



## Identity and Resistance in the poetry of

Mahmoud Darwish and Y. Amichai

By

Essam Muhammad el-Maadawy Mahmoud

Prof. Abdulgawad Elnady

Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Tanta

University

**Dr. Moetaz El-Sorogy**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of

Arts, Tanta University

### **Abstract:**

The research deals with resistance poetry and the inclinations that may emerge in the poet's psyche and manifest in his or her poetry. Moreover, the research depends on harnessing the "poetic self" and the "other" as a scale to measure the credibility of their resistance poetry. The succinct account of the analogy between the poets of resistance who are conflicting on the main cause reveals the individual's view of his poetic "self" and how to reconcile with the "other". On the other hand, the research also proposes exile and diaspora as major factors that may drive a poet to start writing resistance poetry. Poetry is the origin of literature and has been considered a kind of resistance to some defects in the human

nature since the ancient times. It is not a new branch of literature since it has been established as a medium of expression for a long time.

**Key words:** Resistance poetry; Diaspora; Exile; Estrangement; The “Self”; The “Other”, Darwish, Amichai





The word 'resistance' as a basic aspect of poetry was frequently coined while describing the literature about Palestine, 1966, by the Palestinian author Ghassan Kanafani in his work, *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine*. This literary work proposes a very remarkable distinction between literature which has been written "under occupation" and "exile" literature. This differentiation drives the audience to obtain a common expression about people's mutual relationship to a common identity, land, and a common cause. Hence, the opposing poets of resistance poetry come into contact with each other in which every poet's defense of his literary "self" is parallel to attacking of the "other." This all takes place during the confrontation between the "self" and the "other" that are manifested in the difference between occupation and exile. According to Kanafani, literature is presented as an arena of struggle in which resistance sharpens its swords through words and rhymes (Harlow 2).

According to Kanafani, the research of an independent poetic self can never be perfect unless the researcher or, more specifically, the poet is integrated within the movement of resistance itself inside the boundaries of the targeted disputed land. Also, the poet has to base his evidence upon the country where resistance is born and originated. In addition, poetry of resistance must be told from the lips of the aboriginal people who witnessed the clashing incidents (Kanafani 12).

The identity of the poet is part and parcel in his poetic philosophy. The poet's ideology is never separable from his



poetry. Therefore, the poem is not merely rhymed lines, but it is regarded as the poet's identity which bears all his values, principles, and moralities.

### **Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008)**

Mahmoud Darwish is a Palestinian poet and author. He was born in the village of AL-Birwa in the upper Galilee. He received several awards and was considered par excellence the Palestinian National Poet. In 1948, a child of seven, he fled to Lebanon. In most of his works, Palestine is used as a symbol alluding to the loss of Eden. In many other cases laments the feeling of dispossession and exile. Darwish and his family were treated as internal refugees or aliens. Darwish lived for a long time of his life in exile in Beirut and Paris.

After the war that took place in 1948, the family tried to return to Palestine in 1949, but found Birwa, that was one of at least 400 Palestinian villages, completely destroyed and depopulated of Arabs. Darwish commented on this saying that they lived again as refugees, but that time they were treated as refugees in their own country.

### **Y. Amichai (1924-2000)**

Y. Amichai, born in Wurzburg, Germany, on May 3, 1924, is a famous poet and writer. In a similar situation like Darwish, he fled from Germany with his family in 1936 to Occupied Palestine. He served in the Jewish Brigade of the British Army during the



Second World War and fought with the Hebrew defense forces in the war that took place in 1948.

When the war was over, he attended the Hebrew University to study Biblical texts and Hebrew literature, and then worked as a teacher in secondary schools. He was regarded as an advocate of peace and reconciliation between the warring nations although he personally took part in World War II and in the War of Independence, the 1956 Sinai War and then in the war of 1973 against Egypt. He died on September 22, 2000. He had so many literary collections including "Poems" (1969), "Songs of Jerusalem and Myself" (1973), "Amen" (1977), "Jerusalem Poems" (1988), and "Even the Fist Was Once an Open Palm with Fingers" (1991). Amichai also wrote some plays, reviews, novels, short stories, and essays.

