

Rebuilding the Homeland: National Identity in the Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish and Abdullah Goran

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Abstract

The Palestinians and the Kurds are two peoples whose national identities have been fractured as a direct result of the colonial oppression that has gradually rescinded their ownership of their lands. While the continued occupation of historical Palestine since the Nakba (Catastrophe) of 1948 alongside the unabating marginalization of the Kurds since the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire have fragmented their nationhood, these events have aroused a stronger force of resistance that is deeply rooted in their relationship with the homeland. The emergence of literary movements in both regions during the 20th century supplied the Palestinians and the Kurds with a channel to express their spirit of resistance. This article explores how Mahmoud Darwish's and Abdullah Goran's poetry advances Palestinian and Kurdish nationalist aspirations, respectively, to reconstruct and disseminate their national identities. It argues that the metaphorical representation of the relationship between the people and the homeland in their poetry serves to bolster both groups' right to self-determination through sowing nationalist fervor in the active consciousness of their readers.

Keywords: Palestine, Kurdistan, National Identity, Mahmoud Darwish, Abdullah Goran, Poetry of Resistance

A people's national identity may be defined, at the simplest level, as a community of individuals who share "a set of characteristics" that was traditionally referred to as a "national character,"¹ and is "intrinsically tied to political sovereignty."² While a nation is conceptually uniform, it arguably cannot enjoy the independence of a state if it cannot exert political control over the boundaries of its own territory. The Palestinians and the Kurds exemplify this case as two nations that have a unique national identity but exist as scattered "minorities" across a "number of states."³ These groups have been subjected to many years of violent colonization at the hands of foreign actors who have diminished their ownership of the land, and consequently fractured their national identity—an identity that, as a result of this fracturing, is even more strongly defined by the relationship between the people and their homeland.⁴ Their national identities have been shaped by the major social and political changes in the fabric of Palestinian and Kurdish societies during the 20th century, which are reflected in the poetry from both regions. This poetry describes the long for a homeland but also aims to metaphorically rebuild the land, now lost. This article takes a critical and comparative look at the work of two seminal poets—Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) and Abdullah Goran (1904–1962)—and analyzes how they textually depict the relationship with the homeland to reinscribe and disseminate Palestinian and Kurdish national identity, respectively.

Working from the logic of David Miller's notion that "every nation must have a homeland," since the very beginning of the Zionist project in the late 19th century, one could argue that Palestine has lost its sense of nationhood—in the classical sense of the term—as a direct consequence of the insidious annexation of its land, which is today referred to as the "Occupied

Palestinian Territories."⁵ This process was initially motivated by the Zionist settler movement's objective to reestablish a "Jewish national home"⁶ in a "land without a people for a people without a land."⁷ This Zionist settler-colonial project culminated in 1948 with the *Nakba*, or catastrophe, during which Israeli forces razed and depopulated more than 400 Palestinian villages, leading to the expulsion of approximately 700,000 Palestinians. A smaller population of 160,000 remained and became Israeli citizens.⁸ This tragedy was coeval with the establishment of the state of Israel and the deterioration of Palestinian political power, as well as the *Judaizing* of the land and the polity.⁹ Palestine has been repeatedly neglected in Israeli political rhetoric, demonstrated by the numerous laws that favour the dominance of "Jewish goals and interests," and actively discriminate against Palestinian Arabs.¹⁰ The Palestinians' several attempts at reclaiming their lost homeland since have been consistently suppressed, while Israel has continued to expand its control beyond the internationally recognized 'green line' borders following the 1967 War.¹¹ That being said, rather than quashing the Palestinians' hopes for the "Right of Return" to the historical homeland, their hardships have given rise to an empowering wave of resistance, which is addressed by the metaphorical reconstruction of the land in Darwish's *A Lover from Palestine* (1966), one of Darwish's earlier poems.

Literature played an instrumental role in bringing the Palestinian force of resistance to full consciousness amid the struggle against Zionism. Key Poets of Resistance such as Mahmoud Darwish—termed "Palestine's unofficial national poet"¹²—and Samih al-Qasim strove to "legitimate the cause of their people."¹³ They used poetry as a vehicle to express the strong attachment of the people to the homeland, in an attempt to rebuild a sense of nationhood. As Dayla Cohen-Mor writes,

Darwish's work helped "shape and foster Palestinian identity and culture" through reminding the Palestinians of the features of their identity that set them apart from other nations.¹⁴ Darwish's poetry oftentimes reflects his experience of exile when Zionist militias uprooted him and his family from Palestine at a young age.¹⁵ However, despite the transient nature of his life, his poems accurately depict the undying love harbored by the Palestinians for their homeland. Darwish plays a critical role in foregrounding the relationship between Palestinians and their land in their consciousness. This paper analyzes the metaphorical depiction of this relationship in *A Lover from Palestine*, which enables him to reconstruct a sense of Palestinian national identity.

