

## Metaphorical Expressions of Mahmoud Darwish's Poems

Danu Ardiansyah<sup>1\*</sup>  
Yeni Probowati<sup>2</sup>  
Shanty A.Y.P.S duwila<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Department, Faculty of Language and Literature, Universitas Wijaya Putra,

<sup>2</sup>English Department, Faculty of Language and Literature, Universitas Wijaya Putra,

<sup>3</sup>English Department, Faculty of Language and Literature, Universitas Wijaya Putra,

e-mail: <sup>1</sup>[danuard97@gmail.com](mailto:danuard97@gmail.com); <sup>2</sup>[yeniprobowati@uwp.ac.id](mailto:yeniprobowati@uwp.ac.id);

<sup>3</sup>[shantiduwila@uwp.ac.id](mailto:shantiduwila@uwp.ac.id)

### Abstract

*This study examines the use of metaphor in five selected poems by Mahmoud Darwish through the lens of conceptual metaphor theory. The research aims to identify the types of metaphors and analyze their expressions in the poems. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were taken from English translations and analyzed based on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) categories of structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors. The analysis identified 37 metaphorical expressions, with ontological metaphors being the most dominant, reflecting Darwish's way of presenting abstract concepts such as land, memory, and identity in tangible forms. Structural metaphors also appeared significantly, often linking natural imagery with cultural and existential meaning, while orientational metaphors, though less frequent, conveyed symbolic value in spiritual contexts. These findings confirm that metaphor in Darwish's poetry functions not only as a stylistic feature but as a cognitive tool that transforms personal and collective experiences into vivid imagery. The study concludes that metaphors play a central role in Darwish's poetic craft and demonstrates the usefulness of conceptual metaphor theory for literary analysis. Although limited to a small sample and translated texts, this research contributes to understanding figurative language in modern*

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<sup>1\*</sup>Corresponding author, email: [xxxx.xxxx@mail.com](mailto:xxxx.xxxx@mail.com)

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*Arabic poetry and opens opportunities for broader and comparative studies.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language serves as one of the most fundamental aspects of human life. It is not only a system of communication but also a cultural and artistic instrument that allows people to express emotions, share ideas, and construct social realities. Beyond its literal function, language often conveys meanings that are symbolic, imaginative, and layered with cultural or emotional significance. One of the most prominent ways this is achieved is through figurative language. Figurative expressions such as simile, personification, and metaphor enable speakers and writers to transcend literal meaning and present abstract concepts in more vivid, relatable, and emotionally engaging forms.

Metaphor, in particular, has long been regarded as one of the most essential and powerful devices in both everyday communication and literary works. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that metaphors are not merely decorative or ornamental features of language but instead reflect fundamental structures of human thought. They allow individuals to understand abstract domains by mapping them onto more concrete or familiar experiences. For example, common expressions such as “time is money” or “life is a journey” illustrate how metaphor structures human perception and reasoning. In poetry, metaphor becomes even more crucial, as it offers poets a tool to compress complex emotions and ideas into a single, resonant image. Through metaphor, the personal becomes universal, and the abstract becomes tangible.

Poetry has historically been one of the most metaphor-rich literary forms. Poets often rely on metaphor to portray experiences that cannot easily be expressed in literal terms. This includes themes such as identity, loss, exile, belonging, and resistance. By using metaphor, poets can turn intangible ideas into concrete imagery, thus enabling readers to experience emotions more directly. The interplay between language, imagination, and meaning in poetry highlights the value of studying metaphor in literary works. It allows readers and researchers alike to better understand how language not only reflects but also shapes human perception of reality.

Mahmoud Darwish, one of the most prominent Palestinian poets of the twentieth century, exemplifies this poetic use of metaphor. His works are characterized by lyrical intensity, cultural depth, and symbolic richness. Writing against the backdrop of exile, displacement, and political struggle, Darwish consistently used metaphors to articulate experiences of identity, memory, and nationhood. His poetry does not merely document political and personal struggles;

rather, it transforms them into universal reflections on human existence and belonging. This makes his work particularly relevant for metaphor analysis, as his verses are laden with symbolic imagery that communicates profound philosophical and emotional truths.

