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Reimagining Palestinian Identity through Imagist Poetics: Recurring Tropes and Cultural Memory in Mahmoud Darwish's *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Mahmoud Darwish's *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise* through imagist poetics, focusing on how tropes and images express Palestinian specificity. Darwish is often read mainly as a poet of resistance, nation, and collective memory; while these readings remain important, they can sometimes overlook the carefully formal and imagistic craft of his poetry. This study further argues that Darwish's expression of Palestinian identity is shaped not only through political themes but also through a concentrated system of images and tropes that reflect and reshape the principles of Imagism. Rather than relying on abstract ideas or elaborate language, Darwish presents experience through concrete scenes and objects such as the last train, the empty platform, the road, and the body as homeland through which memory, displacement, and belonging are made visible. These images do more than describe feeling; they give form to exile and identity in a direct and powerful way. This study further combines imagist ideas of precision, clarity, and economy with postcolonial perspectives on exile, identity, and cultural memory. Using close reading, it also examines three poems from the collection: *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, "The Last Train Has Stopped," "When the Martyrs Go to Sleep," and "The Cypress Broke." Auxiliary, the analysis shows that Darwish turns imagist simplicity into a deeply meaningful poetic method, where recurring tropes shape both emotional depth and historical awareness. His images carry political and cultural weight without becoming direct statements, while still maintaining a strong lyrical quality. The article ultimately suggests that Darwish expands Imagism beyond its original Western context and shows how image-based poetry can express Palestinian identity, memory, and the experience of displacement in a powerful and enduring way.

Keywords: Mahmoud Darwish, Imagism, Palestinian Specificity, Tropes, Imagery, Lyricism, Exile, Identity, Displacement, Modernism



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INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Mahmoud Darwish has long been recognized for its powerful engagement with themes of exile, identity, and collective memory, often positioning him primarily as a poet of resistance and national consciousness. His work has been widely interpreted as a poetic articulation of the Palestinian struggle, where the experience of dispossession and displacement becomes central to both personal and collective identity (Said). While such readings remain essential to understanding the historical and political significance of his poetry, they tend to foreground ideological content at the expense of examining the formal and aesthetic dimensions that shape his poetic expression. As a result, Darwish's contribution to modernist poetics, particularly his use of imagery and structure, has not always received sustained critical attention. In recent years, however, there has been a growing scholarly interest in situating Darwish within broader modernist traditions, especially through the lens of Imagism, which emphasizes precision, clarity, direct presentation, and economy of language. Imagism, as developed by Ezra Pound, advocates the principle that poetry should present images directly and avoid unnecessary elaboration, where "the natural object is always the adequate symbol" (Pound 5). This theoretical framework provides a useful entry point for understanding the condensed and image-centered nature of Darwish's poetic language. However, the relationship between Imagism and Darwish's work has not been sufficiently explored in relation to the specifically Palestinian character of his imagery and the cultural significance embedded within it. Much of the existing scholarship either treats Imagism as a purely Western aesthetic movement or reads Darwish's poetry primarily through political or postcolonial frameworks (Masood, 62). This study builds on that gap by arguing that Darwish does not merely adopt imagist techniques but actively transforms them into a culturally embedded poetic system through which Palestinian specificity is articulated. In his poetry, images are not neutral or purely aesthetic; rather, they function as recurring tropes that carry layers of historical, emotional, and political meaning. These tropes emerge through the repetition of concrete elements such as trains, roads, landscapes, borders, and the human body, each of which becomes a symbolic site where personal experience intersects with collective history. The imagistic precision of these elements allows Darwish to compress complex realities such as exile, loss, and longing into sharply defined visual forms, making them both immediate and symbolically rich. At the same time, Darwish's use of imagery departs from classical Imagism in significant ways. While traditional Imagist poetry often values detachment, objectivity, and impersonal presentation, Darwish's images are deeply lyrical and infused with memory, emotion, and cultural resonance. His poetic voice inhabits the image rather than remaining distant from it, allowing subjective experience to merge with objective form. This fusion results in a hybrid poetic mode in which imagistic clarity coexists with lyrical intensity, enabling the poet to express both individual feeling and collective identity. In this sense, Darwish extends the possibilities of Imagism by adapting it to a postcolonial context, where the image becomes a medium of resistance, preservation, and reinterpretation (Ahmed 165).

