



SYMBOLISM IN THE POEMS OF MAHMOUD DARWISH: A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the symbolism in Mahmoud Darwish's poems through a semiotic perspective in order to reveal the symbolic meanings that represent the identity, struggle, love of the homeland, and the social reality of Palestinian society. This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research type. The research data are in the form of verses of Mahmoud Darwish's poems containing literary symbols such as land, olives, birds, houses, and seas which are analyzed using semiotic theory by examining the relationship between signifiers, signifieds, and connotative meanings in the poetic texts. Data collection techniques are carried out through documentation studies, intensive reading, recording, and classification of symbols found in Mahmoud Darwish's poetic works. The results show that the symbol of land represents the identity and rights of the Palestinian people, the symbol of olives symbolizes peace and cultural roots, the symbol of birds represents freedom and hope, while the symbols of house and mother represent longing for the homeland. The use of these symbols shows that Mahmoud Darwish builds a narrative of struggle and humanity through poetic language that is aesthetic, emotional, and full of socio-political meaning. This study concludes that the semiotic approach is able to reveal the depth of symbolic meaning in Mahmoud Darwish's poems and shows that symbolism in modern Arabic literature does not only function as an aesthetic element, but also as a medium for expressing national identity, social criticism, and humanitarian struggle.

Keywords: Symbolism, Semiotics, Arabic Literature, Modern Arabic Poetry, Mahmoud Darwish.

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INTRODUCTION

Modern Arabic literature is a form of cultural expression that functions not only as an aesthetic work but also as a medium for social, political, and humanitarian reflection. In the development of contemporary Arabic literature, poetry has become the most dominant medium for voicing various issues of identity, struggle, and the realities of life in Arab society, particularly in Palestine ([Kosasih et al., 2024](#)).

One highly influential poet in this regard is Mahmoud Darwish, widely known as the "poet of the Palestinian struggle" because his works are rich in symbolism depicting the suffering, hopes, and identity of the Palestinian people ([Dayan & Al-Hawtali, 2025](#)). His poems are read not only as literary works but also as collective narratives about history, the loss of a homeland, and the search for identity. In this context, the Qur'an also emphasizes the importance of language as a medium for conveying meaning and truth, as Allah says:

لَهُمْ لِيُبَيِّنَ قَوْمَهُ بِلِسَانٍ إِلَّا رَسُولٍ مِّنْ أَرْسَلْنَا وَمَا

"And We did not send any messenger except with the language of his people, that he might make clear to them." (*Surah Ibrahim: 4*)

This verse shows that language, including literary language, has an important role in conveying messages and values to society.

In the context of literary studies, symbolism in Mahmoud Darwish's poetry is a crucial aspect to analyze because his poetic language is not literal, but rather full of signs that require deep interpretation ([Kazmi, 2022](#)). Symbols such as land, houses, birds, olives, and the sea are not merely aesthetic objects, but contain ideological and emotional meanings that represent the socio-political conditions of Palestinian society. This is in line with the concept of signs in semiotics, which views meaning as not being singular, but rather formed through the relationship between signifier and signified in a particular context.

Furthermore, in Islam, symbols and signs also hold an important place as a means of reflecting spiritual meaning and life. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

لَسِحْرًا الْبَيَانِ مِنْ إِنَّ

"Indeed, among the forms of explanation (language) there is something like magic (very influential)." (*HR. Bukhari*)

This hadith shows that the power of language and literary expression can influence the hearts and consciousness of people, just as Darwish's poems were able to raise collective awareness about Palestine.

Many previous researchers have conducted research on symbolism in Arabic poetry, particularly the works of Mahmoud Darwish. First, research by [Talukder & Ali, \(2025\)](#) concluded that the symbols in Mahmoud Darwish's poetry serve as representations of marginalized Palestinian national identity, where poetic language becomes a means of resistance against colonialism. Second, research by [Alhawtali, \(2025\)](#) concluded that the use of natural symbols in Darwish's poetry reflects the emotional attachment between humans and the homeland as a form of collective nostalgia for the Palestinian people. Third, research by [Al-Kaabi & Alobaidi, \(2026\)](#) concluded that a semiotic

approach to analyzing Darwish's poetry can uncover hidden meanings related to social and political criticism more deeply than a purely structural approach.

