



Understanding the Palestinian Struggle Through Mahmoud Darwish's "Identity Card"

Rakhmania Priwanda ✉¹, Abu Fanani²

UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya¹

UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya²

rakhmaniapri1da@gmail.com

Abstract:

This research examines the poem entitled "Identity Card" by Mahmoud Darwish to understand how historical, social, political, and biographical contexts describe the state of a country and its citizens that are being colonized. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method, collecting data through in-depth reading and applying Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism Theory. The research indicates that, from a historical, social, and political context, this poem portrays the expulsion of the Palestinian people and their loss of land and cultural inheritance throughout the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a weapon of resistance against occupation, the poem represents the Palestinian struggle to regain their freedom. The biographical context also shows that the author's experience as someone who lost his homeland greatly influenced his work. Through this poem, Darwish uses the pain of losing his homeland as a spear of struggle to maintain his identity. It can be concluded that this research shows that Darwish's poem entitled "Identity Card" functions as an essential record of human suffering and resistance amid conflict and as a medium to express feelings through beautiful words. The findings of this research offer a deep knowledge of how literature, and poetry in particular, may capture and perpetuate the fight to protect one's nation and identity.

Keywords: Palestinian; homeland; identity; struggle; resistance

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini meneliti puisi berjudul "Identity Card" karya Mahmoud Darwish untuk memahami bagaimana konteks sejarah, sosial, politik, dan biografis menggambarkan keadaan sebuah Negara dan warganya yang sedang terjajah. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan cara mengumpulkan data melalui pembacaan mendalam dan menerapkan Teori New Historicism milik Stephen Greenblatt. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa dari sudut pandang konteks sejarah, sosial, dan politik, puisi ini mencerminkan pengusiran rakyat Palestina selama konflik Israel-Palestina, yang menggambarkan rakyat kehilangan tanah dan warisan budayanya. Puisi ini menjadi senjata sebagai suara perlawanan terhadap kolonialisme dan penjajahan, menjadi lambang perjuangan rakyat Palestina untuk meraih kebebasannya kembali. Konteks biografis pun menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman pribadi penulis sebagai seseorang yang kehilangan tanah airnya sangat memengaruhi karyanya. Melalui puisi tersebut, Darwish menggunakan rasa sakit akibat kehilangan tanah airnya sebagai tombak perjuangan untuk mempertahankan identitasnya. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa



penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa puisi berjudul “Identity Card” karya Darwish ini di samping berfungsi sebagai catatan penting atas penderitaan dan perlawanan manusia di tengah konflik namun juga sebagai media untuk mengekspresikan perasaan dalam bentuk kata-kata yang indah. Temuan dari penelitian ini memberikan pemahaman yang mendalam tentang bagaimana sastra, khususnya puisi, dapat menggambarkan dan mengabadikan perjuangan untuk mempertahankan tanah air dan identitasnya.

Kata kunci: warga Palestina; tanah air; identitas ; perjuangan; perlawanan

INTRODUCTION

The Israeli occupation of Palestinian land continues to this day and has even become one of the most famous conflicts ever recorded in history. Tahhan (2018) explains that the Balfour Declaration issued by the British government in 1917, which announced Britain’s promise of a “*national home for the Jewish people*” in Palestine, caused European Jews to migrate en masse to Palestine. On May 15, 1948, Israel declared independence, which sparked a war between Israel and five other Arab countries (Alfonseca, 2023). Haddad (2022) states that the Zionist military forces expelled at least 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and land. This event is known as “*al-Nakba*,” which means “*Catastrophe*” by the Palestinians. However, the Arab-Israeli conflict carried on until it peaked in the Six-Day War in 1967. Israel managed to seize the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the Sinai Peninsula throughout this conflict (Bowen, 2017). This occupation not only has political consequences but also has a significant impact on the daily lives of Palestinian people, touching social, economic, and cultural aspects, creating ongoing tensions, and giving rise to controversial issues around human rights. Amid the many events and conflicts that occur, literature appears as an escape for some people who see it as an object to channel their feelings; in this context, literature can be a means of voicing injustice.