The structure of the perennial conflict between Palestine and Israel is mirrored in the situation of the Kurds. As the "largest nation in the world" without an independent state spread across Turkey, Iran, Syria, Iraq, and the countries of the Caucasus,¹⁶ the Kurdish nation has suffered persistent defilement at the hands of foreign rulers, such that they are often described as "victims of history."¹⁷ The Ottoman and Persian empires ruled over the Kurds from the 16th to the 19th centuries, after which they came under the power of governments in neighboring countries following World War I.¹⁸ Despite the fact that the Kurds were able to successfully establish some order of authority following the downfall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, they struggled to "sustain their resistance against the Islamic Republic."¹⁹ Kurdish activists in Iraq and Turkey were similarly stifled, with many of them thrown into prison and blacklisted for demanding equality and recognition of their identity.²⁰ Their national identity was further threatened with erasure by the notorious Anfal policy in Iraq, which led to the destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages and towns as well as the genocidal murder of

approximately 182,000 Kurds.²¹ These brutal colonial practices have severely damaged the Kurds' feeling of nationalism, but have also sparked a stronger movement of resistance that has bolstered their claim to political independence. This nationalist movement can be traced in literature back to the work of Ahmed-e Khani (1650-1707)—author of the national epic poem *Mem û Zîn* (Mem and Zin), which is known as the Kurdish *Romeo and Juliet*—and Haji Qadir Koyi (1817-1897), who was considered to be the "forerunner" of Kurdish "modern nationalist thinking."²² These authors' ideas laid the bedrock for the development of politically-committed contemporary poets such as Abdullah Goran, whose work forms the secondary focus of this paper.

Born in Halabja, Sulaymaniyah (modern-day Iraq) in 1904, Abdullah Goran made a significant contribution to the development of the Kurdish poetic domain. This poetry was closely tied to the "expansion of Kurdish nationalism" during the 20th century,²³ given the function it served as a "language for and of the people" to express their Kurdishness.²⁴ As one of the most well-known contemporary Kurdish poets of his time, Goran's work focused on the metaphorical representation of the "spiritual relationship" between the Kurds and the homeland as a unique dimension of Kurdish national identity.²⁵ As such, he empowers the common Kurd especially as many of his poems were turned into songs and passed down by "ordinary people" via oral tradition.²⁶ The latter part of this article concentrates on the way Goran presents his relationship with the beloved homeland in his poem *Desire* (1950) as a remedy to the Kurds' predicament to reconstruct key facets of Kurdish national identity.

With these notions in mind, this paper ultimately aims to argue that the work of Mahmoud Darwish and Abdullah Goran

disseminates key features of Palestinian and Kurdish national identity, respectively, to empower their people to reassemble the fragments of their national identity. Toward this end, both poets arouse the hope of return to the lost homeland and compel the Palestinians and the Kurds to fight for their respective causes. Owing to the limited purview of this article, I have chosen to focus only on two poems: Mahmoud Darwish's extended poem *Āshiq min filastīn* (*A Lover from Palestine*, 1966), and Abdullah Goran's poem *Desire* (1950). My analysis is focused primarily on Darwish's work, where I intend to address how Darwish dynamically depicts the homeland to highlight the strength of his people's relationship with it. This section draws on my own analysis of my primary source as well as the more political theories of scholars including David Miller and Benedict Anderson.²⁷ I will then focus the secondary section of my investigation on the way that Goran, like Darwish, helps engender solidarity among the Kurds through similarly depicting the homeland as simultaneously fractured and beautiful to instill a stronger feeling of patriotism within the Kurds.²⁸

Whereas an armed form of resistance helps a nation regain some physical control over their land, as exemplified by the formation of the Kurdish republic in 1945²⁹ and the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a literary form of resistance lends itself to the restoration of a metaphysical form of control in the face of oppression. While the former admittedly drives short-term change, the latter keeps a sense of national unity alive in the consciousness of the masses over the long term. As Ghassan Kanafani rightly notes, Palestinian resistance poetry eternally serves as a "fortress" of Palestinian "resistance" (*qal'at al-muqāwama*).³⁰

Palestine as Fragmented

As one of the most influential Palestinian Poets of Resistance of the 20th century, and arguably the "most gifted of his generation" in the Arab world, the voice of Mahmoud Darwish has been instrumental in bringing the trauma and the political demands of the Palestinians to the fore,³¹ especially in the West. *A Lover from Palestine* revolves around Darwish's relationship with his beloved, who represents the homeland and with whom he has an "extended and desperate love affair."³² Drawing on the theories of Salam Mir, Nasser Abufarha and others, I argue that Darwish dynamically portrays the homeland in three distinct states to empower his people: the homeland as (1) broken or fragmented, yet (2) resilient, and ultimately (3) elegant. Mir argues that the literature, and specifically poetry, that arose from the "colonial threat" facing Palestine in the 20th century helped spur a resistance movement and embodied the Palestinian spirit of resilience amid their political dispossession³³; in a similar vein, Abufarha illustrates how the "symbolic representation" of the homeland reflects the depth of the attachment to the land and is the key to understanding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.³⁴ Working from these theories, I ultimately argue that Darwish uses his—and by extension his people's—relationship with the homeland to keep key facets of national identity in the Palestinian national consciousness. This ultimately enables him to rebuild a stronger sense of what it means to be a Palestinian both within and outside the Occupied Territories.

Darwish frames his relationship with the homeland in such a way that its fragmentation becomes an empowering source of resilience in an effort to reconstruct Palestinian national identity. Darwish addresses the division of his homeland in the stanza below, where he recalls how he and his

beloved were once together “behind a door” (*warā’ al-bāb*):

وأنسى، بعد حين، في لقاء العين بالعين

بأثارة مرة كَثًا، وراء الباب، اثنين! ³⁵

When our eyes meet, I soon forget
That once, behind a door,
We were two. ³⁶

Given that the 1948 *Nakba* entailed the forced expulsion of the Palestinians from the “doors” of their homes and the underlying sense of *bāb* as gate, Darwish’s “doors” arguably serve as a literal and metaphorical gateway separating historical Palestine (the internal space that constitutes his “house”), and exilic life (the external space). However, even though Darwish distinguishes between these two spaces, he forgets that the boundaries ever existed when he and the beloved, meaning the homeland, lock eyes. As such, he suggests that the love for the homeland transcends boundaries, demonstrating the ability of metaphor to transfer the meaning of ‘home and belonging’ across distances. ³⁷ The reader is further reminded of the deep attachment of the Palestinians to their homeland when Darwish refers to the departure of his lover’s “words” from his house:

كلامك، كالسنونو، طار من بيتي

فهاجر باب منزلنا، وعتبتنا الخريفية

وراءك، حيث شاء الشوق....