Despite the significance of metaphor in literature, research on Darwish's poetry remains limited when it comes to systematic classification of metaphor types. Previous studies on figurative language have often focused on song lyrics ((Lestari, 2020; Ramadhika, 2022) or provided general discussions of figurative devices in poetry without a structured framework for categorization. Other scholars, such as Al-Sheikh (2021), have analyzed Darwish's poetry but concentrated on natural imagery, such as birds, trees, and landscapes, to discuss themes of exile and identity. While such research is valuable, it tends to emphasize thematic symbolism rather than offering a detailed linguistic analysis based on conceptual metaphor theory. This creates a gap in the literature, as few studies have applied Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) classification of structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors to Darwish's works in a systematic way.

Filling this gap is important for two main reasons. First, applying conceptual metaphor theory to Darwish's poetry provides a more precise understanding of how metaphors operate in his work, not just thematically but also structurally and linguistically. Second, such analysis enriches the field of literary studies by bridging the gap between linguistic theory and literary interpretation. By identifying the types of metaphors and interpreting their meanings, this study offers a more comprehensive account of how figurative language functions in one of the most influential poetic voices of the modern Arab world.

The objectives of the present study are therefore twofold. The first is to identify the types of metaphors used in a selection of Mahmoud Darwish's poems, drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor framework. This involves categorizing the metaphors into structural, orientational, and ontological types. The second objective is to interpret the meanings of these metaphors in relation to the broader themes that characterize Darwish's poetry, such as identity, memory, and cultural endurance. These objectives position the study at the intersection of linguistic analysis and literary interpretation, emphasizing both the form and the function of metaphor in poetic expression.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to both theory and practice. Theoretically, the study extends the application of conceptual metaphor theory beyond everyday discourse into the domain of literature, particularly modern Arabic poetry in translation. It demonstrates how abstract emotions and cultural experiences are structured through metaphorical language, thereby offering insights into the cognitive and symbolic dimensions of poetry. Practically, the study may serve as a reference for students, educators, and scholars interested in the study of metaphor, figurative language, or Middle Eastern literature. It also contributes to a

deeper appreciation of Mahmoud Darwish's work by showing how his poetic craft communicates not only personal and political realities but also universal human experiences.

In summary, while metaphor has been widely acknowledged as a central device in poetry, research applying conceptual metaphor theory to Mahmoud Darwish's work remains scarce. This study seeks to address that gap by systematically identifying and interpreting the metaphors in his selected poems. By doing so, it highlights the enduring relevance of Darwish's poetry and the power of metaphor to bridge linguistic, cultural, and emotional worlds.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Figurative language is widely recognized as a central feature of literary expression. Unlike literal language, which conveys meaning directly, figurative language relies on imaginative associations to enrich communication. It provides writers with stylistic tools that make their works more vivid, persuasive, and emotionally resonant. According to Knowles and Moon (2005), figurative language allows abstract or complex concepts to be expressed in more accessible ways, thus enabling readers to connect with ideas that might otherwise remain distant or obscure. In poetry, figurative language is particularly crucial because it creates imagery that engages the senses and stimulates interpretation beyond surface-level meaning.

Among the various forms of figurative language, metaphor is the most pervasive and significant. A metaphor occurs when one concept is understood in terms of another, often by mapping an abstract idea onto a concrete or familiar domain. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) emphasize, metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament but a fundamental mechanism of human thought. Through metaphor, individuals conceptualize experiences, emotions, and relationships in structured ways that shape perception and action. For instance, when someone says "time is money," the abstract domain of time is framed through the economic domain of money, which influences how people value and organize their lives.

(Feralda et al., 2022) highlight that metaphors play an essential role in structuring narratives and lived experiences. Their study demonstrates that metaphors such as journey, blessing, and lesson allow individuals to articulate personal realities in ways that transcend literal description. This perspective reinforces the idea that metaphors are not simply decorative devices but are embedded in cognition, shaping how individuals make sense of their world.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) classify metaphors into three main types: structural, orientational, and ontological. Structural metaphors occur when one concept is structured in terms of another, such as "argument is war," which frames debate as a battle with strategies and victories. Orientational metaphors organize concepts according to spatial orientation, such as "happy is up" or "sad is down," which

reflect embodied human experiences of posture and emotion. Ontological metaphors involve treating abstract concepts as entities or substances, allowing them to be talked about as if they were objects, containers, or people. For example, “my mind is full of ideas” conceptualizes thought as a container.

