> He used Quranic verses, partially or wholly, in his poems. For example, in his poem *Al Ghorab* from the collection *Why Did You Leave*

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<sup>5</sup> Mitri Raheb, "Biblical narrative and Palestinian identity in Mahmoud Darwish's writings," In *Diyar's Seventh International Conference on "Palestinian Identity in Relation to Time and Space."* Bethlehem (2013), 92-99.

<sup>6</sup> U. F. A. H. Taha, "Grand Metaphors and Their Connotations in the Legacy of Mahmoud Darwish" (master's thesis, Birzeit University, 2014), 24.



*the Horse Alone*, Darwish used references from the Quran, such as the story of Cain killing his brother, Abel, to connect the story from the holy books to the occupation in Palestine.<sup>7</sup> By referencing the verses from religious books, Palestinian poetry will have a much more significant impact as it taps into the readers' emotions due to a form of expression richer in its implied meanings. In addition, Mahmoud Darwish's use of phrases quoted from religious scriptures is done to emphasise Palestine as a holy site.<sup>8</sup> In his poem *To Our Land* from *The Butterfly's Burden* collection, Mahmoud Darwish described Palestine as being near to the word of god. 'The word of god' is a phrase from the New Testament, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'.<sup>9</sup> 'The word of God' is made tangible, enabling Palestine to reside beside it. Being in close proximity to 'the word of God' highlights the sanctity of Palestine. Palestine, therefore, became an 'object of worship'.<sup>10</sup> In *Memory for Forgetfulness*,<sup>11</sup> Darwish quoted in his prose a passage from Ibn Al-Athir's book, *A Universal History*, that described everything in existence as being written by the Pen as commanded by God. The Pen mentioned by Darwish is referenced from the Quran in Surah Al-Alaq, verse 4, which says that God teaches by the Pen. Therefore, it is evident that Darwish was inspired by Palestine and used his extensive knowledge of the religions in Palestine to make the nation the central cause of his poetry. Additionally, Darwish made reference to religious scriptures and gave subtle changes to them to create an understanding of the Palestinians' plight. For example, in his poem, *Dust of Caravans*, from the *It is a Song, It is a Song* collection, Darwish mentioned the Biblical story of the Tabernacle. The Children of Israel, in the Old Testament, brought their sacrifices and slaughtered them before presenting them to the Lord at the door of the Tabernacle of Meeting.<sup>12</sup> The Tabernacle is a story of salvation and offering, in which offerings are sacrificed to draw closer to God or to atone for one's mistakes. However,

<sup>7</sup> Anjad Mahasneh, "The Translatability of Emotiveness in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry" (master's thesis, University of Ottawa, 2010), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Ibrahim Muhawi, "Contexts of Language in Mahmoud Darwish," Occasional Papers, *Center for Contemporary Arab Studies*, Georgetown University, 2009, 6.

<sup>9</sup> John, 1

<sup>10</sup> Ibrahim Muhawi, "Contexts of Language in Mahmoud Darwish," Occasional Papers, *Center for Contemporary Arab Studies*, Georgetown University, 2009, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> U. F. A. H. Taha, "Grand Metaphors and Their Connotations in the Legacy of Mahmoud Darwish" (master's thesis, Birzeit University, 2014), 82.

in the mentioned poem, the Lord is pictured fleeing away from the Tabernacle when the Palestinians draw close to offer sacrifices. By reconstructing a Biblical reference to conform to the current situation, Darwish drew a picture of the unfortunate reality of the Palestinians whose sincere offers for peace are pushed aside, even by God.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, Darwish references religious figures such as the prophets to convey a message shared by followers of the three Abrahamic religions. Challenges faced by prophets, such as Joseph and Adam, bore a resemblance to the struggle of the Palestinians. Darwish's repeated references to Jesus in his works are due to the similarity in the struggle of Jesus and the Palestinians.<sup>14</sup> One of the Jewish prophets, specifically Habakkuk, is referenced in Darwish's poetry in retaliation to the building of Israel since the prophet specifically mentioned that destruction would befall those who establish a village by sin.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Darwish drew a parallel between the commands of the prophet and the illegal settlement of Israel in Palestine. Habakkuk was mentioned in Darwish's series of poems, *Psalms*, in which the Jewish prophet who chronicled the Jews' suffering told Darwish that they both share similar hardships.<sup>16</sup> Since the Jews also suffered at one point in time, Darwish uses this parallel to compare the similarity of the Jewish and Palestinian experiences to give a more impactful message. By using prophets' references, Darwish taps into "collective, universal human memory"<sup>17</sup> to enable most readers to understand his intended message.

Moreover, another religious element in the works of Mahmoud Darwish is mythologies.<sup>18</sup> Mythology is essential as it reflects the worldview of a culture or religion in narrative form. Mythologies address crucial issues such as God, the origin and nature of humans, and the right

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<sup>13</sup> Taha, 83.

<sup>14</sup> Taha, 86.

