

Translating Emotional Charges in Poetic Discourse and the Disruption of Literary Taste among Non-Native Speakers of Arabic: Selected Poems by Mahmoud Darwish

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the problem of translating emotional charges in poetic discourse and the role of the translational act in unsettling the poetic taste of learners who are speakers of languages other than Arabic. It does so by combining theoretical grounding with textual application to selected poems by Mahmoud Darwish in their French and English translations. The study departs from the hypothesis that the emotional charge of the poem is not an isolated lexical element, but rather the outcome of a complex interaction between linguistic, rhetorical, rhythmic and cultural levels, which makes its transfer into another language a highly sensitive interpretive and aesthetic operation.

Relying on recent literature on the "translatability of emotiveness" in Darwish's poetry, the study evaluates the translation strategies adopted between affective equivalence, image preservation, cultural adaptation and rhythmic adjustment. It concludes that translating emotional charges in Darwish's poetry is only partially attainable, on condition that the translator is fully aware of the sources of affect in the source text and of the expectations of the target-language reader. It further argues that success in this endeavour presupposes a composite strategic model that carefully balances fidelity and freedom.



Introduction:

Poetry occupies a privileged position in human culture as the most condensed form of expression of human emotional and existential experience, employing dense language, rhetorical imagery, and a distinctive rhythm. While narrative genres often convey emotion through events and characters, poetry presents it as a direct linguistic energy, making emotional charge a structural component in defining the “poeticity” of a text.¹

When such a text is transferred into another language, the translator’s task becomes doubly demanding: it is no longer sufficient to convey lexical meaning; the translator must also recreate the text’s emotional resonance within a new expressive system. This challenge has been addressed in numerous studies under concepts such as “emotive coloring” and “the translatability of emotiveness” in literature.² The problem becomes even more complex when the poet is Mahmoud Darwish, whose poetry intertwines individual and collective experience, exile and identity, love and loss, in a highly emotional tone that carries the history of a people and a dense cultural imagination.

Accordingly, this study revolves around the following question: To what extent can emotional charges in Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry be translated from Arabic into foreign languages while preserving emotional tension and identity specificity, and what translation strategies enable the translator to achieve acceptable affective equivalence between the source and target texts, thereby contributing to the development of literary taste among non-native speakers of Arabic? To answer this question, the study combines a conceptual grounding of emotional charge and poetry translation with applied analysis of selected Darwish poems in their French translations.

1. Emotional Charge in Poetic Discourse:

In linguistic and translation studies, concepts such as *emotiveness* and *emotionally colored vocabulary* refer to linguistic units that express an emotional stance toward a subject, such as words denoting love, freedom, death, and loss, as well as metaphorical and symbolic images that infuse a text with emotional energy. However, emotional charge in poetry is not confined to vocabulary alone; it also emerges from rhetorical devices such as repetition, vocatives, rhetorical questions, rhythm, sound distribution, and the cultural-referential context in which the poem circulates.³

In Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry, these levels interact to create what some studies describe as “compound emotiveness.” Words referring to land, exile, martyrdom, and childhood function not merely as descriptive references but as carriers of a collective emotional memory burdened



with political history. His use of metonymy, metaphor, biblical and Qur'anic symbolism, and myth contributes to constructing emotional layers that go beyond direct sorrow to an open-ended existential tension.

Translating Poetry: Form, Meaning, Effect.

Scholars of poetry translation agree that this genre represents the highest level of translational difficulty due to the dense interweaving of lexical meaning, figurative imagery, internal music, and the poet's subjective voice. Theorists such as Bassnett and Munday have developed models of equivalence that move beyond the literal/free dichotomy toward the concept of *affective equivalence*, which prioritizes aesthetic and emotional impact in the target language.⁴

From this perspective, the quality of a poem's translation is not measured by syntactic or lexical matching but by its ability to recreate the reading experience within a different cultural horizon, despite differences in rhythmic and rhetorical systems. This approach becomes especially important when the poem is embedded in a politically and culturally dense context, such as the Palestinian experience, where emotion is integral to the discourse of identity and resistance.

2. Emotional Charge in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry: Between Emotion, Identity, and Exile

Specialized studies of Darwish's poetry reveal that emotiveness in his texts is inseparable from representations of identity, exile, and collective memory, where emotions such as nostalgia, love, loss, and political anger coexist within a unified poetic voice. Poems translated in *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, for example, present the Palestinian as both an individual and a collective subject, speaking from exile while addressing universal themes of humanity and freedom.⁵

In such contexts, emotional charge cannot be separated from identity charge, increasing the translator's responsibility when dealing with proper names, geographical references, and religious or political symbols. This raises a crucial question: should the translation convey the same *intensity* of sorrow or anger, or should it preserve the emotional relations between the self and the world as structured by the poet, even if expressive means differ? This question leads to examining the practical strategies adopted by Darwish's translators in English and French and how they balance the horizons of Arabic and Western readers.