Like swallows, your words took
wing,
Led by love,
They migrated from the gate of our
house
And its autumnal threshold. ³⁸

The migration of his beloved homeland’s “words” from the “gate” of their “house” and its “autumnal threshold” symbolizes the

forced departure of the thousands of Palestinians during the *Nakba*. The use of the verb “migrated” (*hājara*) contains the trace of the homeland and reflects its continued existence by virtue of indicating a departure from it. Darwish accordingly attempts to instill the “hope of ‘Return’” to historical Palestine in those who yet hold on to the keys that unlock the doors of the homes they left behind. ³⁹ With that being said, the Arabic could also be read as referring to the migration of the “gate” itself and as such the borders that separate the Palestinians from the homeland. These borders serve as a harbinger of the fate of the homeland; their instability arguably reflects the shrinking Palestinian lands as well as the hope for expansion of such borders. It also refers to the ever-growing Palestinian diaspora that hopes to return one day. The gradual loss of the homeland further lends itself to the reconstruction of Palestinian identity in the poem. Darwish captures the Israeli misconception that Palestinians are “present absentees” in their own homeland within the construction of the beloved as a lost “traveler” (*musāfir*): ⁴⁰

رأيتك أمس في الميناء

مسافرة بلا أهل... بلا زاد

Yesterday I saw you at the harbor;
You were a lonely voyager, without
people or provisions. ⁴¹

Darwish sees his beloved at the ‘harbor’ (*mīnā*), without her “people” (*ahl*) or any “provisions” (*zād*). With the “harbor” functioning as a point of departure and a portal, similar to the “gate” of Darwish’s house, one may argue that it is precisely the loss of her “people” that has driven the homeland to this metaphorical state of departure. This trope of absolute loss is reinforced by the repetition of the prepositional phrase *bi-lā*, which reflects the

status of Palestinian Arabs in Israel as “citizens without citizenship.”⁴² This image accordingly evokes the void that characterizes Palestinians who, like Darwish, suffer the “tragic toll of exilic life.”⁴³ This feeling of loss resulting from the fragmentation of the homeland is further reflected later on in the poem when Darwish refers to the homeland as a “shepherdess without sheep” (*rā‘iya bi-lā anghām*):

رأيتُك في جبال الشوك
راعيةً بلا أغنام
مطاردةً، وفي الأطلال...

I saw you on briar-covered
mountains;
You were a shepherdess without
sheep,
Pursued among the ruins.

In presenting his beloved homeland as a “shepherdess without sheep” (*rā‘iya bi-lā anghām*), lost among the “briar-covered mountains” (*jibāl al-shawk*), Darwish repaints the image of a broken, stranded figure to highlight the damage—material as well as emotional and psychological—wrought by the Zionist annexation of Palestine. The assimilation of the homeland to a “shepherdess” who has been separated from her sheep but yet looks for them among the “ruins” (*aṭlāl*) lends the homeland an endearing quality in that she yearns to recover the core essence she was stripped of. The anthropomorphization of the homeland also gives it agency, at least within the diegetic space of the poem; this, in a sense, challenges the supposed helplessness of the Palestinians.

In addition to the image of the shepherdess, this loss of the homeland is further reflected in the symbolism of the “orange peel” (*qishr al-burtuqal*):

وأكتب في مفكرتي:
أحبُّ البرتقال . وأكره الميناء
وأردف في مفكرتي :
على الميناء
وقفْتُ . وكانت الدنيا عيونَ شتاءٍ
وقشر البرتقال لنا . وخلفي كانت الصحراء!

And I wrote in my diary:
“I love the orange, but hate the
harbor.”
I stood at the harbor
And watched the world with eyes of
winter.
Only the orange peel is ours.
Behind me was the desert.

While recounting what he wrote in his journal about the port, Darwish, in declaring that the “orange peel” (*qishr al-burtuqāl*) belongs only to him and his beloved, asserts his and his beloved’s ownership of the homeland. Given the significance of the Jaffa orange from the Palestinian coastal plains as a symbol of Palestinian “pride,”⁴⁴ Darwish uses the absence of its core to draw attention to the “robbed nationhood,”⁴⁵ demonstrated by the destruction of numerous coastal towns at the hands of Zionist militias.⁴⁶ However, insofar as the fruit’s core constitutes the essence of the nation, one may argue that its peel symbolizes its “outer layer”: Palestine’s borders. The retention of the orange peel thus empowers the Palestinians and serves as a reminder of their true ownership over the homeland.

