

# The Trope of Nature in the Poems of Mahmoud Darwish

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**Abstract-** Nature is capable of surviving on its own, but human race will die in its absence. Humans started realizing the importance of nature around them when it was exploited to the extent that it became a necessity to safeguard it. Arab literature displayed ecocritical concerns in their works much later than other literatures, but some writers had been delineating it in their works ever since. One such poet is the Arab poet, Mahmoud Darwish who is better known as the 'poet of resistance'. The present study delves into the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish and examines his love for nature in the backdrop of literary resistance. His poems portray nature in its pristine state, drawing inferences from trees, mountains, plants, animals, and birds. This paper finds out Darwish's depiction of nature, with special focus on the use of the imagery of trees, which he succeeds in presenting in his poetry with reference to his homeland.

**Keywords:** nature, trope, trees, poetry, Mahmoud Darwish

## Introduction

Nature has been used in literature in different contexts, such as property and creation. Its use in literature led its readers to experience the need to protect nature as well as to consider its importance in one's life. Nature and human beings share a strong bond that should be held tight. In the words of Friedrich Schelling there is a "profound kinship between the human spirit and nature" (Taylor, 2005, p.23). Indeed, nature doesn't require human's presence to survive but Homo sapiens cannot survive without the presence of nature. It was rightly proclaimed, "[Man] cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time." (Emerson). Nature emerged in its full form in literature since the romantic age. Wordsworth and Coleridge created a world in poetry that was followed by the poets for ages to come. The relationship and reconciliation of man and nature in poetry is the "first and last of all knowledge" (Welleck, 1963). In *The Poet as Teacher: Wordsworth's Practical and Poetic Engagement with Education* Xu, Hongxia states, "nature is 'perhaps the most complex word' in the English language, according to Raymond Williams... When it comes to Wordsworth's poetry, the issue is especially intriguing because his verses embody all these aspects" (Hongxia, 2013, p.115).

In the era of artificial intelligence and exhibition of extreme scientific advancements, it is no doubt that human interference is leading to serious degradation of nature with worldwide call for less carbon emission and environmental dumping. The modern poets, too, didn't ditch the call for saving the environment but this became one of the important issues on their list including other such pressing topics. "Ever since the poets and philosophers who shifted their interest from nature to artificial have been left aloof to struggle and fight, for the words they write doesn't help the arid souls to quench their thirst" (Mir & Dar, 2018).

The present study signifies the use of nature as a trope by the late Palestinian modernist poet Mahmoud Darwish to depict the human trauma of displacement and alienation, which is similar to the trauma faced by other colonized nations in the past. One such example is of Africa - the writers from its nation foregrounded its issues they faced during the colonial times and depicted it as a "country of long and rich cultural legacy endowed with a varied corpus of literary traditions" (Shamim, p.1). Similar is the instance of Darwish's homeland. The paper studies the use of trees and groves in the selected poems of Darwish that are symbolic of providing home and shelter to humans. Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) wrote poems depicting the cultural, spiritual and political situations of Palestine. His works received immense admiration from critics and writers. Edward Said praised him by proclaiming that Darwish is "A brilliant poet- certainly the most gifted of his generation in the Arab world." (Blurb, *Almond Blossoms and Beyond*).

Mahmoud Darwish's poems have also been read from the perspective of ecocriticism. Consciously or unconsciously, his poems have made a significant impact in the world of environment through the use of the trope of nature. His poems like the poems of other Arab poets "Highlight the interconnectedness between the human and nonhuman world by presenting natural environment as an interactive form of resistance" (Ahmed, et al, 21). The lens

of the concepts of interconnectedness, eco centrism, and green resistance have also been applied to his poems (Hamoud Yahya, et al, n.d.). In the article “A Cultural Ecological Reading of Human-Nature Interconnectivity in Mahmoud Darwish’s “The Second Olive Tree”, Nahed Mohammed Ahmed Meklash studies the image of olive trees used by Darwish in his poems. She states, “He invokes a sense of attachment and belonging to the Palestinian landscape. When reading his poems, it becomes clear that he is praising the beauty of nature in his birthplace for a specific reason” (2023, p.100). Darwish’s poems not only mention trees and plants but also uses the metaphors of animals and birds (Masood, 2020) for similar reasons.

Out of the innumerable poems written by him, I have selected eight poems. These poems deal with the environment, which has become a major critical concern in the present scenario. The poems of Mahmoud Darwish picked up from his collections for this current study are “A Lover From Palestine”, “Passport”, “Now After You”, “The Damascus Road”, “The Palm Tree”, “Identity Card”, “The Everlasting Indian Fig”, and “We Journey Towards a Home”.

Interconnectivity in Mahmoud Darwish’s  
“The Second Olive Tree”

### Discussion

“Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?”

Walt Whitman

The above quotation refers to the characteristic of trees, i.e. to remain still, which points towards the fact that nature has been used in poetry since long. Romanticism was the time when love for nature emerged and literary works started being written and published. In modern times, we have seen Mahmoud Darwish taking help of the metaphor of nature, which itself is a major issue to be discussed from the perspective of the land of Palestine, and the world at large. As stated by Masood, “In many of his poems Darwish depicts the fauna and flora and imbues them with the scented citrus groves, olives and figs, and fills them with references to birds, flowers, the land, the meadows, the skycap, the sea and the stars of Palestine” (p. 55). It is not possible to read Mahmoud Darwish’s metaphors of environment in isolation. As he’s first and foremost considered the poet of resistance, his works symbolise that imagery. His poem “A Lover From Palestine” uses nature’s imagery to depict the condition of human trauma in Palestine. Though the essence of the poem lies in the sense of belongingness, it does not fail to portray the natural world:

*How can the ever-verdant orange grove be dragged*

*To prison, to exile, to a port,*

*And despite all her travels,*

*Despite the scent of salt and longing,*

*Remain evergreen?*

*I write in my diary:*

*I love oranges and hate the port*

In this poem, orange grove is used as a symbol of happiness, protection, and prosperity. It also refers to eternal love that the poet has with the land of Palestine. The orange grove is “ever-verdant” which represents greenery and life. The above lines are comparing Palestine to the orange grove. The poet marvels at the quality of the orange grove which has been dragged into prison and exile just like himself, yet despite all the difficulties being faced by the orange grove it manages to “remain evergreen”.

