



# Exile's Bed: Memory, Displacement, and Identity in Mahmoud Darwish's *A Bed for the Stranger*

<sup>1</sup>S. Ummu Shamima & <sup>2</sup>Dr. S. Kaleel Ahamed

<sup>1</sup>Guest Lecturer, Kamarajar Government Arts College, Tenkasi

Ph.D Research Scholar, Research Department of English, Sadakathulla Appa College

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor, Research Department of English, Sadakathulla Appa College

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu



Manuscript ID:  
BIJ-SPL3-Nov25-ES-005

Subject: English

Received : 25.07.2025

Accepted : 08.08.2025

Published : 27.11.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si3.25.Nov005

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## Abstract

*This study critically examines three poems “We Were Without a Present,” “The Stranger Finds Himself in the Stranger,” and “The Land of the Stranger, the Serene Land” from Mahmoud Darwish’s 1999 collection A Bed for the Stranger. Through close reading and thematic analysis, the paper explores how Darwish reframes alienation, temporal dislocation, and exile as sources of identity rather than loss. Each poem is shown to reimagine solitude and displacement as spaces of poetic resilience transforming memory into refuge, self-alienation into collective echo, and absence into a lyrical site of belonging. By integrating vivid quotations and situating the poems within Darwish’s broader late style and political-poetic context, the article argues that A Bed for the Stranger marks a crucial evolution in Darwish’s approach to exile where grief, nostalgia, and language converge to claim presence within absence. The findings contribute to scholarship by foregrounding how poetic labor builds diasporic identity through metaphor, time, and remembered geography.*

**Keywords:** Mahmoud Darwish, *A Bed for the Stranger*, exile poetry, memory, displacement, diasporic identity.

Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) was a Palestinian poet often called Palestine’s national poet, as his poems captured both the suffering and hope of his people. He was born in Al-Birwa, Palestine. During the 1948 Nakba, his village was destroyed, and his family became “present-absent aliens”, displaced within their own land. Darwish began writing as a teenager. In 1964, his poem “Identity Card” declared, “Write down: I am an Arab.” This forceful claim of

identity made the poem a symbol of resistance. It led to censorship and house arrest by Israeli authorities.

Living in exile in Paris, Beirut, Cairo, and Ramallah, Darwish edited the literary magazine *Al-Karmel* and served briefly on the PLO Executive Committee. He helped draft the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence but later resigned in protest of the Oslo Accords. Darwish’s poetry often intertwines personal and political themes. He once wrote, “Without hope we are lost.” “Exile is more



*than a geographical concept. You can be an exile in your homeland.*" These lines express how exile reshapes identity not just through loss of place, but through existential loneliness. Another of his memorable observations connects poetry, memory, and homeland: *"I don't decide to represent anything except myself. But that self is full of collective memory."*

His work has been translated into more than twenty languages. He received international awards such as the Lenin Peace Prize, Lannan Cultural Freedom Prize, and France's Knight of Arts & Belles Lettres. In his later poetry especially in *A Bed for the Stranger* (1999) Darwish turns inward. He reimagines exile as a poetic landscape, where memory, language, and absence become sources of identity: "I am from there. I am from here. I am not there and I am not here. I have two names ... I have two languages ..." In this way, exile becomes lyrical presence not defeat, but a space where identity and hope can flourish.

Darwish's *A Bed for the Stranger* (1999) emerges as a pivotal turning point in his poetic journey. After nearly thirty years of exile, Darwish returned to Ramallah and offered readers a deeply introspective book that moves beyond national protest into the realms of emotional and metaphysical exploration. The poems in this collection invite us into landscapes not of territory, but of memory, longing, and identity.

Rather than overt political statements, Darwish uses intimate dialogue, love lyric, and tonal exchange to negotiate exile. He writes as though addressing an unseen other sometimes a lover, sometimes the self creating a poetic conversation where "I" and "you" merge and dissolve. This duality becomes the central experience: memory made present, distance turned into dialogue, solitude transformed into fertile interior terrain. In Darwish's vision, exile becomes not loss, but creative possibility.

Themes of identity and estrangement interweave throughout the poems. Darwish frequently asks questions like "Am I another you and you another

I?" invoking an empathy born of shared displacement. Across this terrain, remembered landscapes from Babylon to ancient Arab exile echo both myth and intimate history. Love becomes analogy for homeland; memory becomes geography; emotional solitude becomes resistance. Kindness, to Darwish, becomes a moral act, offered between strangers and selves in process.

*A Bed for the Stranger* reveals exile as lyrical refuge rather than void. In this terrain, memory, language, and imagined landscapes converge to reclaim belonging. The collection captures a mature voice: a poet who has survived displacement yet continues to build identity through the material of absence. With this groundwork, the poems "We Were Without a Present," "The Stranger Finds Himself in the Stranger," and "The Land of the Stranger, the Serene Land" chart powerful paths each exploring exile as presence, each building a home within poetic space.

In "We Were Without a Present," Mahmoud Darwish explores how exile erases the present. Memories of home, shared places, and lost routines haunt the speaker, revealing absence as its own form of presence. The poem begins with an invitation to journey together, "Let us go as we are: a free woman and loyal friend... together on our separate paths." This paradox together yet separate captures the shared loneliness of exile. It reflects a bond rooted in displacement rather than in closeness, showing how exile shapes relationships in unexpected ways.