Palestine as Resilient

As noted in the beginning of this chapter, the wounds of Palestine are transmuted into a source of endurance in Darwish’s poetry and ultimately serve to reinscribe physical and emotional resilience as an integral part of Palestinian national identity. The depiction of

this facet of Palestinian identity is rooted in the symbiotic relationship between Darwish and the beloved homeland in the first stanza from *A Lover from Palestine*:

عيونك شوكة في القلب
توجعني... وأعبدها
وأحميها من الريح
وأغمدها وراء الليل والأوجاع...
أغمدها

Your eyes are a thorn in the heart;
It pains me, yet I adore it
And shelter it from the wind
I plunge it into my flesh
Hiding it from night and
sorrow

As previously noted, Darwish anthropomorphizes the homeland throughout the poem, referring to her eyes as a “thorn” (*shawka*) that pierces his “heart” (*qalb*) and causes him pain. Even though the “thorn” hurts him, he diligently protects her eyes, which points to Darwish’s celebration of Palestine’s resistance in the face of the trauma it has undergone. As Abufarha suggests in his interpretation of natural symbols in Palestinian culture, the thorns alone on the outer layer of the cactus—a salient feature of the Palestinian countryside—have protective properties, and symbolize the “rugged” lives of the *fellahin*, or peasants/farmers.⁴⁷ Darwish reiterates this sense of resilience in the same stanza when referring to the literal “wound[s]” (*jurh*) inflicted on the homeland, rendering her a site of resistance to Zionism:

فيشعل جرحها ضوء
المصابيح
ويجعل حاضري غدها
أعز علي من روعي

And its wound ignites the
light of stars.
My present makes its future
Dearer to me than my soul.

Rather than weakening her, the homeland’s wounds constitute a source of strength and power the light of “stars” (*maṣābīḥ*), reflecting the Palestinians’ persistence and hope among the darkness of their trauma. Where such “wounds” arise from the damage wrought by the war and expulsions of 1947–49, in Darwish’s poem, they embody the “spirit of resistance” that characterizes Palestinian national identity.⁴⁸ Darwish similarly depicts the Palestinians’ tragedy in a positive light as he addresses the “elegy” of the homeland:

وانكسرت مرايانا
فصار الحزن ألفين
وللمنا شظايا الصوت...
لم نتقن سوى مرتبة الوطن!
سنزرعها معاً في صدر جيتار
وفق سطوح نكبتنا، سنعرفها
لأقمار مشوهة... وأحجار

Our broken mirrors shattered
My sorrow into a thousand
pieces;
We gathered the splinters of
sound.
We could perfect only our
homeland’s elegy.
We will plant it in the heart of
a guitar
And play it on the terraces of
our tragedy
To mutilated moons and to
stones.⁴⁹

Even though Darwish and
Palestinians’ “mirrors” (*marāya*)

have been shattered, he and his homeland reconstruct their national identity with the “perfection” (*nutqin*) of the “homeland’s elegy” (*marthiyat al-waṭan*); Darwish uses this phrase to frame the tragedy of Palestine as both lamentable and beautiful. He goes on to describe how they immortalize this elegy atop the “terraces” (*suṭūh*) of their “tragedy” (*nakba*). Although one may read the “terraces” as a symbol of the great height of their tragedy, I would like to suggest an additional reading: that it symbolizes the overcoming of such a tragedy, considering that it lies inferior to Darwish and his lover, enabling him to articulate a “conscious identity” out of the Palestinians’ predicament.⁵⁰ The overcoming of this tragedy is further reflected later in the poem when Darwish refers to the defilement of the Palestinian land itself:

لماذا تُسحبُ البيّارة الخضراء
إلى سجن، إلى منفى، إلى
ميناء
وتبقى، رغم رحلتها
ورغم روائح الأملاح
والأشواق،
تبقى دائماً خضراء؟

Why does the green orange
grove—
Dragged to prison, exile, and
port,
And in spite of its travels
In spite of the scent of salt and
longing—
Why does it always remain
green?⁵¹

Darwish here expresses his bewilderment at the fact that his homeland, referenced as the

“green orange grove” (*bayyāra khaḍrā*), remains green despite having experienced imprisonment (*sijn*) and exile (*manfā*). This metaphor suggests that the Palestinian land remains fertile despite the violence it has been subjected to. Not only are the orange groves that cover the coastal plains of historical Palestine such an important symbol of the “product” and livelihood of the nation, but they also are common tropes in Palestinian literature that work “to keep the memory [of the homeland] alive.”⁵² The way that the groves’ color remains intact reflects the failure of the Zionist project to completely suppress the Palestinian force of resistance.⁵³ To this end, Darwish presents the homeland as both a site of his homeland’s suffering as well as the resistance to its colonization.⁵⁴

Palestine as Beautiful

As Darwish frames the homeland’s tragedy such that it empowers and reminds Palestinians of a core part of their identity, he expresses the beauty of the homeland and the critical need to cultivate it. This key trope enables him to highlight the close attachment of the people to the land, which underpins their claim to an independent state:

فلسطينية العنين والوشم

فلسطينية الاسم

فلسطينية الأحلام والهَمّ

فلسطينية المنديل والقدمين والجسم

فلسطينية الكلمات والصمتِ

فلسطينية الصوتِ

فلسطينية الميلاد والموتِ

Her eyes and tattoo are
Palestinian;

Her name is Palestinian;

Her dreams and sorrows;
Her veil, her feet and body;
Her words and silence are
Palestinian;
Her birth...her death.⁵⁵

Darwish refers to his beloved's eyes and tattoo as "Palestinian," ascribing human features to the homeland to highlight the symbiotic connection between the humans and the physical land. The woman essentially, and also materially, is Palestinian—her name (a rather metaphysical notion), but also her veil and tattoo (topical or bodily elements); the homeland is a pure embodiment of Palestinian identity. Considering that one actively chooses to have a tattoo engraved into their skin, I would argue that Darwish further empowers his people by showing how the Palestinians have proactively reinscribed their sense of nationhood into the very land itself.