Orange and olive trees held a significant place in the hearts of the people of Palestine because of their evergreen nature that was a relatable quality of their homeland. In the poetry collection *Leaves of Olives* (1964), olive tree and its evergreen leaves are used as a metaphor to denote the quality of the country. Olive plantation had been the major source of income of the Palestinian people through its fruits and oil. “Such is the economic and symbolic power of the olive tree in Palestinian national life that the rural communities that have tended these crops for generations are routinely targeted by illegal settlers attempting to denude families of their land and living” (Kuttub, 2021). The collection mentions different types of trees and plants that are characteristic of Palestine which signifies that Darwish was well aware of the role of the trees and plants in making the life of his native people worth living amidst the political turmoil. In the poem “Now After You”, the imagery of tree is used in the following manner:

*Now, after you, with an appropriate Rhyme*

*And exile, the trees improve their posture*

*and laugh.*

*The sun laughs in the street*

The translation of the above poem has been done by Mohammad Shaheen in 2009 wherein Darwish uses personification to refer to the trees that are capable of feeling happiness and pain. Another poem “The Damascus Road” translated by Khaled M.S. Masood shows the imagery of trees symbolizing memories and providing comfort to the horses of the poet:

*My horses slept on the land and the memories  
My horses slept on the trees of memories  
And I slept on the den of miracles*

In the poem "The Palm Tree", the image of palm tree is used to denote the struggles faced by the natives. Here, he takes the quality of the palm tree that is a tall, deep-rooted tree which cannot be easily shaken or uprooted. In the same poem, "wheat garden" is also shown as a significant part of the relationship amongst him, the Palestinian people, and the poet:

*You are my virgin garden  
As faithful as the wheat  
With our songs, we shall pierce the air  
And plant fertility in the dormant earth  
And like the braided palm tree  
Unbending to the storm*

The "wheat garden" is depicted as faithful to its people that grows and provides sustenance to the troubled lot. The palm tree teaches the people to remain strong even in the harshest of times. In the poem "Identity Card", Darwish compares himself with the "cypress and olive trees" and calls out to this roots that are even older than these trees when they came into existence:

*My roots...  
Took hold before the birth of time  
Before the burgeoning of the ages,  
Before cypress and olive trees,  
Before the proliferation of weeds.*

The poem "The Everlasting Indian Fig" is a conversation between a father and a son who are compelled to leave their home. The poem makes a reference to the Indian fig:

*O my son, remember! Here on the thorn of an Indian fig,*

*the English crucified your father for two nights*

*but he never confessed. You will grow up, my son,*

*and tell those who inherited their rifles*

*the legacy of our blood on their iron. (p. 65)*

The Indian fig is a name given to many varieties of plants and trees in India. According to the poem, it refers to the category of cactus which is generally used as a fence or barrier plant. This plant can survive in deserts with little or no water around (Horticulture Unlimited, 2023). Hence, the poet's father narrates the incident of him being tortured by the English on the thorns of an Indian fig plant in their own native land, which they are now compelled to leave. The father tries to tell his son of their steadfastness which he must inherit from his father and grandfather. He further makes a reference to the oak trees and says, "Be strong like your grandfather! /Climb the last hill of oaks with me". The fig and oaks are defiant plants that can survive harsh weathers and situations just like they are doing. "We Journey Towards a Home" makes a reference to chestnut trees, mountains, seas, and sun, stating that trees, mountains, water, have their own glory but their glory cannot give solace to a parched soul, which is enduring innumerable hardships.

Darwish's poems fulfil the definition of poems provided by Rueckert, "Poems are a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy, coming, as they do, from those ever generative twin matrices, language and imagination" (p.108). The use of trees as a trope in his poems not only provide happiness and comfort to his people but also gives them fresh vigour to fight back the challenges. Darwish makes immense use of the nature's imagery that itself is self-sustaining and refreshing to the senses along with providing food and shelter.

## Conclusion

It is not possible to be insensitive towards nature even in extreme circumstances. This has been clearly reflected in the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish where he projects nature as an essential part of human life that cannot be alienated from it. The imagery of trees and groves in his poems symbolizes a shade that's providing shelter and security. The sense of alienation and displacement gets abated with the presence of trees around him, but trees are mere onlookers that do not give selective comfort. For nature, all human beings are equal and it does not distinguish between right or wrong. Therefore, it won't be wrong to say that environment favours no one. Humans show their authority over nature by capturing the natural environments, whereas nature remains neutral to all.

**Bionote**

Dr. Amna Shamim is working as Assistant Professor in the Department of English, College of Arts & Letters, University of Bisha, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. She has a teaching experience of 16 years. She has **authored/co-authored six books** and **edited/co-edited four anthologies**. She has got a number of research articles published in various journals and anthologies of national and international repute. She has successfully guided four doctoral theses.

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