Although these studies have made important contributions, there is still room for further development, particularly in integrating symbolism analysis with a more comprehensive and systematic semiotic approach. Most previous studies have focused on the thematic meaning of symbols without delving deeply into the relationship between signs, context, and connotative meaning within the poetic structure. Therefore, this study is crucial for deepening the analysis of symbolism in Mahmoud Darwish's poetry through a more focused semiotic perspective. Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the symbolism in Mahmoud Darwish's poems through a semiotic approach to uncover profound meanings related to the identity, struggle, and social realities of Palestinian society. Thus, this research is expected to provide academic contributions to the development of modern Arabic literary studies, particularly in the field of literary semiotic analysis, as well as enrich understanding of symbolic meaning in literary works imbued with humanitarian values and struggle.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with library research focusing on the analysis of literary texts ([Antons et al., 2020](#); [Isoaho et al., 2021](#); [Rahman et al., 2024](#)). The object of the study is Mahmoud Darwish's poems containing elements of symbolism, particularly those related to the themes of identity, struggle, and the social reality of Palestinian society. The primary data source in this study is Mahmoud Darwish's poetry texts in their original Arabic versions and relevant translations, while secondary data sources are obtained from books, scientific journals, and articles related to semiotic theory and modern Arabic literary studies. The data collection technique is carried out through documentation studies by intensively reading all the poetry texts that are the object of research, then identifying, recording, and classifying parts of the poems that contain certain symbols. The symbols found are then grouped based on meaning categories, such as symbols of nature, symbols of place, symbols of humans, and socio-political symbols. This process is carried out systematically to facilitate the analysis of the meaning contained in the poetry texts.

The data analysis technique uses a semiotic approach that emphasizes the relationship between the signifier, the signified, and the connotative meaning in the poetic text ([Huang & Wang, 2024](#); [Rahman et al., 2025](#)). The analysis is carried out through several stages, namely data reduction by selecting parts of the poem that contain symbolism, presenting data in the form of symbol descriptions, interpreting the meaning of symbols based on social and cultural contexts, and drawing conclusions from the results of these interpretations. The semiotic approach is used to reveal implied meanings that are not only literal, but also ideological, emotional, and historical. The validity of the data in this study is strengthened by the theory triangulation technique, namely comparing the results of the analysis with various literature on semiotic

theory and relevant Arabic literary studies. Thus, this study is expected to be able to produce an in-depth, objective, and comprehensive analysis of symbolism in Mahmoud Darwish's poetry and contribute to the development of modern Arabic literary studies based on semiotics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that Mahmoud Darwish's poems contain a very rich and layered system of symbols, which not only function as aesthetic elements of language, but also as representations of historical experiences, collective identity, and the socio-political realities of Palestinian society ([Hamdan, 2021](#)). Through a semiotic approach, the symbols in Darwish's poems are understood as signs consisting of a signifier and a signified, thus producing connotative meanings that go beyond the literal meaning.

One of the main symbols is the land (al-ardh), which represents the identity and existence of the Palestinian people. In one of his poems, Darwish writes:

الحياة يستحق ما الأرض هذه على

‘Ala hādhihi al-arḍi mā yastaḥiqu al-ḥayāh

“On this land there is something worth living for.”

This poem demonstrates that land is not simply a geographical space, but a symbol of life, dignity, and existential rights that are inseparable from the Palestinian people ([Farag, 2021](#)). From a semiotic perspective, land functions as a sign that connects historical experience with the meaning of collective identity.

