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Poetry for socio-political justice in Palestine: Mahmoud Darwish’s translation and re-narration of Palestinian–Israeli encounters

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Abstract

While Mahmoud Darwish’s work has been studied largely from a literary perspective, not much attention has been given to its translational dimensions. This article examines two of Darwish’s poems, “Identity Card” (1964) and “A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips” (1967), as two complementary endeavours aimed at achieving justice for the Palestinian people. It focuses on the socio-political contexts of their production, circulation, and reception to demonstrate the pivotal role translation as (re-)narration can play in the pursuit of justice and in challenging hegemonic narratives. Both poems became sites of political controversy due to the ways in which they were produced, translated, and re-narrated across languages and modalities. Whereas “Identity Card" offers a personal and public narrative of Palestinians’ confrontation with Israelis, “A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips” opens up a space in which to hear the remorse of an Israeli soldier at the acts of killing he committed against the poet’s own people. Unsurprisingly, the two poems were received very differently: “Identity Card” became a national poem in Palestine whereas “A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips” received little acclaim in the Arab world, being criticized because it stood against the pervasive public narratives of the 1960s according to which the humanized soldier portrayed by Darwish does not exist in the enemy’s camp. However, decades later, the poem has been proven right, as the soldier is revealed to be Shlomo Sand, the Israeli writer and activist, known for taking resolute steps towards justice and against Israeli mainstream narratives – to the extent that his work is translated into Arabic by Palestinian translators at the request of Darwish himself. It is in this new context that “A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips” is rediscovered decades after it appeared for the first time and becomes the object of temporal and spatial framing across contexts and modalities, including translations, recitations, and documentaries. At a time of despair arising from entrenched injustices and crimes against humanity perpetrated by Israel settler colonialism, the dynamics of the poem’s emergence and later revival may well inspire alternatives to existing hegemonic narratives of selves and others that continue to stand in the way of justice for the Palestinian people.

Keywords: justice, Mahmoud Darwish, narrative, Palestine, translation, re-narration

1. Introduction

By producing narratives of social change, translation can act as leverage to realize justice and resist hegemony in entrenched conflicts such as that taking place in Palestine. It is now common knowledge that translators may engage in social change. They may translate works that raise awareness of injustices inflicted on Palestinians either on the home front or to the outside world. Both approaches are in operation in Palestine, where the connection between nation and translation is so significant that Palestine is considered to be a "nation of translators" (Alhirthani, 2018, p. 137). Mahmoud Darwish's work is a case in point. The translation in the process of the production, circulation, and reception of Darwish's work functions as a site of the promotion, contestation, and suppression of various political narratives.

Baker's narrative theory (Baker, 2006, 2016) provides a robust framework with which to engage critically with translation in violent conflict. It conceptualizes translation as the (re-)narration of experiences across languages, contexts, and modalities, including conveying texts from one language into another and mediating verbal and non-verbal lived experiences across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Narrative is understood as being a social and communicative practice that constructs realities and engages its public and audiences in specific ways of understanding and interpreting events. The importance of narrativity lies in its ability to "deal with the individual text and the broader set of narratives in which it is embedded" (Baker, 2006, p. 4). This means that narrative theory enables us to conduct a macro analysis that places the researcher's gaze on the social and political factors that affect the reception, circulation, and reproduction of texts. Baker defines narratives as "public and personal 'stories' that we subscribe to and that guide our behaviours" (Baker, 2006, p. 19). In this sense, narratives are powerful tools that people use to promote their perspectives on practical engagement with the world. When narratives are told and retold, they can grow over time as repertoires of latent and/or manifest assumptions that inform and direct the attitudes of those who subscribe to them. Narrative is crucial to resistance to oppression, since the act of telling and retelling stories from the past helps to preserve identity and resist injustice in the present. As Baker puts it, translation plays "an extremely important role in this process, especially given the fact that most conflicts today are not restricted to specific monolingual communities but have to be negotiated in the international arena" (Baker, 2006, p. 22).

Mahmoud Darwish's work, which itself translates the Palestinian struggle for justice and has in turn been translated into several world languages, is a compelling case in point.

Darwish's (1941–2008) unconventional conception and pursuit of justice is particularly interesting from a narrative and translational perspective. This is because, in his poetry, both the self and the other, the victim and the oppressor, receive attention, which means that he does not align himself totally or unquestioningly with certain narratives. He is known and respected as a voice of justice for Palestinians, yet his narrative does not dismiss the role and position of Israelis in the pursuit of justice for his own people. According to Ghanim (2011), Darwish's poetry

"concentrated on poetics of right and justice vis-à-vis the aggressor's moral dilemma and addressed the consistent and complementary relationship of the Palestinian, as an indigenous inhabitant, with the land" (p. 77).