The importance Darwish lays on the sheer name of Palestine lends itself to the veneration of the homeland as a strategy to reconstruct national identity. The reinscription of the homeland's identity is also demonstrated earlier on in the poem:

وأقسم:
من رموش العين سوف أخط منديلا
وأنقش فوقه شعراً لعينيك
واسما حين أسقيه فؤاداً ذاب ترتيلاً...
يمدُّ عرائش الأيك...
سأكتب جملة أعلى من الشهداء والقُبَل:
"فلسطينيةً كانت. ولم تزل"

I vow
To weave a veil from my eyelashes
And embroider it with verses for your
eyes
And with a name which,

When watered with a heart
That was melted with your love.
Would make trees grow green again.
I will write a sentence dearer than
martyrs and kisses:
"Palestinian she was and still is!"

Darwish "swears" (*uqsimu*) that he takes care of the homeland, waters her name, and writes down a sentence that is dearer, or more valuable, than "martyrs" and "kisses" (*aghlā min al-shuhadā' wa-l-qubal*) in an effort to preserve and cultivate the homeland: Darwish contends that his homeland was, and was always, Palestinian. The use of the negative perfective tense indicates that this action is completed and perhaps suggests that, contrary to my previous reading of the poem, she is no longer considered Palestinian in the present world. Nevertheless, considering that the verb 'I will write' in the previous line adopts the future tense, I would argue that Darwish memorializes this statement and frames it as a premise underlying the case for the future "Return" to the homeland.⁵⁶ Darwish accordingly reinscribes the homeland's name into the active part of the readership's consciousness.

Darwish's adoration of the homeland as a paragon of beauty is further illustrated by his assimilation of her speech to a melody, which is exemplified by the stanza below:

كلامك... كان أغنية
وكنت أحاول الإنشاد
ولكنَّ الشقاء أحاط بالشفة الربيعية
كلامك، كالسنونو، طار من بيتي

Your words were a song
I tried to sing,
But agony encircled the lips of spring
Like swallows, your words took
wing.

Darwish lends his beloved a harmonious nature as he likens her words to a melody, which he attempts to “recite” (*al-inshād*) himself. This verbal noun typically collocates with national and religious anthems, suggesting that Darwish idolizes and worships the homeland. This description of the homeland as a divine woman highlights the deep-seated, sacred love harbored by the Palestinians for their land. Darwish further recalls how, as Spring approached, his beloved’s words flew like a “swallow” (*sunūnū*) from his house. While the bird’s flight from Darwish’s house may figuratively reflect the Palestinians’ separation from the homeland, it also symbolizes the homeland’s elegant departure from its trauma, arousing optimism for the nation’s future.

Having fleshed out the nuances of Darwish’s relationship with the Palestinian homeland in *A Lover from Palestine*, it is clear that the poet makes a concerted effort to keep the Palestinian cause alive in the reader’s consciousness. Rather than merely accepting the destruction of the homeland as a weakness from which there is no rebound, Darwish accepts and compartmentalizes this tragedy, and presents it in such a way that empowers Palestinians and encourages them to be proud of this distinct feature of their national identity. This fiery defiance to colonial powers is echoed in the work of the renowned Kurdish poet Abdullah Goran, in which the symbiotic relationship between the people and the land similarly lends itself to the reconstruction of the national identity of a people who have similarly been severed from their homeland and are “threatened with erasure.”⁵⁷

Kurdistan as Dead

Just as Darwish’s portrayal of his beloved homeland in *A Lover from Palestine* serves to reconstruct national identity, Abdullah

Goran, who is considered to be one of the most “well-known Kurdish poets of the 20th century,” feminizes the homeland to generate a patriotic energy within the Kurds.⁵⁸ Throughout his work, Goran expresses how his feelings of anguish become alleviated by the reunion with his beloved Kurdish woman. Much of my analysis is predicated on the notion that this woman represents the homeland. I claim that Goran reconstructs Kurdish identity through reframing the connection between the people and the land in such a way that empowers the Kurds—his poetry’s supposed audience. In the following section, I analyze how Goran, akin to Darwish, presents the homeland in three mutually exclusive conditions in his poem *Desire*: Kurdistan as (1) decomposed, (2) reinvigorated, and finally (3) beautiful.

The death of nature in Goran’s *Desire* metaphorically reflects the insidious decomposition of Kurdistan:

In the sky of my hopes, the stars—
Thousands of bright and beautiful
regal stars
Were submerged in a dark, black sea,
And engaged with death, just like
broken flowers.⁵⁹

Goran describes how the “stars” that symbolize his “hopes” are subjected to death as they become “submerged” in “a dark, black sea.” This metaphor evokes the drowning of such “stars,” and a chiaroscuro between light and dark, producing the inorganic imbrication of sky and water. This unnatural image captures the physical and psychological damage done to the Kurdish landscape, which has shattered Goran’s—and the Kurds’—“hopes” of attaining statehood.⁶⁰ The word “regal” furthermore ascribes a royal, divine character to the sky of Goran’s “hopes,” suggesting that he had perhaps hoped for a more dignified society.

This sense of loss is amplified when Goran frames his dejected feelings as a part of his external environment later in the poem:

There was a time, when the gardens
of my life, were without music;
The nests of my nightingales were
without songs;
My dreams were not dreams, my
thoughts made no sense;
My feelings were like a disturbed
ocean under heavy waves;

His gardens' lack of harmony suggests that the homeland has been stripped of its fundamental function and purpose. The loss of the nightingales' ability to sing, of the rationality of Goran's thoughts, and of substance in his dreams point to the erasure of the homeland's identity, which has resulted from the "destruction" and multiple "massacres" of the Kurds.⁶¹ In the same fashion that Darwish reiterates the prepositional phrase *bi-lā* (without) in the context of the Palestinian environment in *A Lover from Palestine*, Goran associates the decomposition of nature with the hegemonic suppression of 'Kurdishness' to address the Kurdish cause.