Furthermore, the translator's own subjectivity becomes a filter for emotional charge. A translator such as Fady Joudah, an Arab-American poet, brings a dual experience that shapes



lexical choices and tone, unlike translators from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Studies have shown that some translations of Darwish tend to soften political sharpness or intensify contemplative aspects, reflecting translators' assumptions about what suits an English, American, or French reader.

The key strategies recurrent in translations of Darwish's poetry, as observed in studies like "The Translatability of Emotiveness in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry" and others, can be summarized as follows:

- Affective Equivalence: Prioritizing the emotional impact on the reader, even if it necessitates some freedom in rephrasing the image or sentence.
- Image Preservation with Marginal or Contextual Explanation: Retaining central cultural metaphors and symbols with partial compensation through translator's introductions, prefaces, or footnotes.
- Cultural Adaptation: Replacing some local expressions or textual references with expressions familiar in the target reader's culture to ensure the emotion is conveyed.
- Rhythmic Adjustment: Sacrificing part of the meter or rhyme for greater freedom in choosing appropriate affective vocabulary, especially given the differing rhythmic systems between Arabic and French.

Critical readings of French translations show that these strategies are rarely applied in isolation; instead, they are balanced differently from one passage to another and from one translator to another, directly affecting emotional density.

3. Manifestations of Emotional Charge in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry in the Original and French Translation:

The national poems of Mahmoud Darwish are characterized by a special density of emotional charge, resulting from the intertwining of the personal and collective dimensions, where the experience of the Palestinian people is embodied in the image of a poetic self that speaks with the voice of the community while simultaneously experiencing its individual anxiety regarding exile, identity, and death. This emotional dimension is manifested in a poetic lexicon focusing on words of land, home, child, martyr, and exile, and in a discursive structure based on repetition, invocation, questioning, and shifts between the pronouns "I," "we," and "you," transforming the national poem into an emotional and charged protest discourse, not merely a rhythmic political statement. Arab studies on modern poetic discourse show that the poetic

image in resistance poetry, including Darwish's, is not built for decoration, but as a carrier of psychological and collective charge, where images come "loaded with an emotional charge exploding with sorrow and grief" conveying a sense of oppression and hope simultaneously.

At the level of translation into French, Arab research on translating political poetry reflects that transferring this emotional charge faces a set of challenges, the most important being the translation of emotional terms with political dimensions (such as words for martyrdom, occupation, exile) and their associated religious, Biblical, and Quranic references, in addition to transferring the rhythmic tension resulting from repetition and invocation. An Arab study specialized in "Translating Arabic Political Poetry into French" based on Darwish's poems indicates that these terms can be translated "fairly well" because emotions are essentially shared among peoples, because many of Darwish's themes are national and human simultaneously, and because the Biblical and Quranic references used in his poetry are readable in Western culture. However, the same study confirms that the degree of translation success depends on the translator's awareness of the function of these elements in building national affect, and their ability to balance preserving central images and symbols on one hand, and adopting a degree of cultural and rhythmic adaptation on the other, so that the poem in English does not turn into a direct political discourse stripped of poeticity or, conversely, into an aesthetic text stripped of its combative charge.

In the poem "To My Mother," translated into French, which gained great fame, and in which the poet described his feelings towards his mother, he wrote this poem in 1956 when he was imprisoned by the enemy for the first time after the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt and the occupation of Gaza. His mother, with whom his relationship was very tense at the time, visited him in prison, bringing coffee and some fruit. He then realized the extent of love his mother held for him, and there he wrote his famous poem "To My Mother" where he expressed to her his longing and yearning for her. Mahmoud Darwish was greatly surprised by the translation of the poem into French and its interpretation by the foreign recipient, where it became: "Take me, if I return one day... a shawl for your guidance... cover my bones with grass... baptized by the purity of your heel... and tie my bonds... with a lock of hair... with a thread that appears in the hem of your dress... perhaps I will become a god... a god I become"⁶

The following verses were translated into French as follows:

"أحن إلى خبز أمي"

"I yearn for my mother's bread"

"وأعشق عمري لأنني"

"Et je chérie ma vie,"

"And I cherish my life,"

"إذا مت،"

"car Si je mourais,"

"for if I die,"

"أخجل من دمع أمي"

"j'aurais honte des larmes de ma mère !"

"I would be ashamed of my mother's tears!"