This article focuses on selected poems from *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, namely "The Last Train Has Stopped," "The Cypress Broke," and "When the Martyrs Go to Sleep," in order to examine how these imagistic structures operate within a distinctly Palestinian framework. Through close textual analysis, the study explores how recurring tropes in these poems articulate themes of displacement, fragmentation, and belonging while maintaining formal precision and linguistic economy. By combining imagist principles with postcolonial perspectives on identity and cultural memory, the study demonstrates that Darwish develops a unique poetic strategy in which images and tropes become central



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to meaning-making. Ultimately, this approach reveals how Darwish not only engages with imagist poetics but also expands it beyond its original Western context, demonstrating its capacity to articulate the complexities of the Palestinian experience within a global modernist framework.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish has traditionally emphasized his role as a poet of resistance, exile, and national identity. Critics such as Edward Said interpret Darwish's work as a cultural articulation of Palestinian displacement, in which poetry serves as a medium for preserving memory and asserting identity under conditions of loss. Similarly, Bilquees Dar highlights how Darwish transforms personal experience into collective expression through symbolic imagery, suggesting that his poetry functions as a lyrical representation of Palestinian suffering and resilience (Dar 35-36). While these readings remain foundational, they tend to privilege thematic and ideological concerns over the formal and aesthetic mechanisms through which meaning is constructed. Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on Darwish's use of imagery and metaphor as central components of his poetic strategy. Khaled M. S. Masood argues that metaphor in Darwish's poetry is not merely decorative but operates as a structural device that encodes cultural and political realities, particularly through recurring symbols such as birds, land, and confinement (Masood 62-64). These studies indicate that Darwish's poetic language is deeply image-centered; however, they do not fully theorize how these recurring images function as tropes within a systematic poetic framework.

Within modernist literary studies, Imagism offers a productive framework for understanding Darwish's poetic technique. Developed by Ezra Pound and other modernist poets, Imagism emphasizes precision, clarity, direct presentation, and economy of language. In the article "Imagist Poetics and the Representation of Exile in Mahmoud Darwish's *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*," Darwish's poetry is examined through this imagist lens, arguing that his work relies on a highly concentrated system of images that transforms abstract experiences such as exile into concrete visual forms. The study demonstrates how Darwish organizes memory, displacement, and estrangement through carefully structured images such as spatial fragments, objects, and landscapes, thus aligning his poetic method with imagist principles of condensation and immediacy. However, while such studies successfully establish Darwish's alignment with imagist aesthetics, they tend to focus primarily on the formal and stylistic dimensions of imagery. The cultural and political specificity embedded within these images, particularly their role in constructing Palestinian identity, remains underexplored. In other words, the emphasis remains on how images function aesthetically, rather than how they operate as recurring tropes that produce meaning within a specific cultural framework. Further scholarship reinforces the importance of imagery in Darwish's work. Hamoud Yahya Ahmed identifies how natural elements such as trees, land, and sky function as modes of resistance, embedding political and emotional meanings within sensory images (Ahmed 158-166). Similarly, Mahfoodh observes a shift in Darwish's later poetry from direct political expression toward a more reflective and symbolic mode, where memory and language become central to poetic articulation. These studies suggest that Darwish's imagery is deeply connected to cultural identity; however, they do not explicitly integrate this imagery within an imagist framework that accounts for repetition, variation, and symbolic structure. The major gap in existing scholarship, therefore, lies at the intersection of Imagism, tropes, and Palestinian specificity. While Darwish has been examined as a political poet, a universal poet, and an imagistic poet, there is limited research that unifies these perspectives into a coherent analytical model. In particular, the transformation of imagistic