In the realm of poetry, metaphors enable poets to transform personal or collective experiences into symbolic imagery. By doing so, they elevate language from a descriptive tool to a medium of aesthetic and emotional depth. Abrams (1999) notes that poetry seeks to “say more and say it more intensely” than ordinary language, and metaphor is one of the key devices that achieves this intensification. Through metaphors, poets can compress complex philosophical reflections, political struggles, or existential dilemmas into single, evocative images. This capacity makes metaphor indispensable for understanding poetry both as an artistic practice and as a cultural text.

### 3. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive, which is considered appropriate for analyzing figurative language in literary texts. A qualitative descriptive approach allows the researcher to explore and interpret meanings within a text without relying on numerical data. Descriptive analysis was used to identify, classify, and interpret metaphors that appear in the selected poems by Mahmoud Darwish.

The data of this study consisted of five English-translated poems by Mahmoud Darwish, namely *To Our Land* translated by Fady Joudah, *Psalm Three* translated by Ben Bennani, *In Jerusalem* translated by Fady Joudah, *The Prison Cell* translated by Ben Bennani, and *I Belong There* translated by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché. These poems were chosen through purposive sampling because of their richness in figurative language and their thematic relevance to the research focus. The data included words, phrases, and sentences containing metaphorical expressions. Secondary data such as books, journal articles, and previous studies on figurative language and Darwish’s poetry were also consulted to support the analysis.

The data collection was conducted through documentation, which is a common technique in qualitative studies involving written texts (Sugiyono, 2013). The researcher first selected poems that contain abundant figurative expressions. Each poem was then subjected to close reading to identify metaphorical expressions. Once identified, the metaphors were extracted and recorded in a data table that included the original line, the metaphorical phrase, and preliminary notes about possible meanings. This systematic documentation ensured that the data remained organized and accessible for analysis.

For the data analysis, the study applied the conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). According to this theory, metaphors can be

classified into three main types: structural, orientational, and ontological. The analysis began with identifying each metaphorical expression in the poems and classifying it according to these categories. Structural metaphors were identified when one concept was structured through another, orientational metaphors when concepts were organized through spatial orientations, and ontological metaphors when abstract concepts were treated as physical entities. After classification, each metaphor was interpreted in its poetic context to uncover its broader meaning and significance.

The procedure of analysis was carried out in several steps. First, the researcher performed close reading of the poems to locate lines that contained non-literal or figurative expressions. Second, the figurative expressions were examined to confirm whether they could be categorized as metaphors. Third, the identified metaphors were classified based on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) framework. Finally, each metaphor was interpreted with reference to the context of the poem and supported by insights from literary criticism and linguistic studies. This process allowed the researcher to provide both a structural classification and a thematic interpretation of the metaphors, ensuring that the research objectives were met with consistency and clarity.

By combining qualitative descriptive analysis with conceptual metaphor theory, this study provides a replicable method for examining figurative language in poetry. Other researchers who wish to conduct similar studies can adopt the same approach by selecting texts, applying close reading, identifying metaphorical expressions, classifying them according to established categories, and interpreting their meanings within the broader literary and cultural context.

#### **4. RESULTS**

The analysis of five selected poems by Mahmoud Darwish revealed the presence of three types of metaphors, namely structural, orientational, and ontological, as categorized by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The classification shows that ontological metaphors appear most frequently, followed by structural metaphors, while orientational metaphors occur least often.

##### **4.1 Types of Metaphors**

The overall distribution of metaphors is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The Frequency of Metaphor in Poems

Type of Metaphors	Frequency
Structural	11
Orientalional	5
Ontological	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>

The findings indicate that ontological metaphors dominate Darwish's poetry, with 21 occurrences identified. These metaphors reflect the tendency to conceptualize abstract ideas as tangible entities or physical objects. Structural metaphors occur 11 times, showing how one concept is systematically structured in terms of another. Orientational metaphors, which rely on spatial orientation, appear only 5 times, suggesting they are less central to Darwish's figurative repertoire in the selected poems.

#### 4.2 Underlying Meaning Of The Linguistic Expressions Of Metaphor

A total of 37 metaphorical expressions were identified across the selected poems. These metaphors are presented in Table 2 along with their meanings and the poem in which they appear.