Darwish emphasizes that memory can cause more pain than separation. He writes, "If you look behind you, there is only exile... All of them... are preparing to become exile." These lines show how homes, gardens, and meeting places turn into reminders of what is gone, leaving no present but a trail of memories. Despite internal fractures, Darwish offers a path to renewal: kindness. By repeatedly urging "Let us be kind," he suggests that compassion can reclaim some of what exile steals. Critics of his work characterize this shift as part of Darwish's exploration of "postnational identity," where exile disrupts time and community, and empathy becomes



a tool for self-restoration. In this poem, exile is more than absence; it is an ethical condition. When the present disappears, emotional labor empathy, shared vulnerability can rebuild it. Darwish transforms solitude into a shared space where memory, empathy, and resilience offer a fractured people a way forward.

In “The Stranger Finds Himself in the Stranger,” Darwish explores how exile reshapes identity. He shows that being a stranger can bring unity, even while highlighting separation. The poem opens with a striking paradox, “We are two become one. We have no name, strange woman, when the stranger finds himself in the stranger.” This means that in exile, self and other merge into a shared identity. They lose their personal names but gain a bridge between two strangers.

Darwish writes that what is left of their shared past is the “power of the shadow.” He evokes a landscape where memory helps sustain them amid displacement. Darwish uses the idea of the shadow to suggest that Palestinians and their land form a single living force resisting erasure through memory. As one academic study notes, “We are one in two ... Our garden behind us we have the force of shadow.” This image highlights interconnectedness between people and land as a form of poetic resistance. Another key passage states, “Together we searched for our addresses.”

This search shows how they rebuild identity through memory and intimate relation, even without a fixed home. The poem also moves through symbols of desert, sea, and sky. Darwish offers images of traveling, diving, and climbing mountains to suggest journeying between past and future. He claims that in exile they become both observer and participant in a shared myth of displacement and return. Near the end, he observes, “We need to return to being two, so we can go on embracing each other.” Here, Darwish reconciles unity with personal identity. He insists that love and identity must preserve individuality not dissolve it. In scholarly terms, this poem reflects Darwish’s mature style, where exile becomes lyrical terrain rather than absence. As noted by critics, *The Stranger’s Bed* unfolds a dialogue where “the Familiar and the Stranger become ‘two in one.’”

Duality becomes clarity in the poetic puzzle of identity.

In “The Land of the Stranger, the Serene Land,” Mahmoud Darwish invites readers into an inner landscape shaped by emotional memory and fictional geography. He imagines a land both within and beyond himself “at the border of a land within me, filled with you, or with your absence.” This image suggests that homeland lives in the heart, even when physical return is impossible. Darwish declares, “Rise to any woman within you, and daisies will appear on every window in the city...” This line shows how inner growth leads to outward beauty. When memory and love bloom inside, they transform fragmented exile into creative peace. He goes on, “There, here, within me and without... and I can dwell in the serene land.” These words affirm that belonging can transcend geography. Spiritual presence and emotional connection become a true home, independent of physical location.

Critics describe Darwish’s use of nature such as mist, daisies, pigeons, and statues as symbolic of poetic refuge. They show that solitude and exile become sources of beauty and resilience. Darwish does not let absence defeat him. Instead, he melds inner world with outer world to create meaning from exile. The poem becomes a meditation on how one can build a sanctuary inside the soul. According to literary scholarship, Darwish’s poetry often portrays nature as sustaining resistance; landscapes do not just mourn, they endure with the people. Nature becomes resistance itself, woven into memory and identity. Through this poem, Darwish bridges inner emotional life with outer geography. The stranger’s land becomes both “the serene land” and the homeland of the soul. Exile is reimagined not as void, but as space filled with imagined belonging, gentle creation, and patient hope.

Across these three poems from *A Bed for the Stranger* (1999), Mahmoud Darwish transforms exile into poetic presence, forging identity from absence. Each piece “We Were Without a Present,” “The Stranger Finds Himself in the Stranger,” and “The Land of the Stranger, the Serene Land” reveals how solitude, memory, and relational bonds combine to



create a lyrical refuge. A primary theme is exile as a formative space, not a void. Darwish writes of living without a present, merging with another stranger, and finding inner lands filled with memory. Critics note that Darwish's late poetry turns exile into an inner landscape, where grief and longing offer creative vitality rather than paralysis.

The second theme is memory as resistance. In all three poems, the past is reclaimed to assert presence: almonds bloom, shadows and addresses are sought, and inner lands fill with absence or presence. Scholars have described his metaphorical use of nature as eco-resistance against erasure by occupation. Third, the lyric relationality in exile emerges. Darwish explores unity in separation two becoming one, shadow mirrors, holding hands in internal geography. He suggests that true solidarity arises through shared displacement and emotional empathy. Next is nature symbolism as emotional refuge. Almonds, mountains, seas, daisies, and mist serve as spiritual landscapes. Literary studies highlight how Darwish draws on Palestinian ecology to build lyrical identity and political resilience.

Finally, the intention to cultivate kindness and compassion appears across the poems. From pleas for gentleness in a fractured present, to embracing dual identities and nurturing internal lands through love, Darwish emphasizes empathy as a healing act amid fragmentation. Together, these themes exile as creative space, memory as resistance, relational identity, eco-symbolism, and compassion form a cohesive vision. Darwish reimagines exile not as loss, but a serene terrain for identity, memory, and hope to flourish. Through poetry, he claims presence

within absence and builds a home for the stranger in every heart.

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