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images into culturally embedded tropes such as the train, road, tree, and body has not been sufficiently explored. These recurring elements are not isolated images but function as symbolic structures that carry layered meanings of exile, belonging, fragmentation, and resistance. Moreover, comparative insights further highlight Darwish's innovation. While Western Imagists employ minimalism as an aesthetic strategy, Darwish reorients this minimalism toward cultural survival and historical expression. As discussed in "The Image of Displacement: Imagist Aesthetics and the Poetics of Exile in Mahmoud Darwish's *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*," Darwish's poetry constructs a highly concentrated image system in which exile is transformed into concrete visual forms, allowing abstract experiences to be expressed through precise and condensed imagery (Chaudhary et al.). His imagery is not detached or purely objective; rather, it is deeply lyrical and infused with memory, allowing imagistic clarity to coexist with emotional intensity. This transformation expands the scope of Imagism beyond its Anglo-American origins and demonstrates its adaptability within postcolonial contexts. Therefore, this study builds on existing scholarship by focusing specifically on how recurring tropes and imagistic structures construct Palestinian specificity in Darwish's poetry. By analyzing selected poems from *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, this research extends previous work by shifting attention from imagistic technique alone to the broader system of tropes through which identity, memory, and resistance are articulated. In doing so, it contributes to both Darwish studies and modernist scholarship by demonstrating how imagistic expression can be redefined within a culturally and politically embedded poetic framework.

Objectives

1. To investigate how Mahmoud Darwish employs imagist techniques to construct Palestinian specificity?
2. To evaluate how recurring tropes articulate exile, identity, and cultural memory?

Research Questions

1. How does Mahmoud Darwish use imagist techniques to express Palestinian specificity?
2. How do recurring tropes represent exile, identity, and memory in his poetry?

Theoretical Framework

1. Imagism as a Modernist Framework

This study is grounded in the principles of Imagism, a modernist movement that emerged in the early twentieth century as a reaction against the excesses of Romantic and Victorian poetry. Developed by Ezra Pound, H.D., and Amy Lowell, Imagism emphasizes precision, clarity, direct presentation, and economy of language. Its central aim is to present the image in a sharp, concentrated form, allowing meaning to emerge through sensory immediacy rather than abstract explanation. Pound famously defines the image as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," highlighting its capacity to condense meaning (Pound 4-5). Similarly, T. E. Hulme stresses the importance of clarity and concreteness, arguing that poetry must avoid vagueness and instead present reality through precise images (Hulme 22). Imagist poetics rests on key principles: direct treatment of the subject, the use of exact language, and the elimination of unnecessary words. The image is not decorative but functional, carrying both emotional and intellectual weight. This emphasis on compression and clarity makes Imagism a valuable framework for analyzing Darwish's image-centered poetic language.

2. The Image as Meaning: From Object to Trope

While Imagism traditionally focuses on individual images, this study extends the concept by treating images as recurring tropes. A trope refers to a repeated and symbolically charged image that develops meaning through recurrence and variation. Unlike isolated



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images, tropes create a structural network that shapes thematic and emotional coherence. In Darwish's poetry, recurring elements such as the train, road, tree, and body function as more than visual details; they operate as symbolic structures that encode collective experience. Scholars have noted that Darwish's imagery often carries layered meanings tied to cultural and political realities (Masood 62-64). This transformation from image to trope allows the poetry to move beyond immediate perception toward deeper symbolic significance. Thus, imagistic precision becomes a foundation for building a system of recurring meanings that reflect identity, memory, and displacement.

3. Adapting Imagism in a Postcolonial Context

Although Imagism originated within an Anglo-American modernist tradition, its techniques have proven adaptable across diverse cultural contexts. In postcolonial literature, imagistic clarity offers a way to represent complex historical experiences without relying on rhetorical excess. The economy of language associated with Imagism allows for the condensation of trauma, memory, and identity into precise visual forms. Scholars such as Hamoud Yahya Ahmed argue that Darwish's use of natural imagery functions as a form of resistance, embedding political meaning within sensory expression (Ahmed 158-166). This suggests that imagistic techniques can convey political and cultural realities without reducing poetry to a direct ideological statement. In this context, the image becomes a site of cultural inscription, where historical memory and collective identity are encoded within concise visual forms.