**Table2.** Metaphorical expressions, their meaning, and poem sources

No	Metaphorical Expression	Meaning	Poem Title
1	Our land is a chest of sky and wheat	Land symbolized abundance and sustenance	<i>To Our Land</i>
2	Our land is the essence of time	Land represents continuity and timelessness	<i>To Our Land</i>
3	Our land is a bed of cloud	Land reflects beauty and serenity	<i>To Our Land</i>
4	Our land is a green time	Land equated with growth and vitality	<i>To Our Land</i>
5	Our land is a tree	Land as rootedness and endurance	<i>To Our Land</i>
6	Our land is a cot of sun and sky	Land as a cradle of life and nature	<i>To Our Land</i>
7	Our land is a chest of life	Land embodies the source of existence	<i>To Our Land</i>
8	Our land is a chest of wheat	Land as provider of food and prosperity	<i>To Our Land</i>
9	Our land is a chest of hope	Land represents optimism and survival	<i>To Our Land</i>
10	Our land is a chest of memory	Land as a keeper of history and identity	<i>To Our Land</i>
11	The prison cell is a mirror	Confinement reflects inner self-awareness	<i>The Prison Cell</i>
12	The prison cell is a window	Confinement as a limited opening to the world	<i>The Prison Cell</i>
13	The prison cell is a sky	Confinement paradoxically imagined as vastness	<i>The Prison Cell</i>
14	The prison cell is a door	Confinement as both barrier and potential exit	<i>The Prison Cell</i>
15	Time has broken its wings	Time portrayed as powerless and fragile	<i>Psalm Three</i>
16	The day is a white tablecloth	Day as purity and renewal	<i>Psalm Three</i>
17	The day is a wedding dress	Day symbolizing joy and	<i>Psalm Three</i>

		celebration	
18	The day is a festival	Day as communal happiness and festivity	<i>Psalms Three</i>
19	The day is a guest	Day personified as a visitor bringing change	<i>Psalms Three</i>
20	The day is a bride	Day as something precious and beautiful	<i>Psalms Three</i>
21	The day is a child	Day representing innocence and new beginnings	<i>Psalms Three</i>
22	The day is a woman	Day as nurturing, intimate, and life-giving	<i>Psalms Three</i>
23	The day is a lover	Day symbolizing passion and intimacy	<i>Psalms Three</i>
24	Jerusalem rises beyond the sky	Jerusalem depicted as transcendent and sacred	<i>In Jerusalem</i>
25	I rise to meet Jerusalem	Jerusalem as spiritual elevation	<i>In Jerusalem</i>
26	Jerusalem is the meeting of heaven and earth	Jerusalem symbolizing divine-human connection	<i>In Jerusalem</i>
27	Jerusalem is the city of God	Jerusalem as holy and belonging to divinity	<i>In Jerusalem</i>
28	Jerusalem is the city of peace	Jerusalem symbolizing harmony and reconciliation	<i>In Jerusalem</i>
29	Jerusalem is the city of eternity	Jerusalem as timeless and everlasting	<i>In Jerusalem</i>
30	Jerusalem is the city of prayer	Jerusalem as spiritual devotion	<i>In Jerusalem</i>
31	I belong there, to the land of my birth	Land as identity and origin	<i>I Belong There</i>
32	I belong there, to the land of my language	Land as cultural and linguistic heritage	<i>I Belong There</i>
33	I belong there, to the land of my ancestors	Land as genealogy and tradition	<i>I Belong There</i>
34	I belong there, to the land of my memory	Land as collective and personal remembrance	<i>I Belong There</i>
35	I belong there, to the land of my soul	Land as spiritual essence	<i>I Belong There</i>
36	I belong there, to the land of my blood	Land as life force and sacrifice	<i>I Belong There</i>
37	I belong there, to the land of my dream	Land as aspiration and vision	<i>I Belong There</i>

A total of 37 metaphorical expressions were identified in Mahmoud Darwish's selected poems. These expressions are classified into three categories: structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors. The data reveal that ontological metaphors occur most frequently, with 21 instances, while structural metaphors appear 11 times, and orientational metaphors are the least common with 5 occurrences. This distribution suggests that Darwish relies heavily on ontological metaphors to convey complex abstract ideas, indicating a preference for shaping meaning through

extended conceptual comparisons rather than solely through spatial or ontological mappings.