The transition from a refugee, to a soldier, a teacher, and finally a poet shows us an important feature of his poetic "self" which is contradiction that is very vivid in most of poetry in which he talks about war and its devastating impact on people, although he himself participated in a war against the same people he was attacking in poems.



On the other side, the self-image of Darwish's poetry is mainly concentrated on corresponding with others, establishing his poetic "self" upon seeking peace, selflessness, the desire to spread welfare among all people. In his poem "Think of Others," readers can understand that the image of his poetic "self" that is common in many of his resistance poems reflects a series of suffering, exile, and alienation:

When you prepare your breakfast,  
Think of others!  
Remember the aliment of doves.  
When you're fording your wars,  
Think of others!  
Don't forget those who are seeking peace.  
When you rule the water bill,  
Think of others!  
Who breastfeed the clouds.  
  
When you're returning home, your own home,  
Think of others!  
Don't forget the refugee people.  
  
While you're counting the stars to sleep,  
Think of others!  
Some don't have a space to sleep.  
When you liberate yourself by metaphors,  
Think of others!



Who lost their right to speak.

When you're thinking of others, the distant,

Think of yourself!

Say: I wish I were a candle in the darkness!

(Translated by Mahmoud Shaheen, online)

Psychologically, the Jews' shock after the Holocaust left them with Schizophrenia believing themselves as being victims of the Holocaust and it was their right to settle down in any land and banish its inhabitants. This view is strengthened by Nietzsche who said that an individual who wages a fight against monsters has to be very cautious lest he himself, thereby, can be turned into a monster. In addition, symbolically, if a person stares at an abyss intently, the abyss will also stare at him ( Nietzsche 97).

Therefore, Amichai's participation in wars as a soldier and then working as a poet of peace haunted him with a tinge of poetic pathetic Fallacy and self-contradiction. Such an illusion and self-deception are manifested clearly during his meeting with "Paris Review" in which he said that all poetry was political because genuine poems tackle the matter of the human response to reality, and politics is part of that reality. He illustrated such opinion elaborating that even though a poet writes about staying in a glass house sipping tea, it also reflects politics. In his poem "Before":

Before the gate has been closed,

before the last question is posed,



before I am transposed.  
Before the weeds fill the gardens,  
before there are no pardons,  
before the concrete hardens.  
Before all the flute-holes are covered,  
before things are locked in their cupboard,  
before the rules are discovered.  
Before the conclusion is planned,  
before God closes his hand,  
before we have nowhere to stand.

(Translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell, online)

To prove the assumption that Amichai's poetic psychological hallucination in resistance poetry by manipulating the mind of readers through transference, we can have a close look at the two poems by Darwish and Amichai respectively:

-The first poem is entitled "To My Mother" by Darwish:

Dearly I yearn for my mother's bread,  
My mother's coffee,  
Mother's brushing touch.  
Childhood is raised in me,  
Day upon day in me.  
And I so cherish life  
Because if I died  
My mother's tears would shame me.

Set me, if I return one day,



As a shawl on your eyelashes, let your hand  
Spread grass out over my bones,  
Christened by your immaculate footsteps  
As on holy land.  
Fasten us with a lock of hair,  
With thread strung from the back of your dress.  
I could grow into godhood  
Commend my spirit into godhood  
If I but touch your heart's deep breadth.

Set me, if ever I return,  
In your oven as fuel to help you cook,  
On your roof as a clothesline stretched in your hands.  
Weak without your daily prayers,  
I can no longer stand.

I am old  
Give me back the stars of childhood  
That I may chart the homeward quest  
Back with the migrant birds,  
Back to your awaiting nest.

(translated by A.Z. Foreman, online)

The second poem is “My Mother Baked the Whole World for Me” by Amichai:

My mother baked the whole world for me  
In sweet cakes.



