

## ***The Similarities Between Reality and Myth in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry***

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### **Abstract:**

This article addresses the dialectical relationship between reality and myth in the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, considering it as both an artistic and visionary tool that enabled the poet to transcend the limitations of the historical moment toward a universal human horizon. Darwish employed myth not as a static heritage, but rather as a symbolic energy that he reshaped according to the requirements of his poetic and political experience, thus endowing it with meanings of resistance, resurrection, and immortality. He utilized multiple mythological symbols such as the Phoenix, Tammuz, and the Odyssey to embody the Palestinian existential struggle between loss and rebirth. Through this mythic employment, Darwish succeeded in establishing a poetics in which myth intersects with reality, expressing a collective consciousness that seeks redemption and the restoration of the human meaning of life.

### **Keywords:**

Myth – Mahmoud Darwish – Symbols – Resurrection – Collective Consciousness

## Introduction:

Since the dawn of his existence on this earth, man has been inhabited by existential questions that stir within him a sharp ontological anxiety—questions that do not touch upon the partial, but rather strike at the very essence of human existence itself. Here, myth comes to the fore as a means of interpretation, supported by its attempts to understand the world. And because true poetry carries within it the desire to comprehend the world and to elicit the prophecy of words and ideas, we see that the poet always carries with him a vision—he is, to a great extent, searching for the immortality of that vision through his employment of myth in poetry.

The contemporary Arab poet, with deep awareness, has grasped the nature of myth. He resorted to it and sought to revive it whenever possible, in order to express his tormented reality. As a result, parallels emerged between the narrative of reality and the mythical narrative. Therefore, in this research paper, we attempt to uncover this interrelation, taking the works of the poet Mahmoud Darwish as a model. Yet our task does not depend merely on tracing the use of myths in Darwish's poetry; rather, it extends to clarifying the relationship between this mythic employment and reality itself. Hence arise the following questions:

What are the real-life circumstances that led the poet to employ one particular myth over another? How did the poet project primitive myths onto his contemporary reality? Did he preserve their historical form, or did he alter them to align with new civilizational values?

Before primitive man thought of composing poetry, he first thought of interpreting the phenomena around him. His urgent need to organize the sensible world and make use of it on the one hand, and to find solutions to the conflict of existential knowledge on the other, led him to rely on his primordial experience. Here came the decisive emergence of myth as a vital and insistent force of life and immortality:

“It reaches back to the earliest beginnings of human history, where there was no boundary between the mind and emotions of man; thus, it emerged as a mixture of both. This is what granted it a kind of immortality in human memory—an immortality that expresses the constant recurrence of the same existential question, where resorting to myth becomes, in itself, the present solution to that question” (Al-Jazzar, 2002, p. 26).

The previous paragraph explains the secret behind the endurance of myth throughout the ages, supported by its ability to reveal different human dimensions, for “it gives man—and this is of utmost importance—the illusion that he can understand the world, and that he indeed does understand it” (Lévi-Strauss, 1986, p. 37).

And since true poetry carries within it the desire to understand the world through vision, it will—in large part—seek the immortality of its vision in the immortality of myth, and its broader human orientation in the universality and humanity of myth. This is confirmed by Muhammad Fikri Al-Jazzar, who states: “The use of myth (meaning in poetry) represents an attempt to elevate the poem from its personal individuality to its broader and more universal humanity (...) for myth unites the particular with the universal; within its being, the subjective and the objective merge, transcending individual consciousness to connect with collective consciousness” (Al-Jazzar, 2002, p. 261).

When the contemporary Arab poet became deeply aware of the nature of myth, he turned to it and sought to revive it whenever the opportunity arose—not merely for its immortal nature, but because there are numerous reasons for such inclination, foremost among them being that ordinary language is incapable of matching the winged imagination of poetry, its emotional intensity, and its interaction with the external world, as well as its desire to penetrate the essence of the present and foresee the future. “Ordinary language—with its strict rules bound to reason and logic—will undoubtedly stand powerless before the torrent and rush of emotions crowding within the poet’s soul (...) Undoubtedly, necessity calls for an imaginative style, far from directness (...) capable of shaping these poetic meanings in their totality and complexity” (Aloui, 2017, p. 87).