4. Darwish's Transformation of Imagist Poetics

The poetry of Mahmoud Darwish demonstrates a significant transformation of imagist principles. While his work reflects the clarity and economy associated with Imagism, it departs from the movement's emphasis on detachment and objectivity. Instead, Darwish's images are deeply lyrical and infused with memory and cultural resonance. Rather than presenting neutral observations, Darwish uses images to reconstruct the experience of exile and displacement. His poetic method transforms imagistic precision into a medium for expressing identity and historical consciousness. As noted in "The Image of Displacement: Imagist Aesthetics and the Poetics of Exile in Mahmoud Darwish's *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*," Darwish employs a concentrated system of images to translate abstract experiences into concrete visual forms (Chaudhary et al.). This adaptation reflects a hybrid poetic mode in which modernist form is integrated with postcolonial content.

5. Palestinian Specificity and Cultural Inscription

A central concept in this study is Palestinian specificity, which refers to the culturally grounded nature of Darwish's imagery. Rather than expressing identity through direct political statements, Darwish encodes Palestinian experience within recurring images and tropes. These images function as carriers of memory, resistance, and belonging. For example, natural and spatial elements such as land, trees, and roads acquire symbolic meaning in Darwish's poetry, reflecting both personal and collective experiences of exile. Scholars have observed that such imagery transforms everyday objects into representations of cultural identity and historical continuity (Dar 35-36). This process of cultural inscription allows imagistic clarity to convey complex realities without explicit explanation.

6. Imagism, Lyricism, and Emotional Depth

A key distinction between classical Imagism and Darwish's poetics lies in the role of lyricism. While Imagism traditionally emphasizes restraint and objectivity, Darwish integrates imagistic precision with emotional and lyrical expression. His images are not detached; they are infused with memory, longing, and historical consciousness. This fusion



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enables the coexistence of formal clarity and emotional depth. As Ahmed notes, Darwish's imagery often merges personal emotion with collective experience, creating a poetic voice that is both individual and universal (Ahmed 165). In this sense, lyricism does not weaken imagistic precision but enhances it, allowing the image to function as both a visual and emotional unit.

7. Analytical Framework of the Study

Based on these theoretical considerations, this study adopts a framework that examines the relationship between imagistic techniques, recurring tropes, and Palestinian specificity. It analyzes how images are constructed, repeated, and transformed in selected poems from *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, and how these processes articulate themes of exile, identity, and cultural memory. By combining imagist principles with postcolonial perspectives, the study demonstrates that Darwish redefines imagist poetics as a culturally embedded system of meaning. This approach highlights how imagistic expression can move beyond aesthetic minimalism to become a powerful medium for representing historical experience and collective identity.

Analysis of selected poems

“Train” as a Trope

In “The Last Train Has Stopped,” Mahmoud Darwish employs the image of the train as a central imagistic trope through which the experience of exile, displacement, and failed return is articulated. Within the framework of Imagism, the train initially appears as a concrete and ordinary object; however, its repeated use transforms it into a symbolically dense structure that carries layered emotional and historical meanings. Traditionally, the train signifies movement, transition, and the possibility of arrival, yet Darwish subverts this expectation by presenting it in a state of final stoppage. The phrase “the last train has stopped” marks not merely the end of physical motion but the collapse of anticipated return, thereby converting the train into a trope of suspended journey and interrupted destiny. Furthermore, the train reflects the condition of Palestinian displacement, where movement exists without fulfillment and journeys are defined by absence rather than arrival. It becomes a representation of deferred belonging, suggesting that the promise of return remains unrealized. Darwish reinforces this interpretation through the line “Don't put faith in our trains, love,” where the train explicitly emerges as a symbol of broken trust and failed continuity. In this sense, the trope moves beyond individual experience and assumes a collective dimension, encapsulating a shared historical reality. The repetition of the train image throughout the poem intensifies its symbolic function, aligning with imagist principles of precision and economy while simultaneously expanding their scope through cultural and political resonance. Thus, the train in Darwish's poetics exemplifies how a simple image can be transformed into a powerful vehicle of Palestinian specificity, where movement, loss, and identity are condensed into a single, recurring trope.