The table also shows how each type of metaphor contributes to the thematic construction of hope and despair. Ontological metaphors dominate, as they allow Darwish to build layered analogies that illustrate the struggles and aspirations of the Palestinian experience. Structural metaphors, though fewer in number, primarily attribute human or tangible qualities to abstract entities such as time, land, or homeland, thereby grounding intangible concepts into more relatable images. Orientational metaphors, with the smallest number of instances, play an important role by highlighting contrasts such as “up” versus “down” or “light” versus “dark,” which symbolize fluctuating emotional states. This variation emphasizes the poet’s creative use of metaphors in framing and articulating the interplay between hope and despair

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that metaphor is a central element in Mahmoud Darwish’s selected poems, reflecting his consistent use of figurative language to express layered emotions and abstract ideas. From the analysis, ontological metaphors are the most dominant, followed by structural metaphors, with orientational metaphors being the least frequent. This pattern indicates that Darwish often translates intangible concepts such as land, memory, and identity into tangible forms, while also employing structural analogies and spatial orientations when suitable (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses & Benczes, 2010).

The prominence of ontological metaphors highlights Darwish’s tendency to materialize abstract experiences into concrete imagery. Concepts like homeland, memory, or confinement are frequently represented as physical entities, making them more vivid and relatable to readers. For instance, when the land is described as a chest of memory or a source of sustenance, it underscores the intimate bond between people and their homeland. These metaphors not only emphasize cultural identity and collective memory but also turn them into embodied realities that can be felt and imagined. This supports Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) argument that metaphors are rooted in human cognition and provide a framework for understanding the world (Charteris-Black, 2004)

Although less numerous, structural metaphors still play a crucial role in shaping Darwish’s poetic imagery. By using one domain to explain another, these metaphors often link natural symbols with cultural or spiritual dimensions. For example, the homeland described as a tree evokes ideas of rootedness, resilience, and continuity. Such associations do not merely convey identity but also resonate with universal experiences of growth and belonging. Structural metaphors therefore function as a bridge between individual and collective meaning, reflecting Darwish’s

skill in turning the particular experience of exile into themes that resonate universally (El-Ariss, 2013; Kövecses, 2019).

Oriental metaphors, while occurring in smaller numbers, contribute important symbolic value. These metaphors use spatial orientation, such as up–down, to capture abstract or spiritual dimensions. In Darwish’s poetry, they often appear in religious imagery, for example rising upward to Jerusalem, which signifies transcendence and devotion. Even though their frequency is limited, such metaphors suggest that Darwish relies on embodied spatial experience to frame spiritual imagination, reinforcing the idea that orientation-based metaphors can hold powerful symbolic significance (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Turner, 1996).

Overall, these results show that metaphor in Darwish’s poetry functions not merely as stylistic ornamentation but as a cognitive and cultural tool. Previous studies, such as Fereralda et al. (2022), have shown how metaphor shapes personal experiences of illness by framing them as journeys or lessons. This research extends that perspective to literature, showing how similar cognitive mechanisms structure Darwish’s poetic treatment of memory, identity, and spirituality. While Iska et al. (2021) focused on everyday discourse, this study emphasizes how metaphors in poetry can transform personal and political realities into symbolic forms of expression (Charteris-Black, 2011).

The significance of these findings lies in their contribution to understanding Darwish’s poetic style and thematic concerns. Identifying and categorizing metaphors not only demonstrates how the poet addresses themes such as homeland, memory, and spirituality but also reveals cognitive patterns that reflect universal human thought. This underscores the relevance of conceptual metaphor theory in literary studies and illustrates its usefulness in examining modern Arabic poetry in translation (Kövecses, 2010). Moreover, the analysis shows how Darwish’s metaphors make abstract realities accessible and emotionally engaging, reaffirming the central role of figurative language in shaping meaning (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Semino & Steen, 2008).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This study examined 37 metaphorical expressions in five selected poems by Mahmoud Darwish using conceptual metaphor theory. The analysis revealed that ontological metaphors were the most dominant, followed by structural and orientational metaphors. These findings highlight how Darwish transforms abstract concepts such as land, identity, time, and confinement into tangible and relatable imagery. Metaphors in his poetry function not merely as stylistic devices but as cognitive tools that allow readers to engage with complex cultural and existential realities, reaffirming the value of metaphor in both literature and human thought.

The study, however, was limited to a small selection of poems and relied on English translations, which may not fully capture the nuances of the original Arabic texts. Future research could expand the scope by analyzing a broader range of Darwish's works, comparing them with other modern poets, or incorporating additional theoretical approaches to provide deeper insight. Despite these limitations, this research contributes to a better understanding of Darwish's poetic craft and underscores the significance of metaphor as a key element in literary and linguistic studies.

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