Literature can be a mirror and emotional record of the impact of various events that have occurred in the world, including the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Literature is a written representation of human experience through language. Klarer (2004) defines literature as a comprehensive written expression, noting that not all written works qualify as literature. Both literature and history are interconnected because they help us comprehend the people and things that have shaped our world on a deeper



level. Wollacott (2023) explains that the central relationship between literature and history is that literature is used to report and represent history. One type of literary work is poetry, which describes beautiful expressions through language chosen and arranged based on meaning, sound, and rhythm (Nemerov, 2023). In literary works, poetry is often considered the most capable of accessing deep emotional and philosophical dimensions (Derose, 2023). Therefore, poetry is a powerful medium for expressing emotions, thoughts, feelings, or experiences, including love, loss, happiness, anxiety, imagination, criticism, personal experiences, or advice.

"Identity Card" is a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, a Palestinian poet. This poem was written in 1964 and closely relates to the conflict between Palestine and Israel. Originally written in Arabic, this poem is one of Darwish's most famous works and garnered much controversy when it was first published and read in public (Worrell, 2022). The original title in Arabic is *"Bitaqat Huwiyya,"* which was translated by Johnson-Davies (2016), a well-known and prominent translator of Arabic-English literature, in an article entitled *"THIRD WORLD RESURGENCE."* Arambam (2008) states that in most of his works, Darwish uses Palestine as a metaphor for birth, resurrection, and suffering due to colonization and exile. *"Identity Card"* tells the story of a Palestinian man's experience in dealing with his worsening identity and fate during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It can be seen from each lines that describes his family, work situation, history, and sadness over the loss of his homeland. *"Identity Card"* also conveys a universal message about the importance of human rights and dignity in times of uncertainty and conflict. This poem is born from Darwish's personal experience as a Palestinian living under the shadow of Israeli occupation and reflects on the impact of the conflict on Palestinian identity. So, it can be a crucial tool for expressing one's reactions to and analyzing personal and group experiences during prolonged occupation.

The analysis in this study focuses on the historical context during the Israeli occupation of Palestine by describing the situation during the conflict through lines of poetry performed by the author, Mahmoud Darwish. This study will also investigate how the Israeli occupation influences and disturbs the idea of Palestinian identity, mainly how the poem captures the resilience and resistance of the Palestinian people



during the continuous conflict. It clarifies the historical background of the poem and the time it was produced. "Identity Card" was created because of the conflict between Israel and Palestine, considered one of the most significant historical conflicts of the twentieth century. Darwish's poem depicts the experience of the Palestinian people amidst the Israeli occupation. In addition, this study underlines the importance of literature as a reliable historical reference.

LITERATURE REVIEW

New Historicism

New Historicism in Literature is an analytical approach that emphasizes the importance of relating literary works to the historical, social, cultural, and political contexts in which they were produced and received. As stated by Knapp (2022) in an article titled "*New Historicism Theory: Overview and Examples*," New Historicism emerged as a literary criticism movement around 1980 and was brought to prominence by the efforts of Stephen Greenblatt. The phrase "*New Historicism*," first used by Greenblatt in his 1982 book entitled "*The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*," describes writing that deftly incorporates historical details (Mambrol, 2017). This approach argues that the themes and meanings found in literature cannot be directly derived from the text and do not always apply. Instead, the cultural and historical background of the creator influences the literary work. One of the central tenets of New Historicism, popularized by Greenblatt, is the idea of "*historical poetics*," which states that literature and poetry act as mirrors that reflect changes in society, politics, and culture.

Previous Studies

Ahmed (2012) explores how Mahmoud Darwish connects his identity and country in selected poems, one of which is "*Identity Card*," which is analyzed from an eco-postcolonial perspective in his article entitled "*Identity and Land in Selected Poems of Mahmoud Darwish: An Eco-postcolonial Reading*." He explains that this perspective emphasizes the relationship between identity and homeland and its vital part in the



Palestinian fight against Israeli occupation. This study aims to increase awareness about the complex bond between people and their natural surroundings. He also finds that Darwish's poems show how nature can be used to fight against occupying forces and how strong the connection is between identity and homeland.