Samia Aloui continues, revealing this language that stands opposite to ordinary language—the mythic language, the only one that “assists the poet in connecting the dreams of the subconscious mind with the activity of the conscious mind, in linking the past and the present, unifying the personal and collective experience, and rescuing the poem from pure lyricism” (Ihsan, 1978, p. 129).

The collective and the individual may converge within myth, yet it serves, in one of its aspects, as a means for the self to articulate its position within this crisis-laden world. Since his appearance upon the earth, man has never ceased to face crises no less grave than those encountered in his primitive existence. Civilization and progress have placed him before a complex world, compelling him to revive myth but in a renewed form. ‘Abd al-Riḍā ‘Alī clarifies this further, stating that “the contemporary poet’s use of myths aims to fulfill multiple purposes: he seeks through them to realize his repressed self, to voice his discontent with the most perilous issues, and to offer an alternative to today’s contradictory world — rejecting laws of oppression and conflict, aided by artistic symbols that render the poetic experience alive, affecting the recipient and pulling him out of the coercion of conviction toward a renewed contemplation.” (Ali, 1978, p. 25)

The foregoing leads us to affirm the existence of correspondences between the narrated real and the narrated mythical, correspondences born from contents that lend themselves to reinterpretation in order to suit new civilizational values. We would not exaggerate to say that myth continues to offer *miraculous solutions* to the problematic reality: “for it possesses the ability to transcend time, to dwell in the future; and the search for myths and symbols requires an extraordinary ability to discover elements that correspond to one’s personal experience and to the experience of one’s nation and era. (...) The poet releases myth from its eternal imprisonment into the realms of life — from death and oblivion to its resurrection and manifestation in a new vision.” (Al-Rabaihat, 2009, pp. 32–33)

Creativity truly takes form when the poet knows how to elevate the ordinary daily event to the level of the mythical one — when he casts on real, ordinary figures shadows and traits of mythical extraordinariness, or when he brings mythical heroes and events down to earth, making them live the present moment and interact with its occurrences. Here lies the power of artistic and visionary innovation, when the poet “can elevate the individual contemporary incident to the level of the universal human event of mythical nature, just as he can raise the ordinary, familiar word to the level of the symbolic one. He draws the mythical into the real and the real into the mythical.” (Shaker, 2010, p. 108)

This is what Ḥātim al-Ṣakkar attests to in praise of Darwish, noting “his skill in mythicizing the daily event and elevating it to an epic level at once, and the fervor of his linguistic lexicon.” (Al-Sakkar, 2008, p. 24)

Such is what most contemporary poets have attempted to do — those who bore the banner of writing a *human poem* with a comprehensive, global outlook and vision, benefiting from the density and dramatic tension inherent in myth. This quality has made myth play a highly significant role in “transferring the Arabic poem into the realm of drama, for the poet endowed myth with a human meaning in the present — he clothed it in the suffering of man with contemporary issues. Thus, myth began to soar on two wings: bearing the burden of experience and serving as a bridge between past and present, and consequently a means to foresee the future. Our poets have not used myth in its historical sense but in its civilizational one, giving it the features of the present age — and this constitutes the *artistic use of myth*.” (Hannoun, 2014, p. 192; Sahlawi, 1994, pp. 345–346)

The struggle with death has been the most recurrent existential dilemma throughout the ages, and the mythical solution was embodied in the idea of *resurrection*. This notion was expressed through many myths, yet Mahmoud Darwish preferred to render it artistically, projecting it onto the contemporary age — most often through the myth of the Phoenix. But did Darwish’s Phoenix, as it spoke of reality, preserve the primitive essence of its mythical presence?