Kurdistan as Reinvigorated

Following Goran's reunion with his beloved "lady," the decomposed landscape of Kurdistan becomes reinvigorated, as demonstrated by the stanzas below:

But my love, my sweet love, my
stunning lady;
With your rose red lips and dark black
eyes;

With your tall figure, so supple and
attractive;
With your sweet walks, graceful
movements, and melodious voice;

With all this exquisiteness in the
beauty of heavens;
With all the magnificence that is in
you;

From the first day that I saw the magic
of your smile,
The nightingales of my soul began to
sing

As soon as Goran notices his "stunning lady"—the woman who represents Kurdistan—his "soul" becomes reenergized. Given the aforementioned inseparability of nightingales from the melody they emit, the renewed ability of the "nightingales of [his] soul" to sing symbolizes the restoration of the environment's essence. Presupposing that the decomposition of nature symbolizes the disfiguration of Kurdish identity, this image emphasizes the deeply rooted relationship of the Kurds with the land; Goran as such helps rekindle the Kurdish spirit of "resistance" in light of his reconciliation with his beloved.⁶² The revitalization of the nature of the homeland is further demonstrated by the lines below:

The spring of my youth now flows
once more;
The gardens of my life are filled with
flowers

The reinvigoration of Goran's soul is further exemplified by the flow of the "spring" of his "youth" as well as his "gardens." The reunion with Goran's beloved lady relieves him of his depression resulting from the bereavement of his father, reflecting the depth of his ethereal connection with nature.⁶³ Considering that nature functions as a form of 'compensation' for suffering in Goran's poetry, the depiction of the Kurds' relationship with their homeland restores an integral part of their identity.⁶⁴ Whereas Goran's external

environment is only restored after seeing his lady, Darwish's luscious "green orange grove" retains its original color and character despite being subjected to colonial oppression, suggesting that Kurdistan is perhaps more vulnerable to the destruction from external actors.

Kurdistan as Graceful

In addition to the depiction of the resurrection of the homeland, Goran speaks to the elegance of his beloved lady to anchor a stronger sense of Kurdish national identity within the reader's consciousness:

But my love, my sweet love, my
stunning lady;
With your rose red lips and dark black
eyes;
With your tall figure, so supple and
attractive;
With your sweet walks, graceful
movements, and melodious voice;

Goran attributes a sensual, divine nature to the homeland by alluding to her "rose red lips," her "tall figure," and "melodious voice". In the same vein that Darwish anthropomorphizes the homeland in *A Lover from Palestine* through the depiction of his "love for the lost homeland,"⁶⁵ Goran utilizes these images to emphasize the rich beauty of the homeland as well as the Kurds' attraction to it and their "self-sacrificing love" for Kurdistan that often colors the cultural products of nationalism.⁶⁶ The corporeal form of Goran's lady is further illustrated by the stanza below:

Now my love, my goddess, my
Venus,
Don't permit the nightingale of my
poetry to stop singing.

Goran's assimilation of his beloved homeland to the "goddess" of "Venus,"

coupled with the repetition of the possessive pronoun "my," demonstrates the uniqueness of the case made for the Kurds' right to self-determination. Considering that the goddess of Venus mythologically embodies beauty, desire, and sex, this sexualized image reinforces the metaphysical entwining of the Kurds and the nation and their inseparability. The sheer acknowledgment of a Greek deity further sets the Kurdish cause apart from the nationalist aspirations of other states that disdain the idolization and eroticization of the homeland. Goran thus advances the Kurds' nationalist aims through emphasizing their spiritual ties to the homeland and the 'uniqueness' of their national identity vis-à-vis outsiders.⁶⁷

The previous two sections show that a comparative framework unlocks a more nuanced analysis of the methods that Darwish and Goran employ to reconstruct a sense of Palestinian and Kurdish national identity. Both poets depict the suffering faced by their nations and frame this sense of fragmentation as a source of resilience, to empower the Palestinians and the Kurds. While both poets utilize imagery to illustrate the political status of their nations in a similar fashion, Darwish depicts his external environment as fiercely resilient in spite of the unrelenting violence inflicted upon it, however Goran frames the Kurds' resilience as a direct consequence of this brutality. Another key difference is found in the nature of their individual connection to the land: Darwish is spiritually connected but is physically detached from the homeland having mainly lived outside 'the occupied land' throughout his life,⁶⁸ whereas Goran remains both physically and spiritually connected to Kurdistan. This distinction perhaps suggests that the relationship of the Palestinian diaspora to the land is more abstract and that of the Kurds is more concrete, hence the more urgent need to keep

the Palestinian cause active in the consciousness of the nation.

Concluding Remarks

My analysis of the relationship between the people and the land in the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish and Abdullah Goran has shown that oppressed people with similar cultural heritages oftentimes produce similar literature. Darwish evidently employs a range of metaphorical devices in *A Lover from Palestine* to rebuild a fractured national identity through the depiction of the Palestinians' trauma within the context of nature, which is rooted in their natural, 'unchosen' ties to the homeland.⁶⁹ Rather than dismissing his nation's suffering as a weakness, Darwish embraces it and highlights the crucial role played by the scars of the Zionist occupation in bringing the Palestinians' inviolable connection to their homeland to full consciousness. By the same token, Goran depicts his external environment as both a site of the Kurds' political, physical and psychological oppression and their resistance in *Desire*, which serves to empower the Kurds and reconstruct a sense of Kurdish nationhood.

