

# The laureate of all Arabs

## **Mahmoud Darwich is dead, but the voice of the Palestinian resistance will live on in all of us**

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None of us really thought he'd die. Our loss is great, we tell each other. And in our minds we think of Edward Said, of Haider Abd el-Shafi, of Faisal Husseini, and even – yes – of Yasser Arafat. The 'big men' of Palestine. And now, Darwich.

He was seven when – in the Nakba of 1948 - he fled from Birweh, his village in the Galilee. At the age of 12, living in Deir el-Asad, in what had become Israel, with a reputation as a precocious child poet, he was asked to compose a poem for a public reading. The occasion was the celebration of Israel's "Independence Day" and the poem he read described the feelings of a child who returns to his town to find other people sleeping in his bed, tilling his father's lands. He was summoned to the Military Governor who told him that if he continued to write subversive material his father's work permit would be revoked. That incident set the tone, I think, for Darwich's life.

It was impossible for a man of Darwich's sensibility and context not to join the Resistance. He did. He wrote. And between 1961 and 1967 he was jailed 5 times by the Israelis. He lived where the Resistance lived: in Beirut, Cairo, Tunis, Paris and Amman – as well as Ramallah and Haifa. He produced journalism and founded al-Karmel – for a while the top literary magazine of the Arab world. And he wrote more than 20 volumes of poetry.

For the last three decades no-one could have been more celebrated or beloved. His poetic concerns, struggles, experiments and blazing successes have been noted, documented and analysed across the world. His poems early on became embedded in a nation's consciousness in a way that is rare for a living writer. Poets followed, responded and debated with him in their works, novelists prefaced chapters with his verses, performers sang his lyrics. Call him up on Youtube and watch Marcel Khalife sing "Rita" in a full stadium in Avignon. Just last month Darwich himself filled another stadium in Arles.

Darwich gave a voice and an identity to the Palestinian Revolution and to the Resistance. But his 1964 anthem, 'ID card' (Record: I am Arab!), made him, particularly after 1967, the laureate of all the Arabs. That responsibility sometimes lay heavy on him. He acknowledged a duty towards his people, yes, but he also felt a duty towards poetry itself. In the letter he addressed to the writers who took part in the Palestine Festival of Literature last May he spoke of: "... how difficult it is to be Palestinian, and how difficult it is for a Palestinian to be a writer or a poet. On the one hand you have to be true to your reality, and on the other you have to be faithful to your literary profession. In this zone of tension between the long 'State of Emergency' and between his literary imagination, the language of the poet moves. He has to use the word to resist the military occupation. And he has to resist – on behalf of the word -the danger of the banal and the repetitive. How can he achieve literary freedom in such slavish conditions? And how can he preserve the literariness of literature in such brutal times?" There was the core problem of the 'engaged' artist. A strategy that came naturally to Darwich, as it came naturally to his life-long friend, Edward Said, was to raise the issues above the specific and the parochial, to see the specific with great clarity, but to see also the universal in the specific. You could always trust his work to be human, humane, inclusive.

In "State of Seige", the poems he wrote from besieged Ramallah in January 2002, he addressed his Israeli enemy: "A land on the brink of dawn / Let us not quarrel / About the number of those who've died: / Here they lie together, / Furnishing the grass for us, / That we should be reconciled."

But reconciliation needed to be founded on justice. His great poem for Muhammad al-Durrah, the Palestinian boy shot by the Israeli Army as he sheltered behind his father struck a chord across the world. Yet, he declared: "We love life – if we can have it."

Darwich ended his address to the Palestine Festival with the words: "Know that we are still here; that we live." Obits in the Arab newspapers are mourning the last poet who could fill a football stadium. But Darwich lives in us and in his poetry. He lives also in the work of younger Arab poets who will soon be filling football stadiums. They are his disciples. And they are still here.

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