While a good number of studies (Al Fawa'ra, 2019; El-Enany, 1989; Jayyusi, 2008; Khouri, 2016; Mattawa, 2014; Pappé, 2011) have examined Darwish's poetry and his contribution to the Palestinian national struggle, little attention has been paid to the translational dimensions of his work (see Amit-Kochavi, 2010; Haikal, 2018, as notable exceptions). This is all the more surprising since translation permeates and surrounds his entire oeuvre. His intricate relationship with Hebrew and his role as a translator in the actual production of his own work and of the multiple translations performed on his work acting both for and against his own nation offer a worthwhile object of enquiry. After its establishment, Israel embargoed Arabic literature, including poetry, because any literature that advocates the presence of Palestinians in Palestine was perceived as "either overt threats to the safety of the State of Israel or covertly subversive to Israeli Jewish sociopolitical consensus" (Amit-Kochavi, 2010, p. 90). In response to this politics of erasure, Darwish drew on his excellent command of Hebrew to challenge the colonial status quo.

From the perspective of translation as (re-)narration, this article focuses on two poems in which Darwish depicts his encounter with the colonizer: "Identity Card" (1964) and "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" (1967). It draws on Baker's narrative theory to analyse the two poems, their distinctive sociopolitical contexts of production and reception together with their temporal and spatial framing. As will be shown in the analysis, Darwish's personal narrative of the way justice should be pursued clashed with the dominant public narratives in Palestine and Israel alike. Nevertheless, his narrative was eventually adopted, albeit partly, by the Palestinian national movement and by some Israelis. This is attested to by the retroactive canonization of "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" after four decades of neglect, or indeed suppression.

First, Mahmoud Darwish's unique political and poetic trajectory in the Palestinian struggle for justice is introduced. The article then includes an analysis of the poetic, narrative, and translational techniques of two dialogic poems through which Darwish confronts and reconciles with the Israeli other. The focus then shifts specifically to the circulations, translations, and re-narrations of "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" in time and space, highlighting the revival of Darwish's unique and unconventional narrative of social justice.

2. Darwish's life, work, and vision of justice for the Palestinians: A narrative against the current

With 30 collections of poetry and eight books of prose to his credit, Darwish's life and work embody the Palestinians' struggle and aspiration for justice, identity and freedom. Darwish wrote poetry during three phases: when he was in Palestine until 1970, when he was in exile from 1970 until 1996, and from the time he returned to Palestine in 1996 until his death in 2008. The first phase was sparked by the loss of his home and village (Birwa) during the 1948 Nakba. Darwish

emerged as an activist under Israeli occupation and joined the Israeli Communist Party, which consisted of Arab Palestinians and Israeli Jews and which provided him with "better conditions for a struggle for full social and national equal rights of the Arab national minority" in Israel (Kaufman, 1997, p. 29). Given his excellent command of Hebrew, he became an editor and a translator for the Arabic edition of *Al-Ittihad*, the Communist Party's newspaper (Clark, 2008). The life he led during that period would leave a mark on his entire career. It is during this period that his poetry, and the two poems under study here in particular, strove towards the development of a Palestinian-Arab narrative inside the Israeli-Jewish society.

Early on in his life, Darwish realized that a narrative striving for justice can garner support if it can resonate with an all-encompassing narrative of justice for all peoples. Connecting global and local justice is of utmost important since "it is impossible for the human mind to make sense of isolated events" (Baker, 2006, p. 61). Darwish's subsequent poetic and political influence enraged the Israeli authorities, which frequently arrested him and eventually forced him to leave his homeland in 1970. After a year in Moscow, Darwish headed for Lebanon to join the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1973. His affiliation to the PLO intensified the enmity of Israel, which banned him from returning to Palestine for 26 years (Jaggi, 2002). He spent 10 years in exile in France, where he continued to espouse universal ideas of the human condition and global justice in his poetry, and where he was the most translated and most read Arab poet (Palacial, 2016). Indeed, his work "was translated into more than three dozen languages" (Bamia, 2024, para. 8) and he received international awards, including the Lotus Prize (1969) and the Lenin Peace Prize (1983). The French government conferred on him the title Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters (1997) (chevalier de l'Ordre des arts et des lettres). All of these attest to the worldwide recognition of Darwish's poetic and political genius. Edward Said himself (Said, 1994) considered Darwish "the most gifted of his generation in the Arab world" (p. 112).