At times, the poet draws a parallel between reality and myth, evoking it as it is — in its familiar sense of *being reborn anew*. In *Madiḥ al-Ẓill al-‘Ālī* (*In Praise of the High Shadow*), Darwish equates the resisting Palestinian with the Phoenix. Before invoking the Phoenix, he prepares the ground by describing an extraordinary, almost mythical person: one who “gives the sea its shape, makes his body applaud the autumn, tears his naked heart apart — yet triumphs, uniting banners and sorrowful nations through a Palestinian miracle.” (Darwish, 2005, pp. 333–336)

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the poet later parallels this miraculous hero with the Phoenix, urging him *not to surrender but to rise again, to resurrect and reappear anew*. (Darwish, 2005, p. 336)

### Beirut Is Our Story

*Beirut is our bitterness,  
And Beirut is God's test.  
We tried You — we tried You.  
Who gave You this riddle? Who named You?  
Who raised You above our wounds so You could see Yourself?  
So rise, like the Phoenix of ashes, from the ruin!*

In another poem, the poet employs the myth of the Phoenix, preserving its essential meaning yet activating it through his poetic experience, shaping it within an *innovative artistic form* that intensifies the myth's dramatic density and tension. He addresses his enemies, saying: (Darwish, 2005, p. 28)

*We do not come to stay, nor do we leave to return. But the winds  
Threw us, by mistake, into your neighborhood.  
So slay them with your rusty swords,  
And guard your wives from the Phoenix bird in our bodies.*

Here, the poet reassures the *new dwellers* of the land of Palestine that the land, once belonging to its *original inhabitant*, has now become the property of the *stranger*. This original inhabitant will not disturb the new residents — yet, at the same time, he warns them of the possible *rebirth* of the owner's body, suddenly, from within the wombs of their wives. The poet's deliberate use of the word “your wives” reinforces and confirms the *symbolism of resurrection*: just as the Phoenix's ashes contain another life, so does a woman's womb contain another life. This life, however, becomes a *threat* to the settler — especially if it is linked to the body of the land's original owner, a body akin to the Phoenix in its dormancy and renewal — no sooner does it fade than it bursts aflame again.

Darwish remains insistent on life, nurturing the Phoenix in his poems as a creature rich in *revolutionary energy and constant renewal*. Yet, in moments of despair, the Phoenix betrays his expectations — it burns without hope of rising anew. The myth, then, becomes colored by the *harsh hue of reality*; its mythical radiance dims, its miraculous power weakens, and *death's manifestations* dominate the landscape: (Darwish, 1995, p. 46)

*The war had ended,  
And the ashes of our village vanished in a black cloud  
Upon which the Phoenix has not yet been born...*

The poet's anxiety about his *crisis-ridden reality* surfaces in the poem *Sarhān Drinks Coffee at the Cafeteria*, where the Phoenix reappears in a *tragic, deformed* state — unlike its majestic appearance in ancient myth. This is what Peyrebrunel called "*the profanation of myth for the sake of its transformation into literature*", saying: "Myth becomes literature only when it is desecrated — that is, after its first distortion. At that point, myths lose their esoteric nature and sacred function, turning into literature." (Filali, 2013, p. 21; Peyrebrunel et al., 2005, p. 212)

We discern this *distortion of the Phoenix myth* in the poet's words: (Darwish, 2005, p. 109)

Every day we die,  
The steps burn and a crippled Phoenix is born,  
Then we live to be killed again.  
*O my country, we come to you as prisoners and the slain...*

In the previous excerpt, the poet distorts the myth, *reversing its essence* in harmony with the tragic reality — "they were peoples and became stones; they had homelands and became smoke." The words *stones* and *smoke* intensify the drama's tension. Thus, even myth becomes powerless to offer solutions when it leans upon a *crippled, deformed Phoenix*. Indeed, the poet even *reverses* the myth's core logic: if the Phoenix dies to live, *they live only to die*.