Furthermore, in an article titled *"Home, Solitude, and the Search for Identity in the Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish,"* Al Areqi (2013) delves into four poems by Mahmoud Darwish, focusing on the poem *"Identity Card."* Within the framework of the Palestinian experience, his study explores issues of home, modesty, identity, and exile. He argues that Darwish's poetry mostly shows themes such as longing, uncertainty, and the continuous fight against colonial oppression using vivid language, symbolism, and imagery.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to examine the poetry *"Identity Card."* Bhandari (2022) states that qualitative research is the collection of non-numerical data to gain in-depth insight and understand the concept of the work. Mason (2002) also emphasized that qualitative research must produce discussions, including explanations and arguments. In this study, the author analyzes the historical aspects of the poem *"Identity Card"* by Mahmoud Darwish. This study relies on both primary and secondary data sources. For primary sources, researchers take data from lines and stanzas in the poem *"Identity Card"* by Mahmoud Darwish. For secondary sources, the researcher will collect accurate information from books, theses, journals, websites, and articles to support the research to be carried out. In this study, the researcher also applies the New Historicism approach because it is one of the methodologies used to study literary texts, especially those related to their external context. This approach is a theory put forward by Stephen Greenblatt in the 20th century, and its main principle is the interpretation of literature based on the environment in which it appears.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Historical Context



New Historicism theory, historical context refers to the understanding and investigation of historical aspects that influence the production and interpretation of literary works. This context assumes that every literary work must be placed in its historical context to understand its meaning and message better. Historical context refers to historical events that happened during the setting of the story shown in a literary work or at the time of writing. For instance, literary themes and plots can be affected by events such as war, revolution, or political change.

*"I am an Arab.
You stole my forefathers' vineyards
And land I used to till,
I and all my children,
And you left us and all my grandchildren
Nothing but these rocks,"* (Line 48-54)

In the lines above, Darwish describes the expulsion and takeover of their homeland by Israel with the sentence This reflects the feeling of loss and anger over the seizure of land that has been part of their family heritage and history for generations. Moreover, the author notes that they have lost their land and the future of subsequent generations, including their grandkids, left with *"nothing but these stones."* It illustrates how the conflict has destroyed the hopes and futures of their descendants. This line refers to the historical experience involving the expulsion and suffering experienced by Palestinians during the *al-Nakba* event in 1948. In this event, around 750 thousand Palestinians were expelled. The Zionist forces also seized 78% of the Palestinian territory by destroying at least 530 cities and killing 15 thousand Palestinians. One of the impacts of the *al-Nakba* event was the destruction of hundreds of homes, which indirectly also caused the Palestinian population to be expelled from their homeland, which is depicted line by line in the poem *"Identity Card"* by Mahmoud Darwish.

*"Will your government be taking them too?
As is being said?"* (Line 55 & 56)

The author also refers to *"your government,"* which may refer to Israel, and the question of whether it will even pick up the stones left over from the chaos created by these colonizers. It reflects the uncertainty and fear that greater forces in the history of



conflict constantly threaten the Palestinian homeland and identity. It also reflects the events of al-Nakba in 1948, which culminated in 1949 when the Zionist forces defeated five Arab countries. This condition is undoubtedly detrimental to the Palestinian people, who have lost many of their citizens and land, as reflected in the lines of Mahmoud Darwish's *"Identity Card."*

The Social Context

In New Historicism theory, social context refers to the understanding and investigating of how social dynamics, values, social structures, and social issues in a society at a particular time and place influence the creation, distribution, and interpretation of literary works. This context believes that literary works are products of a culture that reflect and are influenced by the broader social situation in which they are created or produced. It includes understanding social changes that occurred at a particular time, such as changes in family structure, gender roles, or other social changes reflected in literary works.