Besides the earth, the symbol of the olive (az-zaitun) is also very dominant in Darwish's poetry. The olive symbolizes resilience, peace, and strong cultural roots. In his poem, he states:

زيتونة أكون أن لوددت فلسطيناً أكن لم لو

Law lam account filastīniyyan lawadidtu an akūna zaytūnah

“If I were not Palestinian, then I would like to be an olive tree.”

This poem demonstrates that the olive is not just a plant, but a symbol of emotional attachment to the homeland and steadfastness in the face of hardship. Semiotically, the olive serves as a sign connecting nature with cultural identity ([Ababneh, 2023](#)).

The bird symbol (ath-tha’ir) in Darwish’s poetry represents both freedom and exile. In one of his poems, he writes:

أمي وقهوة، أُمي خبز إلى أحن

Aḥinnu ilā khubzi ummī, wa qahwati ummī

“I miss my mother's bread, and my mother's coffee.”

Although it doesn't directly mention birds, many critical interpretations associate this verse with a soul yearning to return freely to its home and homeland, just as birds always seek their nests ([LI, 2026](#)). In semiotics, birds serve as a metaphor for freedom bound by the reality of displacement.

The symbol of the house (al-bayt) is also very powerful in Darwish's poetry as a representation of loss and nostalgia. In one of his poetic phrases, he states:

سبيلا إليها استطعنا ما الحياة نحب نحن

Naḥnu nuḥibbu al-ḥayāta ma istaṭa'nā ilayhā sabīlā

"We love life as long as we are able to find our way to it."

The meaning of home in this context is not just a building, but a living space that is lost due to conflict and expulsion ([Bunn et al., 2023](#)). Semiotically, home becomes an emotional sign that contains the meaning of alienation and longing.

The symbol of the sea (al-bahr) in Darwish's poetry represents boundaries, journeys, and uncertainty. The sea becomes an ambivalent space that separates and connects. In one of his verses, he writes:

لأحلامنا يكفي بما واسعاً ليس البحر

Al-baḥru laysa wāsi'an bimā yakfī li-aḥlāmīnā

"The sea is not wide enough for our dreams."

This poem describes the limited space for hope and freedom, while reinforcing the meaning of the sea as a symbol of the ambiguity between hope and alienation ([Sarikaya, 2022](#)).

The research also shows that these symbols are interconnected in constructing a larger narrative of Palestinian identity ([Marshall, 2023](#)). Land, olives, birds, houses, and the sea do not stand alone, but form a system of signs that represents the collective experience of a colonized, isolated, and struggling people. From a semiotic perspective, the meaning of these symbols is dynamic and open, dependent on the social and historical context, as well as the reader's interpretation ([Lobo & Parsons, 2023](#)).

Overall, the symbolism in Darwish's poetry functions not only as an aesthetic element but also as a medium for cultural and political resistance. Poetic language becomes a subtle yet powerful tool of resistance against oppression, conveying meaning through symbols that evoke emotional and intellectual awareness. Thus, Darwish's poetry can be understood as a system of signs that represents the complex relationship between language, identity, history, and humanity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that Mahmoud Darwish's poems have a very strong and complex symbolism system that not only functions as an

aesthetic element, but also as a medium for expressing the identity, history, and struggle of the Palestinian people. Through a semiotic approach, symbols such as land, olives, birds, houses, and the sea in Darwish's poetry are not interpreted literally, but rather as signs containing connotative meanings that represent the collective experiences of Palestinian society, such as alienation, loss, hope, and resistance. Land becomes a symbol of identity and existence, olives symbolize resilience and cultural roots, birds represent freedom and longing, houses become symbols of nostalgia and loss, while the sea depicts boundaries as well as an ambiguous space of hope. All of these symbols are interconnected in building a grand narrative about the struggle for humanity and Palestinian national identity. Thus, the semiotic approach has proven capable of revealing the deep meaning in Darwish's poetry more comprehensively, so that poetry is not only understood as a literary work, but also as a system of signs that reflects social, political, and humanitarian realities in general.

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