My beloved filled my window  
With raisins of stars.  
And my yearning closed inside me  
Like bubbles in a loaf of bread.  
On the outside, I am smooth and quiet and brown.  
The world loves me.  
But: my hair is sad as reeds in a drying swamp--  
All the rare birds with beautiful plumage  
Flee from me.

( translated by Benjamin Harshav, online)

With a simple glance into the two poems, one can easily elicit four major differences that refute Amichai's balance between the 'self' and the 'other'. In the first poem, the use of 'bread' is used metaphorically and symbolically indicating human survival, endurance and existence. There is, therefore, a feeling of deprivation and homesickness with a desire to return to safety, however, the second poem uses 'cake' ironically and symbolically as a method of longing for luxury and mundane pleasure. Secondly, the symbolism of 'mother' in the two poems is different. For the first poem, "mother" has a larger conception, that is 'the homeland', while in Amichai's case, it is a symbol of the political power that provides all the pleasures and support on the expense of 'the other'.

In frequent cases, poetry was written to authorize and systematize imperialism in order to subjugate poor and non-resistant countries. Resistance, by and large, has a dual phase:



the genuine resistance and camouflage. It is very like the lady who has reached an old age and found herself between two options: to face the real world with the real face, or to hide behind Botox injections. In the first choice, she will express a real resistance with a complete fight behind each wrinkle, while in the latter, she will clear the history of life, and as a result, she will appear as a freak and a deformed grotesque. Consequently, the second choice is not a resistance to aging but a mere camouflage. Also Buddha showed that resistance does not come to end till the resistance poet feels a complete independence of his poetic "self" through a complete independence of his country. He had a common view that during the confrontation between the stream and the rock, the stream is always victorious, not through powerfulness, rather through its persistence. Also, "The difference between perseverance and obstinacy is, that one often comes from a strong will, and the other from a strong won't."

The Hebrew literature has cleared part of the history of Palestine and smudged it with the ink of Balfour Declaration. Balfour Declaration that was issued on November 2, 1917, is a promise of the British authorities that they will support the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine. That declaration was arranged through a letter from the British foreign secretary, Arthur James Balfour, to a leader of British Jewry, Lionel Walter Rothschild. The letter said that the British authorities viewed with eagerness the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine, and they would exert their best efforts to



facilitate the achievement of that object (The Avalon Project, 1917).

Traditionally, when communities talk about majorities, they do not mention the rights of the minorities. However, the above declaration talks about the majorities, the Palestinian, as if they were a small faction to be ignored. However, the year 1916 signified 400 years since Palestine had been assigned as part of the Ottoman Empire, with a Jewish existence represented in a small population regarded as a small minority, about 3 % of the total population in Palestine. In his book “*On War*,” Carl von Clausewitz states that the colonialists always show that they are peace-loving, and they would rather take over a peaceful country unopposed. He also assumes that hostility may be intrinsic in one of the conflicting sides because some motive of hostility must have brought them to such a situation when they become ready to start a war. Moreover, as long as they continue their fight using every possible weapon, it means that the same motive of hostility must still be in progress. There is only one consideration that can refrain it, which is, the inclination to have some patience and wait for a suitable moment before putting war into action. Such inclination can not be effective unless both sides accept it and have a complete satisfaction with that solution because if only one side accepts it and the other refuses it, war will ultimately comes into reality between them (Clausewitz 82).

Therefore, the “self” and the “other” must reach an agreement on certain issues if they want a compromise. A close



look into the poem, “Do Not Accept,” by Amichai will demonstrate the sluggish sneaking into the (Home) which reveals and uncovers the original imperialist “self” which Amichai tried hard to conceal:

A) . Step One: Sneaking”

Do not accept these rains that come too late.