"Put it on record

I am an Arab

And the number of my card is fifty thousand" (Line 1-3)

In the lines above, the Darwish describes a person who is proud to be Arab by stating his ID card number. It shows how vital national identities are in the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians. The lines also show that an Arab's identity is based on their ID card number. It shows that in these kinds of disagreements, official papers and identification are very important in deciding a person's fate in society. When there is a lot of friction and conflict in society, ID cards are essential signs of social status and personal rights. It was reflected when Israel expanded its control and colonization of the Palestinian territories in 1967, establishing a population control system that has remained in place for more than five decades. Following the Six-Day War of that year, the Israeli military declared the occupied territories closed, requiring Palestinians to obtain permits to enter or leave them. Israel then divided Palestinians into small boxes by creating a colour-coded identification system issued by the Israeli military and reinforced in 1981 through its Civil Administration branch.



The Political Context

In New Historicism theory, political context refers to the understanding and study of how political movements, political views, conflicts, and power structures in a society change at a particular time and place. This context influences how literary works are created, disseminated, and interpreted. Examining the moment's political background helps one better appreciate literary works. Political context can cover problems including social conflict, government policy changes, revolutions, social inequality, or the effect of political ideology on literature.

“Put it on record at the top of page one

I don't hate people

I trespass on no one's property.

And yet, if I were to become hungry

I shall eat the flesh of my usurper.

Beware, beware of my hunger

And of my anger!” (Line 57-63)

In the lines above, Darwish conveys the strong political sentiments from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When he states, *“I shall eat the flesh of my usurper,”* it is a very vocal statement representing his feelings as a Palestinian about resistance against occupation and colonialism. Darwish expresses anger and frustration with the current reality that causes the Palestinian people to live in uncertainty and injustice. In a political context, these statements imply that the Palestinian people have long endured conflict and occupation. This is in line with Palestinians who, since the 1960s, began to commemorate *Nakba* Day openly, holding events on May 15 to educate the broader community about their ties to their land and to fight for their right to return. These lines of poetry seem to be a voice to protest the political system of the occupying state that has taken away their homeland and their rights as civilians.

The Biographical Context

In New Historicism theory, biographical context refers to the understanding and study of the life and experiences of the author of a literary work. This context assumes that understanding each author's life, background, and influences is relevant to understanding the literature they produce. This approach includes the personal factors



and experiences of the author that influence how they produce literature and how that literature can be interpreted. Understanding the author's biography provides information about their origins, education, life experiences, and events that influenced them.

*"You stole my forefathers' vineyards
And land I used to till,"* (Line 49 & 50)

In the lines above, Darwish conveys the loss of his land in his own country due to occupation. If related to the context of Darwish's biography, this is indeed true. In various historical sources, it is recorded that Darwish came from a Sunni Muslim family, which were the original residents and landowners of the village of Al-Birwah, Palestine. During the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948, Israeli forces captured his village, and his family fled to Lebanon. At that time, his village was destroyed by the Israeli army, which aimed to prevent the Palestinian population from returning to their homes in the new Jewish state (Israel). A year later, Darwish and his family secretly returned to their homeland, facing uncertainty because they were classified as *"internal refugees"* upon their return.

*"I have eight children
And the ninth is due after summer."* (Line 4 & 5)

In the above lines, Darwish reveals aspects of a person's personal life. The author announces that it is as if someone told of having eight children and anticipating the birth of a ninth child after the summer. If we relate it to Darwish's biography, this does not correspond to the facts. Darwish was married twice and divorced. His first wife was a writer named Rana Kabbani. After their divorce in the mid-1980s, he married an Egyptian translator, Hayat Heeni. And another fact is that Darwish has no children.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis above, the researcher found four contexts: historical, social, political, and biographical contexts in Mahmoud Darwish's poem "Identity Card," which were analyzed using the New Historicism theory. First, in the historical context, this poem tells the story of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has been going on for



decades, including war, the expulsion of the Palestinian people from their homeland, and prolonged political uncertainty. Second, in the social context, this poem reflects the social conditions of the Palestinian people who live in refugee, uncertainty, and injustice, referring to lost land, stolen ancestral gardens, and lives that have stopped. Third, in the political context, the author expresses anger and resistance to colonialism and occupation. Finally, the biographical context helps reveal Mahmoud Darwish's personal experience as the author, which includes refugees and the loss of his homeland. Through this poem, readers can imagine how miserable it is to live amid conflict and occupation so that, as readers, we can side with and defend what is right.

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