While his poetic genius may have overridden his political influence in shaping Palestinian political public narratives at crucial moments in history, pro-Palestinian Israeli historian Ilan Pappé (2011, p. 90) reminds us that Darwish belongs to a group of activists who "should all be remembered as people who struggled in the name of the natural and national rights of the Palestinians in the Israeli political arena and paid dearly by being either imprisoned or exiled". Indeed, as underlined by Khalidi (2008), in the 1970s, "Darwish was the most important single figure during the seminal period of the reconstruction of the Palestinian national imagination" (p. 75). This is evident in a major Palestinian political document of his own creation: The Palestinian Declaration of Independence. The laborious wording of this document may well be Darwish's ultimate translation of the Palestinian dream. Considered a "foundational document of Palestinian nationalism" (Segal, 2022, p. 95), the Declaration promotes the peaceful coexistence of all the inhabitants of Palestine, including the Jews, strives to balance "matters of pride, justice and legality" and emphasises the "historic injustice" that was inflicted on the Palestinians, and not on the "establishment of the state of Israel in and of itself" (Segal, 2022, p. 85). For the first time in the history of the struggle, this declaration called for peace, a peace that ought to be based on justice for all. Although unconventional, Darwish's narrative of inclusion of "the other" in the

struggle for justice succeeded in entering the Palestinian public narrative, since the Declaration was proclaimed by the PLO chairman Yasir Arafat in 1988.

Darwish's poetics and politics transcend conventional narratives of justice that tend to dismiss the contribution of Israelis to peace and justice. In so doing, they account for "the ongoingly negotiable nature of positioning in relation to social and political reality" (Baker, 2007, p. 152), and the intricate "interplay between dominance and resistance" (Boéri, 2008, p. 24).

His intimate relationships with both the Arabic and the Hebrew languages and cultures is part and parcel of Darwish's subtle narrative positioning. Indeed, in addition to Arabic (his mother tongue), Darwish was exposed to different languages and cultures, including English and French (Said, 1994, p. 113), and Hebrew – his mastery of which kept him in "close touch with Israeli society and culture" (Said, 1994, p. 112) and with the opportunity to reinforce his own narrative in the face of oppression in encounters with Israelis. He read classics such as the Torah and the Bible in Hebrew and was inspired by the modern Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai (Clark, 2008). He was also influenced by revolutionary poets of the twentieth century such as Federico García Lorca and Pablo Neruda through their Hebrew translations (Clark, 2008). Darwish did not perceive Hebrew as the language of the enemy or the language of "the conqueror" because he "spoke words of love in it" (Yeshurun, 2012, p. 69). The allusion here is to a famous poem he wrote in Arabic with the title "Between Rita and my Eyes, there is a Rifle", Rita being an Israeli girl with whom Darwish fell in love during his youth.

Darwish's unique and ambivalent pursuit of social justice is couched in his poems, as they "lament the degeneration of the human condition and strive to stimulate latent forces to create a new destiny" (Akash & Forché, 2013, p. 18). This destiny is a common destiny for all the people living in Palestine, which attests to the fact that Darwish was not "a political zealot", that he did not subscribe to "national frenzy", and that he was mostly concerned at "the human condition", which made him "a world poet" (Jayyusi, 2008, p. 9).

Darwish's inclusive conception of justice, which he persistently cherished, did not go unchallenged in Palestine and Israel, however. It often caused him to get into trouble, leading him to describe his life as "a scandal" (Shatz, 2002, p. 74). Generally, though, Darwish's image and work faced a rather binary reception in Israel among both critics and advocates in Israeli (Haikal, 2018) and Palestinian society (Shatz, 2002). Some viewed him as a poet of terror, while others esteemed him so much that they suggested including some of his poems in the Israeli school curriculum (Bamia, 2024). Those who rejected his poetry perceived him as the poet of the Palestinian cause par excellence. Those who cherished him believed that he was a visionary man of peace. This reception was contingent upon the context in which his poems emerged, their translation and their re-narration across contexts. These are now explored in the analysis of two of Darwish's poems.

3. Confrontational and reconciliatory poetry: A focus on "Identity Card" and "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips"

The two poems selected for analysis are particularly relevant to the purpose of this article because they epitomize Darwish's confrontational and reconciliatory poetry and the translational nature of his work. In the two poems, Darwish translates the emotions emanating from ordinary and authentic speech into a dialogic poetic form. As we shall see, this poetic technique is political, as dialogue enables interlocutors to express themselves and sharpen their intellectual understanding of political reality; it also promotes justice and encourages participants to leave their own comfort zones and cross borders to explore the other's perspective of reality. Dialogue can be used "as a means for getting around traditional limitations of ideas" (Holquist, 2002, p. 18), be they those of the dominant and colonial party (the Israeli other) or those of the resistant, colonialized party (the Palestinian self). It allows the Palestinian narrator (Darwish) to reposition an Israeli voice and reframe the narrative about the "Israeli other" to create opportunities of justice for Palestinians.