<sup>15</sup> R. AlNaqash, *Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet of the Occupied Land* (Dar al Hilal, 1969).

<sup>16</sup> Khaled Mattawa, *Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet's Art and His Nation* (Syracuse University Press, 2014), 28.

<sup>17</sup> Abdel Khaleq Issa and Abdel Karim Daragmeh, "Aspects of Intertextuality in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry Collection 'Do Not Apologize for What You Have Done,'" *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature* 6, no. 2 (2018), 29.

<sup>18</sup> U. F. A. H. Taha, "Grand Metaphors and Their Connotations in the Legacy of Mahmoud Darwish" (master's thesis, Birzeit University, 2014), 82.

way to live.<sup>19</sup> In Darwish's poetry, he used mythologies to illustrate the reality of Palestinians living under occupation. The poet used numerous mythologies in his works, such as Sumerian's Gilgamesh, Greek's Troy and Narcissus, Canaanites' Phoenix, and Biblical mythologies of Ashtar and Tammuz. The purpose of mythologies in his works is to utilize their significant connotation to convey the pains that Palestinians are going through living under occupation. Mythologies are used in four ways in Darwish's literary works, whether to indicate the displacement of the Palestinians, fertility, human tragedy in general, or immortality.<sup>20</sup> In the poem *Like the Letter 'N' in the Qur'an* from the collection *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, Darwish mentions the Phoenix will kindle a light in a temple using the fire bestowed by the speaker's grandfather after his passing. The poet utilizes the myth of the Phoenix being rebirthed after it burnt to ashes to indicate the immortality of Palestinian resistance and the victories they are bound to achieve after decades of hardships.<sup>21</sup> The use of these mythologies mainly revolved around challenging death and willing life in order to uplift the Palestinian condition that faces death daily. Darwish was meticulous in incorporating mythologies in his works to depict human struggle with tyranny and injustice effectively.

In addition, Mahmoud Darwish invoked religious elements in his poetry, namely religious and historical places.<sup>22</sup> Among them are Jerusalem, Troy, Damascus, and Andalusia. In his collection *Birds Die in Galilee* (1969), Mahmoud Darwish addressed Jerusalem as a lover whom he missed to return to. His sentiment towards Jerusalem went beyond the holy site being a religious symbol as it is equated to a mother, an aunt, and a symbol of unity.<sup>23</sup> Jerusalem, therefore, becomes a symbol of familiarity, his longing, and a place where he feels he belongs. The city is again mentioned in his poem, *In Jerusalem*, where it is made as a symbol of peace and sacred memories, a site that calls forth the memories of its prophets and their miraculous stories.<sup>24</sup> Darwish especially mentioned

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<sup>19</sup> Robert S. Ellwood and Gregory D. Alles, *The Encyclopedia of World Religions* (Infobase Publishing, 2007), 310.

<sup>20</sup> U. F. A. H. Taha, "Grand Metaphors and Their Connotations in the Legacy of Mahmoud Darwish" (master's thesis, Birzeit University, 2014), 82.

<sup>21</sup> Taha, 137.

<sup>22</sup> Taha, 81.

<sup>23</sup> Taha, 81.

<sup>24</sup> Atef Alshaer, "Jerusalem in Palestinian Poetry," essay, in *Routledge Handbook on Jerusalem* (Routledge, 2018), 240.

in the poem the miraculous journey of Prophet Muhammad to the seventh heaven to meet God behind a veil. The poet also conveyed the feeling of peace and love that walking in the city instils in him in the midst of war and suffering inflicted by the Israelis. Therefore, Jerusalem became a symbol of hope due to the peaceful memories and feelings the city brings to Darwish.

Furthermore, another religious element, which is Sufism, can be identified in Mahmoud Darwish's poetry as he used the Sufi language to utilise its rich significance and complex symbolism.<sup>25</sup> Elements of Sufism became evident in Darwish's literary works in the 90s. One way Sufism influenced Darwish is through its rich use of binaries that convey conflicting emotions and contradictory states of being.<sup>26</sup> This reflected the paradoxical existence of Palestinians and the dichotomy between their reality and expectations. For instance, in his poem *Antithesis*, binaries are reflected in the lines, 'He says: I am from there. I am from here/ But neither am I there, nor here'. Another way Sufism influenced Darwish is the use of Sufi allegory. Sufism is found in *The Hoopoe*, a poem that reflects the meaning of life from a Sufi perspective. The poem is connected with a Persian classic, *The Conference of the Birds*. One message of the poem is God surrounds us and lives within ourselves. This Sufi belief becomes the basis of pluralism in his poem, where it is mentioned: 'Love is the fire of love, so catch fire / to free yourself from the body of place.' Simply, Darwish emphasises how one must free himself from limiting the idea of Israel/Palestine based on land and instead replace it with the philosophy of love for all human beings, represented by the "fire".<sup>27</sup> Catching the fire of love leads one to escape the narrow definition of identity.