Darwish's Phoenix never adhered to a single state: sometimes it rose perfectly renewed from its ashes; at other times, it emerged *incomplete and distorted*. At times, the poet would take only a *part* of the Phoenix's aura — choosing, for instance, its bone to build meaning, turning that fragment into an active element in *reviving the linguistic backdrop* expressive of reality. The poet's aim is not merely to cite the myth, but to *draw inspiration from it* — even by employing only part of it. Here lies the *genius of his creativity*: reshaping myth to serve his intent and contemporary experience. He writes: (Darwish, 2005, p. 126)



The second place where the poet mentions the feather of the Phoenix is a passage from the poem *In My Mother's House* where his old image looks at him and asks him: (Darwish, 1995, p. 24)

Are you me? Do you remember your heart pierced  
by the old flute and the Phoenix's feather?  
Or did you change your heart when you changed your path?

Darwish borrows from the Phoenix its feather and links it with the flute. Did this linking come by chance and arbitrarily? If we go back to the formation of the flute and the Phoenix, we find that both have been subjected to burning to take their ideal form throbbing with life. In the same way the Phoenix burned to be reborn, likewise the flute is transformed by fire from a rigid reed with no soul into an instrument pulsating with music, emotions, and feelings — and this is what his image tells the poet. It remembers his youth when he pulsed with hope, life, and even longing and the desire to change destiny. “Am I and you the same person?” The poet's image answers that the days of youth have gone, and with them went the flute, the Phoenix, and the desire to renew life. Rather, he is now in his old age and awaits only his end: (Darwish, 1995, p. 24)

And I leapt over this wall to see  
what cannot be seen  
and measure the depth of the abyss.

In the shadow of the great existential crises experienced by the Arab nation, the turn toward myths of resurrection became a pressing matter. Alongside the Phoenix, the myth of the god of fertility, Tammuz, represented the most favorable orientation for most poets; for at a time when the manifestations of death were hovering over the Arab homeland, the poets turned toward “creating a mythical world in which resurrection overcomes death” (Al-Jabbar, 2012, p. 1144).

But in Darwish's use of the myth of Tammuz, did resurrection overcome death? We can gather from the passages we shall cite that the Tammuz of reality is not the Tammuz of myth: iron has triumphed over vegetation, and Tammuz — who descended into the underworld — was defeated by the serpent, betrayed his covenant, and never returned. All these are circumstances indicating that the poet does not fall into the seduction of

myth, but rather prefers, at times, to subjugate the myth to the intuitive and revelatory power of poetry. He says in the poem *Tammuz and the Serpent*: (Darwish, 1987, pp. 170–172)

Tammuz passed by our ruins  
and awakened the serpent's lust ...  
Tammuz returned, to stone the memory  
thirsting ... and stones of fire ...  
And the children in exile wondered:  
our fathers filled our nights here ... descriptions  
of our golden glory —  
they spoke much of the vineyards of figs and grapes.  
Tammuz returned, and we did not see them ...  
Tammuz leaves our threshing floors,  
Tammuz takes the cloak of flame,  
but he remains in our ruin —  
a serpent.

The poet wrote his poem in the 1960s, “when the Israeli enemy was attempting to occupy the peasants’ lands, preventing them from planting and harvesting, and removing them from their true land by various means such as imprisonment, exile, plundering their wealth, and confiscating their resources” (Zare’ Zardini, n.d., p. 89).

Hence, Tammuz exists, but there is no trace of the stories the ancestors told their descendants about the signs of life that spread with him. Even the myths betray the Palestinians, and the serpent’s lust prevails — leaving ruins, thirst, stones of fire, longing, and rage!