Despite the sincerity of the translation and the good choice of equivalents, "it is less significant and powerful than the original text"⁷, as the translational act obscured the subtext and generative elements in the poem, causing the latent meanings in the poem to lose their effectiveness in influencing the non-Arabic speaking recipient; the affective power exerted by words and expressions like: "أحنّ (I yearn), أعشق (I love passionately), أخجل (I am ashamed)" on the Arab recipient's psyche is not the same in terms of the impact left by the foreign equivalents: "avoir la nostalgie de, je Chérie ma vie, j'aurais honte."

The equivalent for "أحنّ" in this context does not carry the same meaning and semantic charge present in the original; "avoir la nostalgie de" might convey the meaning if the yearning was for a homeland, past, place, or moment⁸. Also, the word "cherir" cannot convey the same meaning intended by the poet in his original poem; it is not a semantic substitute for the word "أعشق," which had a great impact on the recipient's psyche.

The semantic alternatives for words from the original poem to the translated poem create emotional and affective gaps, leading to changes in meaning and the original context for which they were used. This is because the emotional currents within the discourse are often responsible for the process of semantic direction and meaning construction, from the premise that "emotions are a world of modal patterns (ability, desire, commitment, belief...) from which the emotional meaning of the text is built".⁹

The process of semantic work in the translated poem requires achieving an affective equivalence that matches or approximates the impact exercised by the original poem's effect on the recipient. This is what the translated verses here failed to achieve, and the reason is that everything is related to context; the context in which the verses were uttered in the original poem is an Arab context "carrying expressive images related to an ancient Arab culture, customs, and traditions, the relationship between a mother and her son in an Arab society that



reveres this relationship".¹⁰ The mother-son relationship in Arab culture is viewed as a central relationship based on *birr* (filial piety) and near-absolute respect, and the mother is laden with a special emotional and spiritual weight surpassing other family bonds. The mother is presented in religious, linguistic, and rhetorical heritage as a source of tenderness, life, and identity, and a place of daily sanctity in the collective imagination. In the Islamic conception, worshipping God is coupled with filial piety, with particular emphasis on the mother through well-known texts like the hadith "Your mother, then your mother, then your mother," and the saying "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers," placing the relationship with the mother at the level of both religious and moral obligation.

In contrast, the relationship between a mother and her son in Western culture is based fundamentally on emotional attachment in childhood, then on gradual independence in adolescence and adulthood, within an individualistic society that tends to encourage psychological separation from the family of origin. This relationship is viewed in much psychological and feminist literature as a site of tension between the need for closeness and tenderness and the pressure of norms linking "masculinity" to distance from the mother.

4. Translating Conceptual Metaphors and the Problem of Cultural Rootedness:

Conceptual metaphors are presented today as an essential entry point for understanding the intertwining of language and culture, and thus for understanding the problems of translating poetic images rooted in specific cultural contexts, and they are a "cognitive mechanism in which an abstract domain (the target) is understood through a more embodied and concrete domain (the source)"¹¹, as in the pattern LOVE IS A JOURNEY where the conception of love is built on experiences of journey, movement, and path, according to Lakoff and Johnson's theory. Metaphor is not merely stylistic ornamentation, but a deep conceptual structure that organizes human thinking and representations of the world, reflected in both every day and literary linguistic uses.

Cultural rootedness of a metaphor means its reliance on collective experiences and shared historical, religious, and social symbols within a particular linguistic community, so that its full meaning is only understood in light of this cultural reservoir. When a metaphor embodies values, identity, and collective memory (as in metaphors of land, Eid, kinship in Palestinian poetry), it becomes part of the cultural "lexicon of identity," not merely a general linguistic tool.

Therefore, conceptual metaphor theory acknowledges the existence of relatively universal metaphors (like TIME IS MONEY) but simultaneously demonstrates that many metaphors are charged with specific meanings emerging from a particular cultural context, which makes their cultural rootedness a decisive factor in their translatability.

In the context of translation, the higher the degree of cultural rootedness of a metaphor, the greater the risks of its "leveling" or "domestication" in the target language, as the translator tends to replace the local source domain (Eid, bayyara (orchard), rayhan (basil/sweet basil)...) with a domain familiar to the other reader, thereby losing part of both the conceptual and cultural structure. For example, in a line from the poem "Rita and the Rifle":

"إِسْمُ رَيْتَا كَانَ عَيْدًا" (BT: Rita's name was an Eid in my mouth.)

TT: Rita's name was with me in my mouth.