### **Analysis**

Mahmoud Darwish often uses religious elements in his works to represent the Palestinians, but there are differences in their purpose according to specific periods of his life. The 1980s was an eventful period

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<sup>25</sup> Ismail Mahmoud Ehtooob, "The Sufi Experience in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry - the Hoopoe Poem as a Model," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 5, no. 11 (2021), 88.

<sup>26</sup> Ehtooob, 88.

<sup>27</sup> Rehnuma Sazzad, "Mahmoud Darwish: Writing as an Artistic Sanctuary," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 17, no. 1 (2015): 16.

for Mahmoud Darwish, which was reflected in his writings. In 1982, Darwish and other Palestinians were displaced from Beirut due to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which forced him to move to Tunisia and live a stateless life. In addition, in the middle of the 1980s, Palestinian intellectuals began to amplify artistic means to support the fight for Palestinian self-determination. It is a significant effort to counter Zionist ideology that based their occupation on Biblical mythology, which has caused people to accept the atrocities they inflicted upon Palestinians. These events affect Mahmoud Darwish's style of writing. He frequently represents Palestinians' sense of abandonment and hope for the future through religious elements such as allusion to religious practices, verses from religious scriptures and prophetic figures in the Bible and Holy Quran. This is reflected in the poems that is be analysed in this section.

### I. Give Birth to Me Again, That I May Know

*Give Birth to Me Again, That I May Know* is one of the poems from the collection *Lesser Roses* (1986) that depicts the speaker's intense longing for his mother and homeland. The speaker repeatedly requests to be born again to be close to his homeland and mother. He brings forth the memory of his mother lighting the morning fire, evoking a deep sense of respect towards her. He then tells her of the things he lost grasp of, equating it to a mirage, sand, and shadow. These elements may point to his homeland, Palestine, which he finds challenging to hold onto, and his grip on it seems futile as the Zionists implemented policies that make exiled Palestinians's return to their homeland difficult. This sympathetic picture painted by the poet amplifies the speaker's yearning to return to his mother, a comforting figure. In Darwish's poem, allusions to religious elements such as religious scriptures and practices are central to the poem's purpose to show the depth of his connectedness to his homeland and to convey the speaker's situation as an exile longing to return to his home.

The first element in the poem that has a religious connotation is the title, 'Give Birth to Me Again.' In Arabic, the phrase 'give birth to me' is spelled 'لديني'. The direct translation of 'لديني' is 'for my religion'. Religion, besides the belief in a higher power, means the pursuit of an interest with great devotion. In addition, the word 'دين' in Arabic also means a complete way of life. With this specific word choice for a title,

Darwish establishes that his pursuit of his homeland, Palestine, is his way of life. He pursues the Palestinian cause with great devotion, which is reflected in his extensive works depicting the life of Palestinians from an individual and collective perspective. Darwish's deep devotion to his homeland is shown throughout his life as he never stopped writing about Palestine, conveying his yearning and longing to return. By using the term 'religion', the poet brings the cause of Palestine and his pursuit of it to a sacred level, a holy matter to which he needs to fully devote and surrender himself. This conveys the poet's deep connection to his homeland.

In addition, religious connotation is found in the mother-child relationship established in the poem. The speaker is represented by Jesus as indicated in the line 'in which land I will die, in which land I will come to life again.' which echoes the Quranic verse where Jesus in his infancy speaks of "Peace be upon me the day I was born and the day I will die, and the day I will be raised up alive".<sup>28</sup> Since the speaker is Jesus, it may be suggested that the addressee of the poem, which is a mother figure, refers to Mary. Therefore, the poet is making a parallel between the story of Jesus and Mary with the speaker and his mother. Mary suffered from accusations of adultery since she bore Jesus without a father. Her experience of going through tribulations while innocent is similar to the speaker's mother and by extension, Palestine. Both suffered under the Zionist occupation while undeserving. The speaker is Jesus in a way as he suffers so much like the prophet. He was chased away and in pain. The poet establishes a connection between the mother and the speaker, akin to the relationship of Mary and Jesus which is significant in Abrahamic religions, a story known for years to come. Invoking this sacred relationship, Darwish immortalizes the bond of the speaker and the mother and by extension his land as a relationship that is sacred and holy, which further emphasises the connectedness of the speaker to his land.

*Greetings to you as you light the morning fire, greetings to you,  
greetings to you.*

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<sup>28</sup> The Quran, 19:33.

Moreover, another religious element identified in the lines above is the speaker's prayer unto his mother, 'greetings to you' which in Arabic is 'سلام عليك'. This echoes the greeting for Muslims in Arabic, 'Assalamualaikum', and for Jews in Hebrew, 'Shalom Aleichem'. The greeting comes with the connotations of a welcome, well-wishes, and an acknowledgment of a spiritual connection between the addresser and addressee. Therefore, in this context, the speaker's repetition of the greeting 'greetings to you' towards his mother conveys his intimacy and closeness to the maternal figure. He establishes a profound connection between himself and his mother especially as he recounts the memory of her lighting up the fire in the morning. As the mother may be interpreted as an extension of the poet's nation, Palestine, the speaker's wishes for peace are extended to his country, which makes clear how he holds it in high regard and thus portrays his deep connection to his motherland.