Adopting a comparative framework for analyzing both poems highlighted the conceptual similarities as well as the structural differences in the narratives of *A Lover from Palestine* and *Desire*. Whereas Goran's narrative is centered around how the reunion of him and the Kurds with the homeland constitutes the solution to his predicament, Darwish illustrates how the suffering arising from the detachment of the Palestinians from their land is what defines their national identity and motivates their nationalist aspirations. As such, Goran perhaps uses his work to paint an idyllic future in which the Kurds can peacefully reclaim the right to independently govern their homeland, rather than the more

pragmatic view of the Palestinians' political situation conveyed by Darwish.

It is not often that the fields of Arabic and Kurdish studies have been brought together, and it is my hope that this comparative analysis demonstrates the urgency of such a project. The poets' use of the object of nature as a form of resistance to colonization to rebuild the homeland in the text sheds light on the power of human interaction with nature to consolidate the relationship with the nation in poetry. Despite the ample work focused on the relationship between the people and the land in Arabic literature, literary criticism of poetry through an ecological lens remains in its infancy.⁷⁰ Considering that these are two people who share the position of being a stateless nation spread across different states, the prominence of the territorial element that makes up their national identity warrants the development of a new framework for this literary domain: a literary framework for eco-nationalism.

Setting my thesis into its modern-day context sheds light on the purpose of this paper, given the scale of the issues that continue to bedevil the Palestinians and the Kurds. Since the publication of Darwish's *A Lover from Palestine* in 1966, Israel has expanded its territorial control with the recent conquest and settlement of the West Bank and Gaza.⁷¹ Nonetheless, the Palestinians have resisted this control, and—as Darwish's poetry articulates—the occupation has rather stimulated the growth of a stronger opposition to Zionism, demonstrated by the unjustifiable desire to dispossess Palestinians from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem, which resulted in violent protests since May 2021 and until the editing of this essay.⁷² Likewise, the late 20th century witnessed myriad attempts to 'exterminate the entire Kurdish population', such as the chemical attack on the town of Halabja in 1988.⁷³ That said, with the establishment of a

de facto state of Kurdistan and the recent resurgence of Kurdish uprisings during the 21st century, Kurdish nationalism has begun to regain steam.⁷⁴ Resistance against colonial oppression evidently operates in two distinct but interrelated manners: an armed response along with a literary movement.⁷⁵ As noted in the very beginning of this paper, whereas an armed attack is essentially short-lived and

retaliatory, the voice of poetry ensures that a nation's internal spirit of resistance remains intact over a long period of time. As the movements of these communities demonstrate, a broad-based resistance that deploys both armed and literary operations is what brings a nation closer to statehood and political autonomy.

¹ David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 25.

² Abbas Vali, "Nationalism and Kurdish Historical Writing," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 14 (1996): 23–51, at 28.

³ Miller, *On Nationality*, 19.

⁴ See Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 137-49, at 140-41.

⁵ Miller, *On Nationality*, 25.

⁶ Victor Kattan, "The Partition of Palestine," in *From Coexistence to Conquest: International Law and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1891-1949* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 146-68, at 162.

⁷ J. Kristen Urban, "Darwish's 'Indian Speech' as Dramatic Performance: A Sacred Speech and Transformation," in *Literature and Nation in the Middle East*, edited by Yasir Suleiman and Ibrahim Muhawi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 79.

⁸ Erika Harris, "Ethnic Violence," in *Nationalism: Theories and Cases* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 135.

⁹ Oren Yiftachel and As'ad Ghanem, "Understanding 'Ethnocratic' Regimes: The Politics of Seizing Contested Territories," *Political Geography* 23 (2004): 647–76, at 664.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Harris, "Ethnic Violence," 135.

¹² Edward W. Said, "On Mahmoud Darwish," *Grand Street* 48 (1994): 112-115, at 112.

¹³ Salam Mir, "Palestinian Literature: Occupation and Exile," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2013): 110-29, at 110.

¹⁴ Dayla Cohen-Mor, *Mahmoud Darwish: Palestine's Poet and the Other as the Beloved* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1.

¹⁵ Atef Alshaer, "Identity in Mahmoud Darwish's Poem 'The dice player'," *Middle Eastern Journal of Culture and Communication* 4, no. 1 (2011): 90-110, at 92. Darwish also offers a reflection on this experience of dispossession in his *A Journal of an Ordinary Grief (Yawmiyyāt al-ḥuzn al-'ādī*, 1973).

¹⁶ Michael Rubin, "Are Kurds a Pariah Minority?" *Social Research* 70, no. 1 (2003): 295-330, at 295.

¹⁷ Kendal Nezan, "The Kurds: Current Position and Historical Background," in *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, edited by Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Christine Allison (London: Zed Books, 1996), 12.

¹⁸ Mohammed M.A. Ahmed, *Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

¹⁹ Rubin, "Are Kurds," 299.

²⁰ Ahmed, *Iraqi Kurds*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), 62.

²³ Persheng Yari, "Kurdish Narratives of Identity: A Comparative Reading of Novels from Turkey and Iraq" (Master's thesis,

University of Western Ontario, 2019), 20. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/6256/>.

²⁴ Rebwar Fatah, "Introduction," in *My Poetry Depicts You: An Anthology of Contemporary Kurdish Poetry* (London: Art Meriwani, 2017), 21.

²⁵ Patrick MacManus, "Our Kurdish Poets," *The Kurdistan Tribune*, August 16, 2011. <https://kurdistantribune.com/ourkurdishpoets/>.