3.1 "Identity Card"

At its establishment in 1948, Israel expelled seven hundred thousand Palestinians from their homes, a dreadful event referred to as the Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe). Having accomplished the 1948 expulsion, Israel then implemented politics of erasure by launching a war on the memory and identity of the Palestinians who remained or managed to return after a period of displacement in neighbouring countries. Darwish's family was one of them. They were not allowed to live normally in their homeland and were treated as internal refugees under the legal status of "present-absentees" (Sand, 2009, p. 7). Palestinians, including Darwish, were required to check in frequently at Israeli police stations. It was during this period that "Identity Card" was conceived. In it we hear the voice of a Palestinian protesting against an Israeli soldier at a security checkpoint, stressing his rootedness in, and attachment to, the land of Palestine. The poem features important themes such as otherness, homeland, humanity, respect, humiliation, resilience, and – first and foremost – identity. "Identity Card" constitutes a response to a humiliating encounter with an Israeli soldier. Originally written in Arabic and translated into English by Khaled Mattawa (2014), the full 63-line poem showcases Darwish's assertive position regarding his identity, as illustrated in the following selected lines:

> Write it down
> I am an Arab
> and my identity card is number fifty thousand
> I have eight children
> And the ninth will come after summer
> […]
> Write it down
> I am an Arab
> Employed with fellow workers at quarry

> I do not beg for charity at your doors
> Are you satisfied with my status?
> …
> Record at the top of the first page:
> I do not hate people
> nor do I steal
> But if I become hungry
> I will eat my robber's flesh
> (Mattawa, 2014, pp. 7–9)

Written as a dialogue, the poem "turned the private anguish into a public testament" (Mattawa, 2014, p. 11), stressing two layers of identity: Darwish's personal identity and the collective national identity of the Palestinians. The imperative phrase "write it down" is repeated as the opening line of most of the strophes, urging the soldier to recognize and seal the individual and collective Palestinian existence. As a re-narration of a humiliating event, the Arabic poem performs a subversive translation of adversarial encounters at checkpoints, where Israeli soldiers speak in Hebrew to Palestinians. In this regard, Mattawa (2014, p. 11) underlines the point that "Darwish's translation and placement of expressions uttered in Hebrew into a poem written in Arabic made private moment public and turned humiliation on its head". The use of Arabic is a clear act of resistance to Israel's politics of erasure as much as an assertion of administrative existence, be it individual – "my identity card is number fifty thousand" – or collective – "I have eight children, and the ninth is due after summer". The allusion to family genealogy solidifies the rootedness of the Palestinian people. It also demonstrates Darwish's affinity to a working class that sanctifies labour and embraces dignity:

> My father comes from the family of the plow
> Not from a privileged clan
> And my grandfather, a farmer
> Not well-bred or well-born
> (Mattawa, 2014, p. 8)

National identity and class intersect in the poem, which reminds us of Darwish's integration of the Palestinian struggle into the global struggle for social justice underlined in the previous section.

Decades on, it remains one of the most prominent poems in the Arab world. It received great acclaim, not only in Palestine, but across the entire Arab world. Indeed, it became "a Palestinian poetic manifesto" (Levy, 2017, p. 84). It was able to foil the efforts of the Israeli establishment that invested in convincing itself and others that Arab-Palestinians do not exist. According to Siddiq, the poem is "a veritable litany of grievances against discriminatory Israeli policies and practices" (Siddiq, 2010, p. 494). Through it, Darwish had "the audacity to speak (Palestinian) truth to (Israeli) power" (Siddiq, 2010, p. 494), more especially because the conditions in which it was written still stand and the Palestinian question remains unresolved.

“Identity Card” is one of the most controversial poems in Israel, despite the fact that the poem is an assertive statement of identity that does not mention Israel and which does not contain any explicit reference to the Israeli occupation. But when the poem was broadcast in 2016 by the Israeli Army Radio, the then Israeli defence minister, Avigdor Lieberman, was incensed, and compared the poem to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (Beaumont, 2016). As reported by Silverman (2019), the controversy was ignited by a Hebrew re-translation of two verses by the then Israeli minister of Sports and Culture, Miri Regev, on the occasion of a recital of the poem in Israel in 2016. She left the hall on the ground that Darwish threatens to eat the flesh of “the Jewish people” (Silverman, 2019, p. 169). She stressed that she has “no tolerance for Darwish … who desires to wipe out the Israeli people” (as cited in Silverman, 2019, p. 170). There is no mention of “wiping out Israeli people” in the poem, though. What we find in the poem in Arabic is “ولكني إذا ما جعت /آكل لحم مغتصبي” (Darwish, 1964, p. 49), which Mattawa translated as “But if I become hungry / I will eat my robber’s flesh”.