*Is your hair still longer than our years, longer than the trees of clouds*

*stretching the sky to you so they can live?*

Next, the length of one's hair, which the speaker inquires of his mother, has significant religious connotations. Firstly, in the Old Testament, Samson let his hair grow as an oath to God, thus associating hair with holiness. His hair is considered "...a source of strength...a kind of life force, connoting a heroic status that sets Samson apart from other people".<sup>29</sup> Thus, in the context of the poem, the mother's long hair is given an elevated status of sacredness and made into a symbol of strength and resilience in the face of oppression. It is noteworthy that there is a parallel between Samson's hair being considered as a life force and the mother's hair being portrayed as a life force for the 'trees of clouds' in the poem. The hair is connecting the sky to the mother as she is a means for nourishment for the 'trees of clouds'. By the means of her hair, she is nurturing the universe. Drawing these interpretations together created a mother figure whose nature is rooted in the land, strong and nurturing. Both elevate the mother figure to the archetypal mother and Palestine as the source of life and meaning for the speaker.

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<sup>29</sup> Susan Niditch, *My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man* (Gorgias Press, 2008), 66.

Since the mother is an extension of the land itself, the speaker's desire to be close to both amplifies his connectedness to his land.

The title of the poem, 'Give Birth to Me Again', also alludes to a religious element, namely the concept of rebirth which is found in the Bible. By being 'born again,' one goes through a transformation to attain salvation, as mentioned in John 3:3, "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." The concept of being born again is related to an entirely new experience and way of life after tremendous changes take place. Therefore, the speaker's repeated plea to be reborn represents his hope to leave his painful life in exile behind and attain salvation in the form of security in his homeland to enjoy its comforts. The Israeli occupation of Palestine has forcibly uprooted the speaker from his homeland, triggering a sequence of impactful changes in Palestinians' lives. Beyond the burden of leaving one's homeland is the constant feeling of homelessness and reminiscence of painful memories. Therefore, within the Palestinian context, the speaker wants to be born again into a new life free from the pain of exile, as exile is "...like death but without death's ultimate mercy".<sup>30</sup>

*Your mother has a mother, the fig tree in the garden has clouds.*

*Don't leave me alone, a fugitive. I want your hands*

Religious connotations are found in the line "...the fig tree in the garden has clouds" in two symbols i.e., 'fig tree', and 'clouds'. The people of Israel are sometimes represented as figs on a fig tree, for example, in Hosea 9:10, "I found Israel, like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers, as the first fruits on the fig tree in its first season." Since Israel in the verse is associated with grapes and figs, the poet invokes an image of a fig tree to represent its Biblical association, the Israelis. In addition, the poet portrays the fig tree in possession of 'clouds'. Cloud in Christianity is a symbol of God's presence as depicted in Exodus 40:38, "For the cloud of the Lord hovered over the Tabernacle..." In the context of the poem, the clouds signify the constant presence of God, thus suggesting the Israelis have the protection of God. By bringing forth such image,

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<sup>30</sup> Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 76.



which is preceded by the line “your mother has a mother”, Darwish highlights the absence of a protective presence in the speaker’s life compared to his mother and the Israelis. Such absence has cast him into a state of longing and loneliness, “Do not leave me alone, a fugitive.” Said (2000) described exile as “...the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted”.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Darwish encapsulates this ‘unhealable rift’ of an exile through the use of religious elements by drawing a comparison between a mother and the Israeli entity, both who have a source of protection, to the speaker who is alone, begging for his mother’s comforting presence to banish his loneliness and sadness.

*Give birth to me again ... Give birth to me again that I may know  
in which land I will die, in which land I will come to life again.*

In these lines, Darwish evokes a Quranic verse and restructures it to convey the speaker’s experience as an exile. The second line in the poem echoes Surah Luqman’s verse 34: ‘... and no soul perceives in what land it will die’. The verse from the Quran implies that only God knows the matters of the unseen in which death is one of it. However, there is a clear restructuring of the original verse as Darwish subverts the idea of a man unable to know his fate by saying “...that I may know/ in which land I will die, in which land I will come to life again.” This restructuring allows Darwish to enable the impossible, a man knowing his fate, through the means of rebirth. It is worth noting that the speaker conveys his purpose to be born again, which are to know in which land he will meet his fate, and to drink from the mother and remain in her arms. To be in the know and close to one’s mother are significant things that people in exile lost. Exiles lost the sense of stability, indicated by home and family, and sense of security as they live as stateless people who are restless and unsettled. Therefore, the speaker’s wish to be reborn to know in which land he will die and live again is significant as it points out to the living experience of an exile who did not have the security of settling down in a place indefinitely, and thus wondering which land will they truly settle.

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<sup>31</sup> Said, 2000: 180.