This line is from the poem "Rita and the Rifle," where the poet compares Rita's name to "an Eid in my mouth," making "Eid" a metaphorical domain onto which the reader projects their ritual and collective experience of joy, peace, and family reunion, to understand that Rita's name is a source of joy and reassurance in the poet's consciousness. This conception is culturally rooted in the Arab-Islamic imagination, and deleting the word "Eid" in the English translation and replacing it with a neutral phrasing ("was with me in my mouth") erases the emotional-cultural dimension, transforming the metaphor into a flattened expression that does not convey the religious and collective celebratory weight intended by the original text.

Similarly, in the metaphor: "سَلْتَانِ مِنْ رَيْحَانٍ" ("Two baskets of rayhan")

"يَدَاهُ سَلْتَانِ مِنْ رَيْحَانٍ" BT: His hands are two baskets of basil.

TT: His hands are like two baskets of sweet basil

This example deals with a line from the elegy "He Returned in a Shroud," in which Darwish describes the hands of the young martyr as "two baskets of rayhan," establishing a conceptual metaphor that makes the hands (target) understood through "rayhan" (source) with its connotations of youth, purity, fragrant scent, and the use of flowers for adornment within Arab culture.

Analysis indicates that Arab culture primarily evokes from "rayhan" the image of a flower and perfume, whereas Western culture often evokes "a cooking herb." "Therefore, adding 'sweet basil' in the English translation introduces a Western-culinary framework that reduces the funerary-aesthetic meaning in the text"¹², and marginalizes the Palestinian cultural perspective that links rayhan to pure death and good memory.

Third Example: "The Bayyara (Orchard) and the Sun"



The metaphor is derived from the poem "Soft Rain in Autumn" where the poet describes the setting sun as a "bayyara" (a private farm/orchard), creating a conceptual metaphor that makes the sun perceived through the image of "private ownership" in Palestinian culture, where "bayyara" refers to citrus and pomegranate orchards symbolizing historical ownership of the land.

Converting this metaphor in translation to "the sun is a pomegranate at sunset" simplifies the image to a visual similarity (roundness and color), but empties it of its political-proprietary dimension linked to the Palestinian right to the land, showing how adapting the image according to the Western recipient's horizon can lead to erasing an entire layer of historical memory embedded in the original metaphor.

Conclusion:

This research demonstrates that the emotional charge in Mahmoud Darwish's poetry is not merely an additional layer decorating meaning, but a structural component of the text's poeticity, generated from the intertwining of levels of lexicon, rhetorical image, rhythm, and cultural-historical context, so that every linguistic shift carries a measure of both individual and collective emotion. Both the theoretical and applied analysis have shown that this composite emotional structure imposes special conditions on translation that go beyond lexical transfer to the reconstruction of the curve of emotional tension within a different cultural horizon, making the act of translation itself a highly sensitive interpretive and aesthetic practice.

The study concludes that the translatability of emotional charges in Darwish's poetry is partial and conditional rather than absolute; it is possible to the extent that the translator skillfully reads the sources of affect in the source text (affective lexicon, discursive structure, network of culturally rooted symbols and metaphors), and to the extent they are aware of the reception horizon in the target language and the required adaptation without excessive compromise. The French translation examples—through examples like "I yearn for my mother's bread" and the metaphors of Eid, rayhan, and bayyara—have shown that any uncalculated shift in choosing an equivalent can create "emotional and affective gaps" between the texts, weakening affective equivalence even if lexical equivalence appears superficially acceptable.

Furthermore, the study of conceptual metaphors rooted in Palestinian culture (metaphors of land, mother, Eid, bayyara, martyr...) revealed that the cultural rootedness of these images is the source of a significant part of their emotional charge, and that leveling or domesticating



them in the target language—by replacing local source domains with others familiar to the foreign reader—leads to erasing layers of the memory and identity embedded in the text. Consequently, the translator is positioned in a constant negotiation between the demand for "clarity" and "fluency" on one hand, and preserving the creative strangeness carried by the original images on the other, bringing back to the forefront the question of the cultural politics of translation and the limits of its intervention in reshaping taste.

Based on this, the need emerges for a composite strategic model in translating Darwish's poetry that combines a set of choices: affective equivalence where emotional impact is prioritized over literal correspondence, preservation of central images supported by footnotes or explanatory contexts when necessary, and the adoption of a calculated degree of cultural and rhythmic adaptation that does not empty the text of its identitarian dimension. Such a model allows translation to transform from a mere channel for meaning transfer into a space of intercultural interaction, through which Darwish's poetry contributes to "disrupting" the literary taste of non-Arabic speakers, not by softening its emotiveness or neutralizing its resistance charge, but by exposing the other reader to the intensity of his human and political experience with the utmost possible fidelity and beauty combined.

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