Regev’s re-translation of “robber” as “the Jewish People” in Hebrew (as cited in Silverman, 2019, p. 170) is a typical case of reframing a text by “selective appropriation”, a strategy of omission, addition, or even invention of elements in order to “suppress, accentuate or elaborate particular aspects of a narrative encoded in the source text or utterance” (Baker, 2006, p. 114). While the poem does not contain any concrete names or entities such as “Jews” or “Israelis”, Regev’s selective appropriation can be seen as an attempt to reverse the situation and reposition participants where the victim (the colonized) becomes a victimizer, a protagonist in the meta-narrative of terror. One may think that by using “the Jewish people” in Hebrew, Regev contributes to the context of what has been referred to as the “politics of inversion” to victimize the oppressor, who is no longer framed as a colonizer who starves the colonized to death. A term coined by Perugini and Gordon (2015), the politics of inversion features Israelis as the dispossessed indigenes and the Palestinians as a settler population (Alhirthani, 2021), where “the Israeli Jew is the subject of human rights, while the Palestinian is not” (Perugini & Gordon, 2015, p. 22). This reminds us of the pitfalls of using Arabic exclusively as a resistance strategy. Had Darwish opted for instant oral delivery of the poem in Hebrew, he may have circumvented the risk of Israeli inversion of his Arabic verses in Hebrew.

While Darwish’s protested against injustice in “Identity Card”, he promoted justice creatively and unconventionally in “A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips”.

3.2 “A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips”

Darwish was arrested during the 1967 war (Sand, 2009, p. 8) that resulted in Israel’s capture of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. “A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips”[1] is an account of a unique conversation between Darwish and an Israeli soldier (anonymous at the time) that took place after Darwish was released. After a night-long conversation in Hebrew, the soldier went to sleep and Darwish remained awake, turning the authentic conversation into Arabic verses. At midday, he woke the soldier up and read them to him in Hebrew. What is in

operation here is a conversation which evolved in Hebrew, one that was then reproduced poetically in Arabic and which was finally translated back live into Hebrew to the original interlocutor.

The poem depicts a soldier who is discontented with his role in seizing other people's land. He dreams of a simple life in another place where he can love and walk in "streets of song" (Darwish, 2013, p. 167). Because the Israeli triumph in the 1967 war is a "fascist moment" (Darwish, 2013, p. 168; English translation by Akash & Forché), the soldier decides to leave and live with "a kind heart not a bullet" (Darwish, 2013, p. 168). Like "Identity Card", the poem does not mention Palestinians and Israelis directly, but the reader can detect both in the dialogic poem:

> He dreams of white lilies,[2] her breasts in evening blossom.
> […]
> And the land? I don't know the land, he said.
> I don't feel it in my flesh and blood, as they say in poems.
> […]
> I asked him, but don't you love the land?
> My love is a picnic, he said, a glass of wine, a love affair.
> Would you die for the land?
> No.
> […]
> I never knew its roots and branches or the scent of its grass.
> […]
> Homeland for him, he said, is to drink my mother's coffee, to return, safe at nightfall.
> (Darwish, 2013, pp. 165–168)

These lines indicate the turbulent relationship between the soldier and the land to which he feels no connection. He does not feel at home. He yearns for a home where he can drink his mother's coffee and where he can find comfort at the end of the day. White tulips do not belong in Palestine. From the outset, the Israeli interlocutor does not have an attachment to the indigenous nature. Instead, he is more attracted to "non-native flowers" (Mattawa, 2014, p. 56). The flower is a symbol of purity, innocence, and rebirth, all of which presumably speak to the soldier's attitude and aspiration.

While both "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" and "Identity Card" are dialogic poems, they construct divergent narrative positionings on the relationship between Palestinians and Israelis. Narrative positioning can take place through the management of "time, space, deixis, dialect, register, use of epithets and various means of self-and other identification" (Baker, 2006, p. 132). Here deixis, personal deixis specifically, is particularly salient.

In "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips", the Israeli soldier is given a voice as he responds to the poet's genuine questions. This is attested to by the numerous reporting verbs ("said" is repeated six times and "answered" five times) and by the asymmetry of speech opportunities. Indeed, out

of 106 verses, no fewer than 78 correspond to the soldier's utterances. Thus, the dialogic poem is simply a device that allows him to speak and express human feelings that are rarely heard in Palestinian public narratives on "the Israeli other". This conciliation contrasts sharply with "Identity Card", where "the Israeli other" is a voiceless reprimanded receiver of the defiant and rebellious verses of the poet, who is asserting his rights and those of his nation.

Taken together, the two poems function as reversed mirrors, with diametrically opposed narrative positionings of the Palestinian poet and the "Israeli other". They construct and are constructed by Darwish's unique narrative account of the conflict. But the reception of "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" was bound to be more sensitive as it constitutes a "breach" of the "canonical script" (Baker, 2006, p. 98) and of the Palestinian public narratives of the "Israeli other". As underlined by Baker, breaching the canon is perhaps one of the most disruptive, subversive, and innovative of narrativity patterns. In "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips", the soldier is unencumbered by Zionist narratives and aspires to a shared sense of humanity, hoping that doves "flock through the Ministry of War" (Darwish, 2013, p. 166). This humane position may not be typical of soldiers who carry out military orders unquestioningly, yet the poem indicates that people, regardless of their profession and national affiliation, can have sufficient intellect and compassion to differentiate between just and unjust actions. Acknowledging this very possibility constructs a narrative of social justice and solidarity which epitomizes the work of Darwish.