## II. My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?

*My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?* is one of the poems from the collection *Lesser Roses* (1986). Darwish brings forth a glimpse of the speaker's confusion, betrayal and grief in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion on Lebanon. This cocktail of disappointment is trailed back to the origin of the Palestinian tragedy which is the Nakba, the first occurrence of Israeli occupation of Palestine. Interestingly, the focal point of the poem is not entirely on the Israeli entity but also on a higher power; which may be read as the international community and Arab regimes; whose actions had neglected Palestinians' human rights and allowed them to be oppressed continuously. Therefore, in Darwish's poem, *My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?*, allusions to religious elements such as religious scriptures and practice are utilised to portray the consequences of displacements on one's psyche and to counter mainstream narrative propagated by Israel.

The first religious element in the poem is the title itself, 'My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?', which focuses the entire poem on the despair felt by Palestinians after the countless tragedies that befell them. According to Christian beliefs, Jesus called out to God with this specific sentence when he was on the cross and on the verge of death. He was questioning God's help after facing a series of humiliations prior to being nailed to the cross. Jesus's sense of being forsaken is echoed by the speaker. The utterance emphasises the voice of Palestinians who, after the siege of Beirut, felt more helpless than ever. They faced a series of humiliations due to the Zionist occupation that follows them, despite being displaced in Beirut. The series of painful experiences were further intensified when the Arab nations, who were supposed to be allies of Palestine under the notion of Arab unity, provided insufficient assistance to relieve Palestinians from their hardships. The passive attitude of Arab regimes and their failure to help Palestinians in times of need forsakes the idea of Arab unity, thus causing the Palestinians to feel abandoned. These distressing incidents culminate in a cry of despair from people who have been dealt with unjustly throughout their lives.

*Why did you promise the soldiers my only orchard, why? I am the widow.*

In addition, Darwish invokes the Biblical story of Jesus's capture in the Garden of Gethsemane by the Roman armies to emphasise the despair that Palestinians felt following the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The orchard refers to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus sought in his final moments before crucifixion to feel close to God, thus implying his deep connection to the land. However, the Roman soldiers ripped him away from his place of solace and brought him to the cross to be crucified. Therefore, by invoking this narrative, Darwish points to the forced displacement of the Palestinians following the Zionist occupation. They are ripped away from their place of solace, Palestine, by the military forces of Israel. The emphasis on 'my only orchard' shows the speaker's deep connection to the homeland as a land that she possesses. The soldiers refer to the Israeli military, who often used military means to uproot the Palestinians from their homes. The presence of the soldiers implies the forceful means exacted by the Israeli forces to displace the Palestinians from their homeland. It is also important to note that Darwish emphasises God promising the soldiers this small patch of land as if God permitted them to do so. Thus, it may allude to the concessions made by Arab countries with Israel that has allowed the Zionists to take away the little possession the Palestinians have. Therefore, by invoking the Biblical narrative of the capture of Jesus by the Roman armies, Darwish offers the readers an insight into the forced displacement Palestinians faced, a tragedy that parallels Jesus's hardships.

*I am the daughter of this quiet, I am the daughter of your neglected utterance*

Next, the line 'I am the daughter of your neglected utterance' echoes the Quranic verse in Surah Yasin verse 82, 'Verily, when He intends a thing, His command is, "Be", and it is!' This verse shows the quality of God as a creator who with an utterance, 'Be,' can create everything and brings them to life. Darwish puts forth the idea of the relationship between a Creator and creation, emphasising a sense of dependency which further heightens the impact of abandonment. As the speaker is tied to God and dependent upon Him, being forsaken left her lost. Since Darwish described the speaker as the daughter of 'neglected utterance' and 'quiet,' he reflects the sense of uncertainty and insecurity felt by Palestinians post-displacement or exile. In 1982, the Israeli siege on Beirut led to the downfall of the city and the

withdrawal of Palestinian freedom fighters to Tunisia. With no protection from their people and allied forces, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were left to the mercy of Lebanese Phalangist militias, who massacred them. The occupation of Palestine by Israel and the subsequent Palestinians' harrowing experiences in Lebanon have thrown their world upside down. "For many Palestinians, this devastating loss of their homes, personal possessions and their whole way of life caused an existential crisis, causing them to question all manner of once unshakeable truths, including their faith in a beneficent and just God"<sup>32</sup> thus lending significance to the line 'I am the daughter of your neglected utterance.'