Tammuz appears elsewhere as a traitor to the poet when he becomes colored by the tone of the period marking the poet’s departure from Beirut — one of the hardest stages he went through. Tammuz abandoned him just as Beirut abandoned him: (Darwish, 2005, p. 368)

Beirut, at dawn:  
the poet’s poem was completely exposed,  
and three betrayed him:  
Tammuz,  
a woman,

and rhythm ...  
and they slept.

Betrayal in the poem appears in a triadic form: Tammuz as a symbol of fertility and resurrection, the woman also as a symbol of life and fertility, and rhythm as that feature which grants life to the poem. Thus, once again, the manifestations of death prevail over life — contrary to what the myth tells.

Darwish continues to invest in myths of rebirth, transforming them. In *Do Not Apologize for What You Have Done*, he turns to the Canaanite myth (*Adonis*). He preserves the beginning of the myth but chooses for it a purely realistic ending. Here, the poet pulls the mythical into the real, yet once more the myths of resurrection appear powerless before the weapons of war and unable to find solutions to stop the machine of death. The poem begins carrying with it the mythical signs of rebirth: (Darwish, 1995, pp. 45–46)

The beloved bled poppies,  
the land of purple gleamed with his wounds,  
its first songs: the blood of love spilled by a goddess,  
and its last: blood ...  
O people of Canaan, celebrate  
the spring of your land, and burn !

Yet, the manifestations of life soon fade away when the gods of iron replace the gods of love, and the decisive word belongs to reality at the expense of myth: (Darwish, 1995, p. 76)

The beloved bled poppies,  
the rocks of the slope turned yellow  
from the pain of hard labor,  
then reddened,  
and the red water flowed  
in the veins of our spring ...  
the first of our songs was the blood of love  
spilled by a goddess,  
and the last — blood spilled by the gods of iron ...

Myth thus remains an inexhaustible source from which the poet draws new dimensions to express lived reality, yet he does not always adhere to its details. Muhammad Fikri al-Jazzar quotes Rathven as saying to the creator: “*You reveal your originality by employing your skill in discovering many ways to write about ancient myths. By engaging yourself within a web of imaginary images in which cultured readers participate, you can transcend clarity to reach the implicit.*” (Al-Jazzar, 2002, pp. 260–261).

Darwish continues in his poems to manipulate myths according to what suits his present. Unlike Telemachus, the son of Ulysses, who traveled in search of his father, here stands the Palestinian Telemachus refusing to travel, preferring instead to remain steadfast upon his father’s rock. He says: (Darwish, 1987, p. 182)

I am the son of Ulysses who waited for the mail from the north.  
A sailor called him, but he did not travel.  
He bridled the ships and withdrew to the highest mountains.  
— O rock where my father prayed to protect a rebel,  
I shall not sell you for pearls.

The poet identifies with the myth yet “imposes upon it contemporary connotations opposed to the inherited meanings of Telemachus” (Zare’ Zardini, n.d., p. 92). Darwish goes on to construct some of his poems upon fragments of the *Odyssey*; but just as he made Ulysses’ son refuse to travel, he now transforms Penelope — no longer weaving out of loyalty to her absent husband and deferral of her suitors, but out of helplessness as she watches her children die of hunger. She will sell the garment she has woven to buy a cup of milk for her children. He writes: (Darwish, 2005, p. 145)

... Do not believe, then,  
in the patience of our wives.  
They will weave two robes, then sell the lover’s clothes  
to buy a cup of milk  
for our children.

In the previous passage, Penelope chooses her children over her husband; yet in another poem, she reaches the utmost degree of selfishness when she chooses to weave the garment not out of fidelity to the long-awaited absentee, but to wear it herself. He does not mention her name

explicitly — as in the previous excerpt — but we infer it implicitly when he depicts her refusing to complete Homer’s story. He says: (Darwish, 2009, p. 64)

I am a woman — no less and no more —  
I live my life as it is,  
thread by thread,  
and I spin my wool to wear it,  
not to complete Homer’s story, or his sun.