Darwish probably anticipated criticism. His resorting to dialogue is interesting in this regard, as it has a double effect. It provides a platform to the soldier to represent himself democratically, in line with the poet's humanist ideals. But at the same time it may exempt the poet from being accountable for the positions he adopts in the poem, and for the breach of canonicity. As underlined by Mattawa (2014), this creates a distance between

> the two characters and lessens the Identification between them … it is as if Darwish is telling his Palestinian, Arab, and Israeli audiences that he, the poet did not make up this portrait, that he is merely reporting what the soldier told him (p. 57).

Despite his careful distancing and his cautious approach to dealing with complex and sensitive issues, the poet still faced criticism and the poem languished in obscurity for a very long time before being acknowledged both domestically and internationally.

4. Reception and re-translation of "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips"

Reception is a form of translation in the sense that the narrative is interpreted in context, where it feeds into new narratives.

4.1 Reception at the time of publication

Given the breach of canonicity, the poem "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" was met with a great deal of criticism as it hardly "translated" into the Palestinian narratives at the time of its publication. Darwish was criticized by his fellow Palestinians at the time, and was asked: "How dare you humanize the Israeli soldier?" (Shatz, 2002, p. 73). Darwish had the talent to successfully reveal the potential for justice in that soldier and the "absurdities of an oppressive military occupation" (Clark, 2008).

A humanizing account of the enemy is not expected, needless to say welcome, at a time of war. When it happens, it is the triumphant who may think of the defeated out of empathy and common humanity. However, the story of this poem is different. It is the defeated and the deprived who look at their oppressor from a humanist perspective. Because it ran against the national sentiments at the time, Darwish's narrative position as constructed in "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" was not accepted by those who cherished him and admired his work. On the whole, the poem did not receive the usual acclaim that other poems by Darwish normally enjoy. Instead, it was ill-received, criticized, and even considered a snare set up by Darwish to make Arabs believe that such a soldier exists (Al-Manasrah, 2018). The reason for this, according to Subhi Hadidi, the Paris-based Syrian literary critic, is that the poem "portrays the Israeli soldier in a manner contrary to the common stereotypes dominant at the time" (Hadidi, 2020; own translation) and, in doing so, it breached the canon and led to the critical and sceptical reception of Darwish's narrative of the Israeli other.

An early and notable criticism came from a prominent Palestinian poet and critic, Yousif Alkhatib, who published a collection of poems by different Palestinian poets accompanied by critical commentary in 1968. In this collection, which appeared in Arabic under the title *ديوان الوطن المحتل* (Poetry Collection of the Occupied Homeland), Alkhatib expresses his resentment at the mere portrayal of that soldier:

> فأي نمط إنساني، عجيب حقًا، هذا الذي جاء من بولندة، أو رومانيا، أو اتحاد جنوب أفريقيا، من أجل أن يبحث عن "زنابق بيضاء" في الجولان، أو في الغور الأردني، أو في سيناء.. إن هذا الإنسان... لا يكاد يختلف شيئًا عن أيما ضابط هتلري قام بواجبه العسكري على أكمل وجه في ساحة القتال، أو في أحد أفران الغاز، ثم عاد إلى نفسه ليسكر، ويبكي.
>
> [What kind of human being, and this is indeed strange, is this who comes from Poland, or Romania, or the Union of South Africa, in order to search for "white tulips" in the Golan Heights, or in the Jordan Valley, or in the Sinai? Hardly does this person … differ from any Hitlerian officer who accomplishes his military duty on the battlefield, or in a gas chamber and then, at the end of the day, he regrets it and starts lamenting himself and drinking to forget (Alkhatib, 1968, p. 91; own translation).]

The poem was written at a time of utter devastation across the Arab world after the 1967 war, during which Israel not only occupied the rest of Palestine, but also defeated major Arab countries, including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan. In this context, some critics even went further

to accuse Darwish of "collaboration with the Zionist enemy" because of his "sympathetic depiction of an Israeli soldier's remorse of conscience" (Deane, 2009, para. 1). But, years later, the soldier's identity was revealed, sparking new translations and re-narrations and shedding new light on the poem and Darwish's narrative of justice, to which we now turn our attention.