Better to linger. Make your pain

An image of the desert. Say it's said

And do not look to the west. Refuse

To surrender. Try this year too

To live alone in the long summer,

Eat your drying bread, refrain

From tears. And do not learn from

Experience. Take as an example my youth,

My return late at night, what has been written

In the rain of yesteryear. It makes no difference

Now. See your events as my events.

Everything will be as before: Abraham will again

Be Abram. Sarah will be Sarai.

(Translated by Benjamin & Barbara Harshav, online)

In the poem above, the scenario of occupation started in the dark (late at night), and the Declaration of Balfour was (written) to assist their malicious plan during the conflict between the two cultures and religions, but it did not abstain them from creeping into the Palestinian land (no difference now), then they altered the



Islamic and Arabic culture into Jewish customs in an attempt to impose their Jewish traditions (Abram- Sarai).

#### B). Step two: The illusion of victimization

The second step of this illusion is to allege to be victimized. Amichai reveals this step in his poem (I Don't Know If History Repeats Itself), as follows:

I don't know if history repeats itself  
But I do know that you don't.  
I remember that the city was divided  
Not only between Jews and Arabs,  
But between me and you,  
When we were there together.  
We made ourselves a womb of danger  
We built ourselves a house of deadening wars  
(Translated by Glenda Abramson and Tudor Parfitt)

In this same poem, we find the second step of occupation: To divide the city as if it were an inherited right, then speaking about the city as their own property. More surprisingly, he claims that the Palestinians are the Jews' accomplice in the crime of dividing and destroying the city (We made ourselves a womb of danger).

#### C). Step Three: being victims alone

The exaggeration in Amichai's poetry is to visualize Palestine as their own land and farther to accuse the Palestinians of being terrorists, just because they defend their land. Such



manifestation is presented in this step of poetry in Amichai's poem "Yad Mordchai:"

Yad Mordchai: Those who fell here  
Still look out of the windows like sick children  
Who are not allowed outside to play.  
And on the hillside, the battle is reenacted.

(Translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld,  
online)

Reversely, the above poem portrays Jews as victims of the war waged by the Palestinians. And in the poem, "The Little Park Planted," Amichai is charging the Palestinians with murder:

The little park planted in memory of a boy  
who fell in the war begins  
to resemble him  
.....  
as he was twenty eight years ago.  
Year by year they look more alike.  
His old parents come almost daily  
to sit on a bench  
and look at him.

In this poem, Amichai is attempting to draw a universal feeling of commiseration toward them after the admonitory tone in the other poems like "Ein Yahav": "Hope must be a minefield."

The final step of occupation is a state of denial. In some cases of psychology, the patient feels guilty, and then he or she uses transference to relieve such feeling and maintains his or her



plea under control. In many cases the patient claims to be the martyr of others' oppression and the unfair world. It is the same situation when Amichai expresses the agony he received from the cruelty of the world. More defiantly, he depicts martyrdom of the Jews who fell due to the Palestinian uprising. This state of denial can be seen in Amichai's declaration in one of his poems:

We forget where we came from. Our Jewish  
names from the Exile give us away,

.....

in this dark land with its  
yellow shadows that pierce the eyes?

(Translated by Chana Bloch, online)

And in "Memorial Day for the Ward Dead," we find a state of linguistic hallucination which is a state of defending nothing for the survival of nothing, which semantically leads the readers to laughing frantically:

A flag loses contact with reality and flies off.

A shopwindow is decorated with

dresses of beautiful women, in blue and white.

And everything in three languages:

Hebrew, Arabic, and Death.

There a strategy called "Bait and Bleed" which is adopted by Amichai in his poetry. This strategy means inducing the opposing parties to get involved into a mortal conflict till they bleed each



other while the inducer stays unharmed. This is when the Jews throw missiles on the Palestinians and accuse them of hostility to respond with stones. This is evident in Amichai's poem "Temporary Poem of My Time:"

They throw the land, want to get rid of it.

Its stones, its soil, but you can't get rid of it.