“The Cypress Broke”

In “The Cypress Broke,” Mahmoud Darwish opens with a striking imagistic statement: “the cypress broke like a minaret,” immediately presenting a powerful visual image that carries layered symbolic meaning. The cypress tree, traditionally associated with mourning, immortality, and continuity across various cultural traditions, also holds particular significance in Palestinian landscapes, where it becomes a marker of identity and rootedness. The act of “breaking” introduces a sudden sense of rupture, suggesting destruction, displacement, and the disruption of cultural and historical continuity. By comparing the tree to a minaret, Darwish merges natural and spiritual imagery, as the minaret symbolizes faith, elevation, and connection to the divine. Its collapse, therefore, signals not only physical destruction but also a deeper disturbance in cultural and spiritual



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structures. The image of the fallen tree “sleeping on the road” further intensifies this symbolic framework. Through subtle personification, the tree is transformed into a body, evoking associations with death and loss. The road, often a trope of journey and movement, here becomes a site of interruption, reflecting the halted trajectories of exile. This combination of images reflects Darwish’s imagist technique, where meaning is conveyed through concrete visual forms rather than abstract explanation. The broken tree thus functions as a condensed representation of Palestinian displacement, where land, identity, and continuity are simultaneously fractured.

Darwish expands this imagery through detailed visual elements such as the tree’s shadow and color, which remain intact despite its fall. These details suggest that while physical destruction has occurred, the essence or identity of the tree persists. This reflects a broader cultural implication: even in conditions of loss, memory and identity endure. The ironic line “no one got hurt” reinforces this idea, as the absence of visible human injury contrasts with the deeper symbolic damage inflicted upon the land itself. In this way, the poem shifts attention from individual suffering to collective and cultural loss. Additional images further develop this symbolic network. The dust that “blew into the windshields” creates a blurred visual field, suggesting obscured vision and instability, while also drawing on traditional associations of dust with mortality and cyclical existence. Similarly, the image of the pigeon that “didn’t change its public nest” introduces a moment of stillness within destruction, implying that everyday life continues even as deeper transformations occur. This coexistence of continuity and rupture reflects the complexity of lived experience under conditions of displacement. The presence of “two migrant birds” hovering above the scene reinforces the theme of exile, as migratory birds traditionally symbolize movement, transition, and wandering. Within the Palestinian context, they evoke the condition of displacement and the search for belonging. These images collectively transform the broken tree into more than an isolated object; it becomes part of a broader symbolic system that connects land, identity, and movement. Darwish further complicates the imagery by juxtaposing natural and political references. The contrast between “storm” and “bulldozer” introduces ambiguity, as the destruction may be interpreted as either natural or man-made. In a Palestinian context, however, the bulldozer clearly signifies political violence and the destruction of homes and landscapes. This ambiguity aligns with imagist principles, where the image is presented without explicit explanation, allowing meaning to emerge through interpretation.

The responses of different observers within the poem add another layer of meaning. The children’s recollections of the tree as something familiar and easily drawn emphasize its role in shaping collective memory and identity. The differing perspectives on whether the sky is “complete” without the cypress highlight the instability of meaning, suggesting that a single image can generate multiple interpretations. This multiplicity reflects Darwish’s ability to present the image as both concrete and open-ended, allowing emotional and intellectual responses to emerge simultaneously. Finally, the repetition of the statement “the cypress broke, and that is all there is to it” reflects a core imagist principle: the presentation of the object without excessive interpretation. The image stands on its own, yet it carries immense symbolic weight. The broken cypress, once associated with myth, nation, and continuity, is reduced to a simple visual form, but one that continues to convey themes of exile, memory, destruction, and survival. In this way, Darwish transforms imagistic simplicity into a powerful vehicle of Palestinian specificity, where a single image encapsulates a complex historical and cultural reality.

“When the Martyrs Go to Sleep”