4.2 Reception four decades later

Four decades after the publication of "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips", Israeli historian Shlomo Sand published *The Invention of the Jewish People* (2009), in which he revealed that he was the soldier and that the poem was Darwish's rendition of an authentic exchange he had had with him (Khouri, 2016; Sand, 2009). In this best-selling book, for which he was awarded the *Prix d'Aujourd'hui* and which gained him celebrity as "something of a TV star" (Deane, 2009, para. 1), Sand reveals the succession of facts and events that led to the poem being written, thus telling us the story of its emergence:

> During the fighting in the Holy City, Mahmoud was manacled and taken to prison through the streets of Haifa. The soldier saw him after his release. They passed a sleepless, drunken night immersed in the fumes of alcohol beside windows made dim by cigarette smoke. The poet tried to persuade his young admirer to remain and resist, rather than flee to alien cities and abandon their common homeland. The soldier poured out his despair, his revulsion with the general air of triumphalism, his alienation from the soil on which he had shed innocent blood. At the end of the night, he vomited his guts out. At midday, the poet woke him with a translation of a poem he had written at first light, "A Soldier Dreaming of White Lilies" (Sand, 2009 pp. 8–9).

Sand also shares his affection and admiration for Darwish's work, and describes how listening to the poem in "Hebrew translation" at the time "fire[d] his imagination" (Sand, 2009, p. 8). Sand's book cast a new light on the Israeli other in "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" and attests to the ways in which works are temporally and spatially re-narrated, repositioned and reinstituted.

Not only did the soldier quit the army and leave Israel, but he also became a staunch critic of its policies in Palestine, like other Israeli voices who emerged over the years and renounced Zionist actions in Palestine, including the likes of Ilan Pappé, Amira Hass, Avi Shlaim, Gideon Levy and Neve Gordon. Lebanese novelist Elias Khouri (2016) points out that:

> I had to wait forty years to meet the man after he took off his military attire and put on the attire of the historian. I saw the white tulips and witnessed how the previous soldier fights in defence of truth (para. 1; own translation).

In a conversation, Sand informs Khouri that "Darwish is somewhere in the background of this book [*The Invention of the Jewish People*], I wanted to say to Darwish that I have not given up on him" (Khouri, 2016, para. 10; own translation). Darwish is primarily praised because, according to Hadidi, "this Israeli soldier, who had just returned from war against the Arabs, did not extol

any Zionist or biblical dream, nor did he express colonial aspirations, nor did he have any racist sentiments against his Arab enemies" (Hadidi, 2020, para. 4; own translation).

In Darwish's attempt to set the scene for change and justice, his poem gave voice to a pro-Palestinian activist Israeli in the making, which was confirmed with Sand's publication. In so doing, the poem may be retrospectively received as having been progressive, forward-looking, even prefigurative. Progressive narratives constitute a type of "ontological narrative" that describes "a pattern of change for the better of time", and they allow people to "see themselves and their surroundings as capable of improvement" (Baker, 2006, p. 170). Darwish's "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" articulates such a progressive narrative as it provides a humanist blueprint alongside his other poems. It bolstered his image around the world not only as a poet of resistance and confrontation ("Identity Car""), but also as a visionary poet of conciliation for a better world. As emphasised by Jayyusi (2008, p. 9), it is by virtue of the humanist pattern that permeates his poetry that Darwish was influential and inspiring worldwide.

Multiple translations commissioned and published in the wake of Sand's book contributed to this shift in perception and reception. Sand himself provided an English translation of nine lines of "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" (see Sand, 2009, pp. 8–9). Two years later, in 2011, the Arabic translation of Sand's book was published and recommended by Darwish himself, which gave more attention to the poem in the region and granted it significance in the Palestinian and Israeli scenes. A full English translation of the poem was then undertaken and introduced by the US-based professors and translators Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché in 2013, in a collection of Darwish's poems under the title *Unfortunately it was Paradise*.

This was followed by a Hebrew translation in 2015 (Snir, 2015). This is significant in Israel, where the translation of Arabic literature is generally unwelcome. It reminds us that there are voices in Israel that believe in Darwish and his mission of justice. This is evident in the attempt by leftist Minister of Education Yossi Sarid in 2000 to include four of Darwish's reconciliatory poems (Bamia, 2024), including "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips", in the Israeli school curriculum. Although this attempt was thwarted by Ehud Barak, the prime minister at the time, it signals just how much Darwish's politics of global justice were influential in certain sections of Israeli society, which should not be obliterated by the rise of the far right in Israel.