They throw stones, throw stones at me

In 1936, 1948, 1988,

Semites throw at Semites and anti-Semites at anti-Semites,

Evil men throw and just men throw

.....

The past throws stones at the future,

Please do not throw any more stones,

You are moving the land.

(Translated by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav, online)

Therefore, the dichotomy between the "self" and "the piece of writing" creates a state of unreliability. Darwish wrote under siege and in prison while Amichai wrote behind the shield of weapons and allies. There is an immense distinction between someone who is writing poetry while sipping a cup of coffee and watching clashes on TV, and another writing poetry while suffering imprisonment and exile, the same difference between officials who pass laws at their air-conditioned offices and the workers executing the same laws in the heat of the sun.

Moreover, similarly, there is a folktale included within Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, that explains how the tortoise



came to have a cracked shell. According to that legend, the starving tortoise who was so renowned for his cunning sweet tongue and volubility, was able to convince all the birds to take him to visit their hosts in the sky. Immediately on agreeing to his proposal, each of the birds provided the tortoise with a feather and accepted his suggestion that they should have new names for the occasion. Interestingly, the tortoise got the name “All of you.”

Through this linguistic manipulation, he managed to obtain the best part of the food and palm wine served at the feast in the sky. The furious birds, then, decided to take back their feathers, leaving the tortoise stranded high above the earth. However, the parrot, strangely, agreed to deliver a message to the tortoise’s wife asking her to provide a soft landing spot for her husband. The parrot changed part of the message and the tortoise landed in a pile of hoes, matchets, spears, guns, and even cannon which were taken from his home. The medicine man in the village had to stick back together all the bits of the tortoise’s shell. That is why, according to the Igbo story, the tortoise’s shell is not smooth (Harlow 14).

Achebe’s novel was written during the European colonization in Nigeria and the folktale included was taken symbolically as an allegory for an African technique for independence. The tortoise represents the colonial power in his successful endeavor to manipulate the language to control and subjugate the birds, the colonized people. All the possessions in



his house indicate the military equipment. Furthermore, the birds were very submissive till they learned to communicate with the “other” by using the very weapons which the tortoise had wielded against them. Consequently, in resistance poetry, the poet attempts to correspond with his or her counterpart in a similar linguistic strategy (Harlow 15).

The camouflage technique adopted by some poets to convey the literary message can be legalized in terms of literary defense, and the catharsis extracted from Achebe’s folktale is that the linguistic skill of rhetoric, together with the armed struggle, is crucial in the process of the literary resistance against domination and hegemony. Therefore, the lifelong struggle for independence and liberation on the part of colonized peoples against socio-economic and literary hegemony to obtain independence of the “self” thoroughly and show their respect to the “other” that literature, like the resistance and national liberation poetry, demands recognition of its independent status (Harlow 15).

Generally, the “self” can be modified according to the land, but the land can not be modified according to the “self,” that is, according to the common saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Therefore, Amichai who could not defend his homeland in Germany against the Nazis, tried hard to defend his alleged so-called homeland against the armless people of Palestine. In “*Returning to Haifa*,” Khaldoun, with the Jewish name Dov, tells his father that Mariam and Evrat were not his parents until three or four years before, and since the time he was



a little child he was a Jew as he went to a Jewish school, went to the synagogue, studied Hebrew language, and ate Kosher food. Nevertheless, when they informed him of his Arabic origin and that he was not their son, that matter did not change anything. And even he was learned that his true parents were Arabs, still nothing changed. He commented on that incident by telling them that it's man who is the main issue (Kanafani 131).

Truly, it is something innate implanted in human beings to defend homeland, whatsoever land. In this case, if it is Amichai's intuition to defend the land where he was living since he was 11 years old with every rhetoric means and every weapon of literary resistance. Hence, it is also the right of Darwish to fight back to express the existence of Palestine where he was born and to assert his Palestinian "self" in his poetry.