*Have you divorced me? Or have you gone to heal an other/my  
enemy from the guillotine?*

Divorce is the termination of a marriage between two people in a legal process. Therefore, it is implied that the speaker was 'wed' to God before Mary came into the picture. This way, Darwish hints at a sacred bond formed between Palestine and God long before the establishment of the state of Israel, highlighting the legitimacy of Palestine as a state. Further look into the concept of divorce, the Biblical texts emphasises that divorce could only happen under the circumstances in which sexual immorality is committed. Therefore, the idea of divorce in this line implies that God has forsaken the Palestinians for another whom He shows favour to at the price of the Palestinians' abandonment. This has caused the feeling that Palestinians are being 'divorced'. Darwish reflects Palestinians' sentiment of despair over the lack of intervention from any party to help them resist the occupation. Instead of helping them to stop the enemy, they helped strengthen the Zionists to form their establishment. Healing the speaker's enemy from guillotine may refer to the impunity granted to Israel from being persecuted for their crimes. It could also be read as the rescue of the Jews from the Nazis who massacred the Jewish population, thus bearing a similarity to being saved from a guillotine. Drawing an image of the abandonment

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<sup>32</sup> Suad Alenzi, "I Am Neither There, nor Here: An Analysis of Formulations of Post-Colonial Identity in the Work of Edward W. Said and Mahmoud Darwish a Thematic and Stylistic Analytical Approach" (PhD thesis, The University of Manchester, 2015), 211.

of Palestinians to rescue the Israelis, Darwish points to the existential crisis faced by the Palestinians. They were confused about where they stood, reflected by the barrage of questions. They are the land's natives but were chased away and labelled 'present absentees.' They moved to Lebanon to seek refuge, only to be displaced again due to an Israeli attack.

The whole poem is built on the premise of supplication to God in form of questions. The repeated question of '...why have you forsaken me' to God heavily echoes a sense of betrayal. Though the speaker says that she '...fully obeyed...' God's wisdom, she contradicts herself as she challenges a higher power to answer her questions. A challenge to God is opposite the idea of fully obeying Him as it requires her to accept everything without question. The relationship between God and the speaker, a Creator and His creation, entails that the creation is subjected to God's power. The clear difference in power relation reflects the power relation of Zionists and Palestinians. It also may be read as power relations between Arab nations and Palestinians. The repeated question to God is the Palestinians addressing the higher power, Zionists or Arab world, which appears to oppress them. However, they did not accept the oppression passively but challenge it which is a form of resistance.

*You were revealed in me as words. You brought down two people from a spike of grain, and you wed*

*me to an idea, so I obeyed. I fully obeyed your coming wisdom*

The line 'You brought down two people from a spike of grain,' echoes the image of spikes of grain invoked in the Quran. In Surah Al-Baqarah verse 261, Allah says, "The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is like a seed [of grain] that grows seven spikes; in each spike is a hundred grains. And Allah multiplies [His reward] for whom He wills." The poem may be read as two people, which suggests the Palestinian and Israeli are chosen by God to settle on a land together. The connotation of God descending both the Palestinian and Israeli brought forward the idea of the irrevokable right of Palestinians to live in the land. It can also be read in the light of Israelis and Palestinians are descended from one common figure, Abraham who is a prominent prophet. Invoking similar origin in lineage emphasises the

notion of a supposed brotherhood between the two nationalities who shared the same forefather. Both readings point to the argument that Palestinians have the irrevocable right to live in the land of Palestine together with Israelis since God has determined as such and that they share the same lineage. By using the religious image, Darwish also counters the idea that the Palestinians despise the idea of living together with the Israelis since the speaker continues to say that she obeys fully with God's wisdom, conveying an acceptance of the idea of coexistence. Though the poet is vocal in voicing out his resistance against the state of Israel, he did not harbour any ill intention upon the Jews as spoken in an interview, "The accusation is that I hate Jews. It is not comfortable that they show me as a devil and an enemy of Israel. I am not a lover of Israel, of course. I have no reason to be. But I don't hate Jews".<sup>33</sup> His resistance against them is mainly due to the occupation of Palestine and not based on race. Therefore, Darwish utilises the religious symbol of a spike of grain to portray Palestinians willingness to coexist with the Israelis which is the opposite of the mainstream narrative of Palestinians being hostile towards them.

### **III. Last Supper Lingers**

In the third poem, *Last Supper Lingers*, Darwish explores the struggles faced by Palestinians using the Biblical narrative of the Lord's Supper as the backdrop. This poem appears to reference the siege of Beirut, which witnessed the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), expelled from Lebanon and the remaining Palestinians facing violence and brutality as a consequence. The voice of Palestinians in this poem is represented by the disciples of Jesus who were lamenting the tragedy that will befall them due to their steadfastness in upholding Jesus's teaching, and thus asking God to relieve them of their distress. The situation faced by the disciples is similar to the Palestinians who were in despair as they will be punished due to their persistence in fighting against occupation. Consequently, they were yearning to escape persecution and find a place of refuge far from the brutality of the occupation forces. Therefore, Darwish used multiple religious elements

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Sachs, "Ramallah Journal; Poetry of Arab Pain: Are Israeli Students Ready?," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2000. <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/07/world/ramallah-journal-poetry-of-arab-pain-are-israeli-students-ready.html>

in the poem to portray Palestinians' experience of displacement and the search for a home.