Sand's book and the multiple translations of "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" that followed it contributed to the enthusiastic circulation and positive reviews in Arabic (Hadidi, 2020; Khouri, 2016); in English (Clark, 2008; Deane, 2009; Mattawa, 2014), and in Hebrew (Musawa Channel, 2018; Palestine TV, 2018). Another significant form of revival of the poem is its appearance in a multi-screen documentary film, *Identity of the Soul*, directed by Høegh and released in 2009. The film celebrates and promotes global justice. It is based on two poems – Darwish's "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips", sung by the famous Arab singer, Majida Rumi, and the Norwegian poet Henrik Ibsen's "Terje Vigen", a poem whose setting is Europe during the Napoleonic wars (1807–1814), read by Darwish himself. The poems are recited in six languages with the purpose of

showing "the impact of personal choices on the human spirit" (*Identity of the Soul*, 2009, para. 1). The combination of Ibsen's "Terje Vigen" and Darwish's "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" was decided on to emphasize "common humanity" (*Identity of the Soul*, 2009, para. 1).

These multiple translations and re-narrations of the poem highlight the fact that a text may endure criticism and neglect for a long time but may then be rediscovered and celebrated when the time is ripe for a change of narrative. In narrative terms, this process is known as temporal and spatial framing, where a text is selected and made salient at a certain place and time to serve a political end. Temporal and spatial framing therefore highlights the narrative embedded in the text and "encourages us to establish links between it and current narratives that touch our lives" (Baker, 2006, p. 112). In this instance, while the poem was relegated to the margins for decades, it resurfaced in the 2000s with Sand's recollection and experienced a revival, gaining more visibility and acquiring acclaim both inside the Arab world and beyond, and across modalities.

5. Conclusion

Darwish's creative experimentation with poetry and politics is a major characteristic of his career and it is manifested in translation. Not only was Darwish the translator and editor of the Arabic *Al-Ittihad*, the Israeli Communist Party journal, but he also translated two encounters across genres, languages, and modalities. His personal narrative and the Palestinian national public narrative intersect in "Identity Card" but diverge in "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips", thus leading to different receptions, retranslations, and re-narrations.

Darwish's reflections on and multi-faceted narration of a reality that is full of power asymmetries produce prefigurative poetry and politics in which narratives of social change dwell. In what Sazzad calls an "antihegemonic endeavour to undermine the imperialist Zionist discourse" (Sazzad, 2015, p. 3), Darwish drew on poetic techniques, aware as he was that poetry can be used to "instruct, agitate, and mobilize the oppressed nations and classes for inevitable struggle and resistance" (Siddiq, 2010, p. 494). Even though "Identity Card" challenged and resisted the occupier's narrative of Palestinians, Darwish did not subscribe to the racially and ethnically based annihilation of the enemy which breached the canon of Palestinian nationalist narratives in the 1960s against the backdrop of Israel's invasion and occupation of most of Palestine. "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" deviated from the Palestinian or Arab narrative of Israelis at the time, and this may well explain why Israel fears "poets more than shaheeds (martyrs)" (Sand, 2009, p. 8).

Dialogic poetry as a tool for narration has been central to Darwish's aesthetic and political goals. He employed dialogue to reflect moments of identity assertion, where the self and the other are repositioned in line with a global progressive narrative of justice. Both poems are re-narrations of real encounters with two different types of soldier. Owing to the content of each of these poems, Darwish was repositioned differently in the Palestinian and the Israeli contexts. Whereas with "Identity Card" he was repositioned in Israel as a person who aspires to annihilate the Jewish

people, with a "A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips" he was criticized by Palestinians for humanizing the Israeli other.

Darwish was able to attract the attention of the world to the plight of the Palestinians through his unflinching progressive narrative that never gave up on the improvement of humanity. At a certain point, his views on the way justice can be sought found their way to the highest levels of the Palestinian National Movement and they were able to influence some Israelis of the calibre of Shlomo Sand and Yossi Sarid. However, Darwish's notion of justice did not find its way into the Israeli establishment. Those who espouse his views and cherish his narrative in Israeli society are a minority with little influence on the political and cultural scene in Israel. On the contrary, his work was subjected to negative framing and selective appropriation in ways that could turn his progressive narrative into a regressive narrative that "stresses a pattern of decline or change for the worse" (Baker, 2006, p. 170) or indeed reposition him as an extremist who calls for the annihilation of the Jews.

Darwish's views were officially endorsed and adopted by the PLO, the sole representative of the Palestinian people at the time, when the PLO chairman, Yasir Arafat, announced the Palestinian Declaration of Independence in 1988. However, when Arafat recognized Israel's existence in 1993, Darwish, like other prominent intellectuals of the calibre of Edward Said, withdrew from the PLO. This act alerts us to the slippery boundaries of reconciliation. Indeed, it is one thing to weave networks of solidarity with the Israeli people towards social and political justice and quite another to surrender to the colonial state of Israel. The modern history of Palestine has shown us that the Israeli establishment continued and still continues its politics of dispossession and ethnic cleansing against Palestinians and that, as Darwish himself knew very well, reconciliation and surrender should not be conflated.

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[2] 'Lilies' and 'tulips' are used interchangeably in the English translation of the poem to denote the same flower.