The implicit use of myths recurs when the poet prefers not to state outright the names of his mythic figures. For instance, when he employs the myth of Narcissus — the handsome youth enamored of his own reflection in water — he never names him explicitly; yet we discern his presence in the poem where the poet himself takes Narcissus’ place by the stream. He does not, however, inherit his overwhelming narcissism; rather, he beholds in the water the reflection of his beloved’s face, thereby elevating her to mythic realms. He writes: (Darwish, 2005, p. 57)

Upon the water — your face,  
the shadow of evening  
quarrels with my shadow,  
and the windows of my kin  
forbid me to stand beside this evening.  
When will the rose in memory wither?  
When shall the strangers rejoice?  
To describe the floating moment  
upon the water — a myth, or a sky ...

We move from mythological characters to a mythical river known in ancient Greek mythology as *Lethe*, “one of the five rivers of the underworld (...) from which the souls of the dead drink in order to forget all earthly memories” (Gouin, 2016).

In the poem “The Narrator Writes: He Dies”, the poet partially employs the myth of *Lethe*, saying: (Darwish, 2005, p. 83)

I have no face upon this time’s mirror  
My face is like the houses of the poor

“Forgets drinks” from the memory of wheat  
And from the dream of prophets.

If, in the myth, only the dead drink from this river, the poet — from the title itself *“The Narrator Writes: He Dies”* — already evokes death. Yet he is a living dead, confined within a cell where light and shadow coexist. The paradox lies in that the poet does not drink forgetfulness from the river, but rather from *memory itself* — the memory of wheat, and hence, the memory of the earth to which he surrenders himself and the martyrs. In this way, *forgetfulness* becomes the desire of the living, not of the dead.

From myths of rebirth, fidelity, selfishness, and forgetfulness, we move to creation myths. The earth has always been an obsession for Darwish — he, the eternal exile, a suitcase wearied by airports but never tired himself. In his poem “My Father, Lord of the Deer... Raise Them”, he mentions that he learned *the book of the earth* from his father, from *A to Z*. Yet this same earth turns into *exile* for the son, after it has become “a ball tossed about by invaders.”

In a desperate attempt to assert his belonging, he returns to the first myth of creation, when the earth was still in its primordial and pure state — virgin, untouched by the corruption of human hands. He writes: (Darwish, 2005, pp. 199–200)

The earth breaks the shell of her egg and swims among us,  
Green beneath the clouds. She takes from the sky her color’s ornament  
To enchant us. She is blue and green, born from her own fable  
And from our offering on her wheat feast, teaching us the art of searching  
For the myth of creation.  
A lady upon her watery throne,  
The lady of praise. Small — no age scratches her face, no bull  
Bears her upon its horns; she carries herself within herself  
And sleeps in her own embrace.

The darkness and tension of reality compel the poet to return to the *primordial manifestations of earth*, portraying her as a *charming bride* clinging to her people, refusing to welcome strangers, enthroned upon her watery dais. In doing so, he evokes the myth of creation, which belongs to the “category of aquatic birth myths, where the pre-cosmic state in our

cosmogonic legends is a condition of watery chaos — motionless, undifferentiated, and unformed” (Al-Sawwah, 1996, p. 28).

This mythical, virgin earth is the *longed-for land*; thus, the poet beseeches his father — in one last plea — to rise and *write the Chronicle of Forgetfulness*: to forget all the invaders that have trampled it and inscribe his name upon its seal.

### Conclusion:

At the end of this study, we arrive at a set of findings summarized in the following points:

1. Darwish sought the immortality of his poetic vision and its universal orientation through the eternity and inclusiveness of myth.
2. Darwish did not preserve the myth in its literal form; rather, he transformed and reshaped it to suit his contemporary reality.
3. The myths employed by the poet varied between resurrection myths, represented by *the Phoenix* and *Tammuz*, and creation myths, while he also drew upon mythological events from the *Odyssey*.

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