*The Last Supper lingers, so do the Last Supper commandments*

The title, *Last Supper Lingers*, directly references the Gospel's account of Jesus's final meal with his disciples before his crucifixion. This event caused an emotional turmoil among the disciples who were told of Jesus's impending death. However, in this poem, the Last Supper is lingering which implies the event is happening longer than necessary. Therefore, similar to the distress felt by Jesus's disciples, Palestinians were also in a state of anxiousness but for a stretched period, waiting for the final judgment to befall them after the PLO evacuated Lebanon which left them vulnerable and without protectors. On another hand, the lingering of the Last Supper can be read as a reference to the occupation of Palestine in 1948. The Palestinians were displaced and faced brutality and persecution due to the occupation are in a constant state of distress as they anticipate the Zionists' brutality to be inflicted upon them one day, thus lending significance to the notion of the Last Supper lingering. Both readings exemplify the collective experience of Palestinians living in displacement due to occupation.

*Father who is with us, be full of grace with us,*

*Wait for us a little while, oh Lord!*

*Do not pull out the cup from us,*

*Take it slow, so that we may ask more than we have asked.*

The symbol of cup used in the line is significant in the context of the Lord's Supper. The supper involves drinking four cups of wine; cup of sanctification, deliverance, blessing and consummation. During the Lord's Supper, Jesus shared the cup of blessing with his disciples which signals that the supper is ending. The end of the supper will indicate the end of Jesus's ministry on earth through crucifixion and ascension. Therefore, the speaker asks the Father to be merciful by withholding from taking the cup from them, as reaching the final cup means they are closer to impending death. The speaker is essentially asking God not to hasten them to their death as the end of the final supper would mean that

they will be persecuted just as the disciples were killed<sup>34</sup> after Jesus's death. In this case, withholding the cup will be an act of mercy on their behalf.

*and do not accuse anyone. Be merciful to those of us who will  
become weak*

*Our Father in the Ends, and ascend little by little to our death*

Next, the idea of ascension in these lines echoes the ascension of Jesus in Christianity. Therefore, the speaker is asking the Father for mercy through ascension to avoid the tragedies that will follow him.<sup>35</sup> While the symbol of Christ in Darwish's poems usually represents suffering and a return to life, this poem utilises the symbol of Christ as eternal salvation<sup>36</sup> by means of ascension. The speaker is hoping to escape persecution on earth and attain eternal salvation by living by God's side. The speaker wants to attain salvation through unity with Christ.<sup>37</sup>

*This small place has become narrow with our cry. This body was fed  
up*

*with our thoughts, Father, and you said the words that were within  
us. So take*

*us with you*

*to the beginning of the water, take us, to the beginning of the thing,  
take us,*

*to the beginning of the word*

In these lines, Darwish utilizes the concept of creation in religious beliefs to frame Palestinians' yearning to return to a new beginning.

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<sup>34</sup> Ken Curtis, "What Happened to the 12 Disciples and Apostles of Jesus?," Christianity.com, 2024, <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/whatever-happened-to-the-twelve-apostles-11629558.html>

<sup>35</sup> Sultan AlZghoul, "Kana fallāḥan faṣāra lāji'an fatha'iran wa muqīman fi al-ḥulm: Jarīdat al-Dustūr al-Urduniyya," 2009. <https://www.addustour.com/articles/474737>

<sup>36</sup> A. F. A. Mohamed, *Development of Symbol in Arabic Poetry*, n.d., 2893.

<sup>37</sup> Mohamed, 2893.



Christians beliefs hold that in the beginning there is only a formless void before God begins to create forms out of it. The same idea is echoed in Islamic beliefs, in which there was only God in the beginning before He created all things.<sup>38</sup> These religious narratives point to a common idea of a moment where everything was yet to be set into motion. Darwish, therefore, uses the idea of ascension and beginning of creation to mirror Palestinians' yearning to return to a state where the tragedy that befell them was yet to be set into motion. The speaker begs the Father to ascend them to the beginning prior to being subjected to harsh trials.<sup>39</sup> Following the Nakba, Beirut became a refuge for Palestinians. This 'small place' in Beirut they sought for a semblance of protection is now constricted with the pain of being displaced and slaughtered following the Israeli invasion of Beirut. Adding to the suffocation are the lingering memories of their motherland and the secure life they once had before the occupation, which over time appears to be a farfetched idea. In desperation, the speaker begs the Father to take him and ascend together to a moment void of pain and harsh experiences they faced due to the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

*This dinner has been long, the loaf has become scarce, and your  
commandments have been long, so take us up*

*because after you ((the letters)) will assassinate us one by one... O  
our father*

In these lines, Darwish makes a reference to the challenges faced by Jesus's disciples following Jesus's crucifixion and connects it to the condition of Palestinians after the PLO was expelled from Lebanon. Jesus's crucifixion was followed by the successive death of his disciples due to their belief in his message. This relates to the killings of Palestinians that culminated in Sabra and Shatilla massacres soon after the PLO was expelled from Lebanon. In the same way Jesus and his disciples face persecution and threat of death due to their strong held beliefs on Jesus's teachings, the Palestinians also face the same consequences due to their strong held belief on their rights to remain in

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<sup>38</sup> Sahih Bukhari, Book 54, 414

<sup>39</sup> Sultan AlZghoul, "Kana fallāḥan faṣāra lāji'an fatha'iran wa muqīman fī al-ḥulm: Jarīdat al-Dustūr al-Urduniyya," 2009. <https://www.addustour.com/articles/474737>

their homeland and to fight against occupation. Mahmoud Darwish's use of the Christian religious text unites the tragedy of Palestinians and Jesus as both are exposed to crucifixion and torture as they carry the message by which and for which they die.<sup>40</sup> However, in the final lines of the poem, the speaker asks God to take him before he is killed, showing his desperation to be saved before the impending massacre awaiting him happens. Once again, the idea of ascension with the Father as a form of salvation is repeated in the poem.