²⁶ Fatah, "Introduction," 21.

²⁷ Miller, *On Nationality*; and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso 1991 [1983]).

²⁸ While I have worked from the original Arabic, I do not read Kurdish and so have worked with a translation. I preferred to engage Kurdish poetry, even if in translation, than to not do so at all.

²⁹ C. J. Edmonds, "Kurdish Nationalism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 6, no. 1 (1971): 87–107, at 97.

³⁰ Ghassān Kanafānī, *Adab al-muqāwama fī Filasṭīn al-muḥtalla* [Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine] (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1966), 13.

³¹ Edward W. Said, "On Mahmoud Darwish," *Grand Street* 48 (1994): 112–115, at 112.

³² Denys Johnson-Davies, "Introduction," in *The Music of Human Flesh*, by Mahmoud Darwish (London: Heinemann, 1980), x.

³³ Mir, "Palestinian Literature," 110.

³⁴ Nasser Abufarha, "Land of Symbols: Cactus, Poppies, Orange and Olive Trees in Palestine," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 15, no. 3 (2008): 343–368, at 343.

³⁵ All original Arabic extracts from Darwish's *Āshiq min filasṭīn* are taken from Maḥmūd Darwīsh, "*Āshiq min Filasṭīn*," *al-diwan.net*, <https://www.aldiwan.net/poem2289.html>.

³⁶ All translations of Darwish's *A Lover from Palestine* are taken from Badreddine

M. Bennani, trans., "Two Palestinian Poems," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 5 (1974): 129–33. The translation is modified here. I have often modified the translation and indicated where I have done so in a footnote.

³⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 291–322, at 291.

³⁸ Translation modified.

³⁹ Mir, "Palestinian Literature," 112.

⁴⁰ Samih Farsoun and Naseer Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians: A Social and Political History* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2006), 149.

⁴¹ Translation modified.

⁴² Nadim N. Rouhana and Nimer Sultany, "Redrawing the Boundaries of Citizenship: Israel's New Hegemony," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no. 1 (2003): 5–22, at 10.

⁴³ Ahmed H. Sa'idi, "Representations of Exile and Return in Palestinian Literature," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 46, nos. 2–3 (2015): 216–243, at 222.

⁴⁴ Abufarha, "Land of Symbols," 348.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁴⁶ Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 27.

⁴⁷ Abufarha, "Land of Symbols," 347.

⁴⁸ Johnson-Davies, "Introduction," xi.

⁴⁹ Translation modified.

⁵⁰ Mir, "Palestinian Literature," 110.

⁵¹ Translation modified.

⁵² Carol Bardenstein, "Threads of Memory and Discourses of Rootedness: Of Trees, Oranges and the Prickly-Pear Cactus in Israel/Palestine," *Edebiyât* 8 (1998): 1–36. See Bardenstein's discussion of oranges in *A Lover for Palestine* at 21ff.

⁵³ Abufarha, "Land of Symbols," 348.

⁵⁴ Hamoud Yahya Ahmed et al., "Identity and Land in Mahmoud Darwish's Selected Poems: An Ecopostcolonial Reading," *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* 1, no. 6 (2012): 7-19.

⁵⁵ Translation modified.

⁵⁶ Mir, "Palestinian Literature," 112.

⁵⁷ Sinan Antoon, "Returning to the Wind: On Darwish's *La Ta'tadhur 'Amma Fa'alta*," in *Mahmoud Darwish, Exile's Poet: Critical Essays*, edited by Hala Khamis Nassar and Najat Rahman (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books), 253.

⁵⁸ Fatah, "Introduction," 20.

⁵⁹ All extracts from Goran's poetry are taken from Rebwar Fatah's translation in *My Poetry Depicts You: An Anthology of Contemporary Kurdish Poetry*, 22-24.

⁶⁰ Abbas Vali, "Nationalism and Kurdish Historical Writing," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 14 (1996): 23-51.

⁶¹ Nezan, "The Kurds," 14.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Barzan Hadi Hama Karim, "A Study of the Comparative Elements of Nature and Beauty in the Poetry of William Wordsworth and Abdullah Goran," *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 15 (2021): 47-54, at 53.

⁶⁴ MacManus, "Our Kurdish Poets."

⁶⁵ Cohen-Mor, *Mahmoud Darwish*, 1.

⁶⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 141.

⁶⁷ Umut Özkırımlı, *Contemporary Debates on Nationalism: A Critical Engagement* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 18.

⁶⁸ Johnson-Davies, "Introduction," ix.

⁶⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 143.

⁷⁰ Ahmed et al., "Identity and Land."

⁷¹ Yiftachel and Ghanem, "Understanding 'Ethnocratic' Regimes," 664.

⁷² Latifeh Abdellatif, "Sheikh Jarrah: Residents Promise to Stand Firm after Salhiya Demolition," *Middle East Eye*, January 22, 2022.

[middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-jerusalem-sheikh-jarrah-residents-stand-firm](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-jerusalem-sheikh-jarrah-residents-stand-firm). Also see Mersiha Gadzo and Dareen Jubeh, "Sheikh Jarrah Is 'Under a Siege,' Palestinian Residents Say," *Al-Jazeera*, May 21, 2021.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/21/we-dont-sleep-at-night-palestinians-in-sheikh-jarrah>.

⁷³ Ahmed, *Iraqi Kurds*, 5.

⁷⁴ Galip Dalay, "Kurdish Nationalism Will Shape the Region's Future," *Al Jazeera*, July 12, 2015.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/7/12/kurdish-nationalism-will-shape-the-regions-future>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.