The Trojan Horse is a tale narrated during the Trojan War about falsification that the Greek used to get through the independent city of Troy and gained victory. After 10 years of siege went in vain, the Greek managed to deceive the city guards by building a huge wooden horse and stuff it with a selected group of very powerful soldiers. The Greek, then, pretended to have failed and started to sail away, and the Trojans dragged the horse inside the city and accepted it as a victory trophy. At night when no one was paying attention, the hidden soldiers started to creep out of the horse and succeeded in opening the gate for the rest of the Greek soldiers who had sailed back in the darkness.



The Greek eventually intruded and destroyed the city of Troy, winning the war.

Figuratively, the Trojan Horse has been frequently used to mean any deceptive techniques or stratagem which seduce and cause a targeted foe to get involved into a war inside a securely protected arena. Chinua Achebe came to express such deception accurately in his novel, "Things Fall Apart" when he mentioned similar tricks on the tongue of one the major characters warning the other natives against the outlanders whose major target is turn things upside down and change people's attitude toward the "other," the colonialists. In the novel, one of the major phrases that talk the confusion of identifying the "self" is as follows, "How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have Fallen apart" (Achebe 176).

In his poem "In the Middle of This Century," Amichai refers to the matter of the Trojan Horse as follows:

I stroked your hair

In the opposite direction to your journey,

And the anesthetic injection is shot towards the end of the poem:

Lovely is the world falling asleep to sing and pity

(Translated by Assia Gutmann)

Notably, the construction of the poetic linguistic barrier that isolates Amichai's 'self' from the outside world is a huge plan to



suffocate the 'other's' language. Although this wall or barrier is a symbol of lack of contact and congregation, it can be seen metaphorically as the difference between chalk and cheese, that is to say, the right and misleading right:

The wall is in your head

to exist

is to resist

(Written for the Oppressor, Zapatista Army, Mexico)

While true resistance poetry is directed to enlightening the minds of people, false resistance poetry aims at misleading and blinding the minds of public opinion. A central theme encoded by Steve Biko, a South African anti-apartheid activist, is the notion of psychological liberation as a prerequisite for political freedom which shows that the most powerful weapon that may fall in the hands of the oppressor is the intellect of the oppressed.

In resistance poetry, land means identity and the loss of land means loss of identity which leads to a sense of alienation, and the search for identity is exactly the major quest of the poet. In his pursuit to restore his identity, the poet is trying to regain his pure 'self' by defending his land. If he succeeds to catch the attention of people, he then succeeds to deliver his message through poetry. Therefore, if the individual has free heart, no artificial chains will imprison him in servitude, but if the individual's mind is very controlled and manipulated by the oppressor, then there won't be anything the oppressed may do to frighten his influential cunning masters (Biko 92).



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الهوية والمقاومة في شعر كل من  
محمود درويش و ي. اميكاي

إعداد

عصام محمد السعداوي زكي محمود

أ.د. عبدالجواد النادي

أستاذ بقسم اللغة الانجليزية كلية الآداب \_ جامعة طنطا

د. معتز السروجي

أستاذ مساعد اللغة الانجليزية كلية الآداب \_ جامعة طنطا

**المستخلص:**

يتناول هذا البحث بشكل تحليلي التوجهات في شعر المقاومة بالاضافة الي ذلك فإن البحث يتيح فرصة الكشف عن العوامل المؤثرة علي شعرالمقاومة كل منهما وكيف أثرت التجارب الشخصية والخارجية علي الجوانب النفسية في استخدام مفردات معينة داخل القصائد المتضمنة في شعر كل من محمود درويش و ي. اميكاي. كما ان من بين الدوافع التي أثرت في الشاعر لكتابة شعر المقاومة تتضمن الصدمة، المنفي، البعد الاجباري عن الوطن. كما أن النتيجة التي يقدمها البحث تكشف بعض المعايير التي توافق شعر المقاومة

**الكلمات الافتتاحية:** الذات - الآخر - الشتات - الاغتراب - المقاومة - درويش- اميكاي