The lines discussed above echo the idea of the speaker's ascension with the Father to escape death thus reflect the pursuit of a shelter to be protected from harm, a sense of home. According to McLeod (2010), home "...is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination". The concept of home is important as it gives people a fixed sense of place in the world where they belong to legitimately.<sup>41</sup> The idea of home is associated with shelter, stability and security. The repetition of the idea of ascension with the Father to a place of a new beginning reflects the speaker's quest for a place of security, a home. This quest embodies the dreams of people in diaspora for a sense of home following displacements that shatter their homes along with its connotation as a place of stability. However, it is important to note that the shelter that the speaker seeks is associated with the beginning of 'water', 'thing' and 'word' which appears to be a dream that is impossible to attain. Therefore, though the speaker yearns for a shelter, it remains a mythical place that people in diaspora could only dream of.

### **Conclusion**

Mahmoud Darwish's poetry is an important contribution to Palestinian literature as it embodies the Palestinian experience and fight against the Zionist occupation. Darwish's poems made it to the international stage for their artistic articulation of the Palestinian struggle under the Israeli occupation. These poems remain prominent and widely quoted, especially in response to the current and previous massacres of the Palestinians that captured the world's attention. This study has undertaken the analysis of some poems in his distinguished

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<sup>40</sup> Z. AlRabbh, *The Semiotics of the Title in the Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish*, 2013, 116.

<sup>41</sup> John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 2nd ed. (Manchester University Press, 2010), 142.

collection *Lesser Roses* which are *Give Birth to Me Again That I May Know*, *My God Why Have You Forsaken Me* and *Last Supper Lingers*. Darwish's poems convey numerous religious elements that are not necessarily manifest to readers, especially non-Arab readers and those not well-versed in Abrahamic religions. For example, one might not be fully aware of the various religious elements derived from the Abrahamic faiths such as the symbol of long hair and spikes of grain. However, these religious elements are important as they convey postcolonial concepts that build on the message of the poetry. Accordingly, religious elements in the poems play an important yet subtle role in delivering their thematic messages.

Darwish mainly utilised key religious elements from the religious dimensions of myth or narrative (stories of the prophets) and ritual (supplication to God). These dimensions appeal to one's emotions. Thus, Darwish's purpose in utilising elements from these religious dimensions is to tap into readers' consciousness of the Palestinian issue and make it relatable and understandable from a more human level. These religious elements are effectively used to convey the Palestinians' tragedy. The semantically dense religious verses and stories allow the poet to frame Palestinians' experiences in a clear manner. The religious elements echo the idea of a deep connection to the homeland and the loss of home and security related to experiences of exile. Darwish explores dislocation through experiences of displacement and its emotional consequences of being unstable and in search for a sense of home. He also utilises multiple religious elements as a counter-discourse to resist the mainstream narratives.

Darwish did not necessarily use religious elements based on their original contexts but instead adapted them to suit his message and purpose. He engages with these elements by adding twists to their original meanings to capture features of his current reality such as the lingering of the Last Supper to represent the lingering pain of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. While in *Give Birth to Me Again That I May Know*, the poet adapts a Quranic verse and restructures it to enable the speaker to envision a possibility of knowing matters impossible to be known by humanity, one's place of death and resurrection. Darwish uses religious references from multiple religious sources such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The poet is known to be well-versed in various religious

scriptures though he appreciates them mainly for their literary aspects. Therefore, numerous religious elements in his poems are used to convey universal themes such as suffering and resistance that resonate across different beliefs. The numerous references also allow Darwish the freedom to find the best metaphor or allusion to achieve his poetic goals in conveying his message to a broader audience. Despite different beliefs, Darwish proves that all are united in the Palestinian cause.

Finally, Darwish's use of some religious elements may be unaccepted by the adherents of certain religions. For example, in *My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?*, the poet's depiction of God marrying Mary is unacceptable to Christians, Jews and Muslims. The poet uses religious elements in such a way to grip readers' attention as they serve as a shock factor that evokes strong emotional reactions and to express his frustration at those in power and God by extension. Nonetheless, Darwish's poems skilfully employ numerous religious elements such as religious figures, beliefs, and rituals to allow the speaker to convey the multifaceted dimension of Palestinians' unique experience, giving depth to the Palestine-Israel issue.

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