In “When the Martyrs Go to Sleep,” Mahmoud Darwish opens with a paradox in which



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the speaker remains awake while the martyrs “sleep.” This initial image operates as a trope of suspended death: “sleep” does not end life but repositions it in memory and belief. The companion phrase “professional mourners” forms a trope of performative grief, exposing how mourning can become detached from authentic loss. Together, these tropes unsettle fixed meanings of death and grief, aligning with an imagist economy while carrying cultural and ethical weight. The speaker’s role as a watcher at the boundary between life and death develops a trope of guardianship, suggesting that the living must protect the dignity and memory of the dead. Darwish then constructs an imagistic space, “a home of clouds and trees, a mirage of water,” which functions as a trope of an imagined homeland. This “home” is both consoling and unstable: the mirage marks desire without possession, turning place into an image of longing. In imagist terms, the scene remains concrete, yet it condenses the historical condition of distance and loss. The ironic claim that the martyrs are “safe” introduces a trope of inverted safety, where protection exists only after death. The “slaughterhouse” intensifies this as a trope of a violated homeland, presenting the land itself as a site of organized destruction. Rather than overt explanation, these images carry the argument through visual pressure, exemplifying imagist directness with postcolonial resonance. Darwish’s manipulation of time, “I take time so they can take me from time,” creates a trope of suspended temporality. Time is not linear; it is held, stretched, and shared. The question “are we all martyrs?” expands this into a trope of collective martyrdom, where suffering is distributed across the living community. Here, imagistic compression allows a philosophical claim to emerge from a brief, concrete formulation.

The poem then turns to everyday objects, walls, laundry lines, and songs, each functioning as a trope of domestic continuity. The wall signifies privacy and shelter; laundry lines mark ordinary routines; songs carry oral tradition and cultural memory. In a Palestinian context, these are not neutral details: they condense home, family, and continuity under threat. The request to “save one wall” and “one night for songs” becomes a plea to preserve the minimal structures of identity. The act of hanging names introduces a trope of memorial inscription. Names become visible presences, imagined as banners or flags, turning absence into a circulating sign. This is reinforced by the image of names floating in the air, which forms a trope of living memory; the dead persist through signs that move among the living. The vine imagery transforms martyrs into nature, establishing a trope of organic continuity; yet the mention of bitterness revises the symbol, marking renewal with pain and broken promise.

Darwish further develops a network of power-laden images, knives, guards, and scriptures as a trope of moral inversion. Instruments of protection and sacred authority appear distorted, suggesting that ethical systems have been turned against themselves. This imagistic reversal communicates critique without discursive argument, consistent with imagist restraint. The call for martyrs to become “a song for those who have no songs” introduces a trope of voice and transmission. “Song” here signifies hope, memory, and resistance; the voiceless children, refugees, mourners are those excluded from expression. Through this trope, martyrdom is redefined as a medium that carries collective voice forward. The image of the “wild horse” functions as a trope of mobile homeland. Associated with freedom and force, the horse carries a “home” on its back, rendering belonging portable but unstable. This captures exile as a condition where identity persists without fixed ground; memory becomes what is carried. In the closing movement, “gallows in disguise” operates as a trope of hidden violence. It suggests that structures of death are embedded within ordinary life, turning survivors into “walking dead.” This extends martyrdom into the present, where endurance itself is marked by pressure and fear. The image is stark, visual, and final, an imagist closure that refuses consolation. Overall,



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the poem organizes meaning through a system of recurring tropes: sleep, mourning, home, wall, song, name, vine, knife, horse, gallows, each of them grounded in concrete imagery yet layered with historical and cultural significance. These tropes transform imagistic precision into a vehicle of Palestinian specificity, where exile, identity, and memory are not explained but made visible. Darwish thus extends Imagism beyond aesthetic minimalism, using it to encode collective experience within a tightly structured field of images.

Conclusion

This study shows that the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish reshapes Imagism into a culturally grounded poetics defined by Palestinian specificity. Darwish does not use images as isolated decorative elements; instead, he builds a coherent system of recurring tropes (drops) such as the train, the cypress, the road, the wall, the song, and the body that carry layered meanings of exile, identity, and memory. These tropes condense complex historical and emotional realities into precise imagistic forms, allowing meaning to emerge through visual clarity rather than abstract explanation. In this way, imagistic precision becomes a method of cultural expression, where each image functions as a site of memory and resistance. The analysis further demonstrates that Darwish transforms imagist minimalism into a dynamic and emotionally resonant structure through repetition and variation. His tropes do not remain static; they evolve across poems, creating a network of meaning that connects individual experience with collective history. This enables his poetry to maintain formal restraint while sustaining deep emotional intensity. By foregrounding the role of tropes (drops), this study moves beyond viewing Darwish as merely influenced by Imagism and instead positions him as a poet who expands its possibilities within a postcolonial context. Ultimately, his work shows that imagistic clarity can serve as a powerful medium for articulating displacement, belonging, and cultural survival, establishing a distinctive and enduring contribution to modern poetry.

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