



Poetry as Living Archive: Palestinian Witness Poetry in selected poems of Mahmoud Darwish and Refaat Alareer

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ABSTRACT

Palestinian literature has long been studied as resistance writing; however, no existing study systematically examines what specific role this poetry plays during active atrocities, or how that role shifts across different historical eras of violence. This study analyses the selected poems of Palestinian poets Mahmoud Darwish and Refaat Alareer in order to understand the role of poetry during wartime and how that role adapts when the nature of violence changes, given that Darwish's era is defined by displacement, land dispossession, and the bureaucratic erasure of Palestinian identity, whereas Alareer's era is defined by aerial bombardment and siege. By employing Carolyn Forché's poetry of witness as its theoretical framework, this study demonstrates that the selected poems preserve evidentiary traces of suffering, act as poetic memorials against enforced forgetting, restore the individual humanity of those whom violence reduces to statistics, construct a habitable world under conditions of destruction, and create communal urgency that binds writer and reader in shared ethical responsibility. Although both poets perform these same functions, the historical era shapes how each function is performed, such that where Darwish's poems preserve evidence of a people whose existence is officially denied, Alareer's poems transform a genocide that the world watches in real time but fails to act upon into language that demands ethical response, and together these functions transform the poems into what Forché calls a living archive, a text that continues to mark and move its readers across generations. This study concludes that although poetry may not stop war, it ensures that the world does not forget.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of Study

On December 7, 2023, an Israeli airstrike killed Refaat Alareer, a Palestinian poet, professor and editor, along with members of his family, in Gaza. Within hours of his death, a poem he had written travelled across the internet in ways that no news report, no footage and no United Nations statement could replicate. "If I Must Die" (Alareer 38) was translated into over forty languages. It was projected on the walls of buildings in cities across Europe, North America and the Middle East. It was read aloud at vigils and quoted on the floor of the United Nations General Assembly. A man was killed. But his words kept him alive. His words reached millions of people who had even never heard his name before. This event demonstrates the power of literature. And

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raises the fundamental question: what is the role of poetry during atrocities? This question is the central focus of the present study.

The twenty-first century is characterized by global conflicts. But among these, the crises in Palestine remains one of the longest standing tragedy. It spans more than seven decades of military occupation. During such environment of extremity, when a population is subjected to systemic erasure, military blockades and aerial bombardments, the literature is not produced for aesthetic pleasure. Its role shifts from Aesthetic pleasure to documenting resistance, identity and testimony. It becomes a means for preserving victim's dignity and truth against the machinery of state violence. Palestinian literature is that kind of literature. It was produced not for aesthetic pleasure but from historical necessity. It is produced from the need to record, to insist and to refuse the erasure.

Among many writers who have shaped Palestinian literary tradition, this study focuses on Mahmoud Darwish and Refaat Alareer whose works represents different historical moments. Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008), is regarded as the national poet of Palestine. He wrote under Israeli military law in the 1960s, from exile in Beirut in the 1970s and 1980s and to the Oslo period. Refaat Alareer (1979-2023) represents the contemporary voice of Palestine. Refaat Alareer wrote from within Gaza between 2011 and 2023. He wrote in an entirely different historical moment but within the same tradition.

This study examines these two poets together in order to understand how witness poetry adapts its functions across changing historical conditions. Its organizing framework is drawn from the work of American poet and editor Carolyn Forché, specifically from her introductions to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (W. W. Norton, 1993) and *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English, 1500-2001* (W. W. Norton, 2014). According to Forché witness poetry is a distinct literary mode that emerges from "conditions of historical and social extremity" (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 30) and performs identifiable functions: preserving evidence, memorizing the dead, restoring individual dignity, building communal solidarity, constructing a habitable world and drawing the reader into ethical responsibility. Forché also argues through this last function, reading witness poetry transforms the reader and that through this transformation, "the text we read becomes a living archive" (Forché, *Poetry of Witness* 46). It is this phrase, and the concept it carries, that provides the title and the central argument of this study.

This study examines literature's role in precisely the condition when survival supersedes aesthetic pleasure. And when the poem must do work that no other form of record can accomplish. The living archive, as this thesis argues, is not a passive repository of historical information. It is an active text that demands ethical response from the reader, that outlasts the journalist's report and the politician's statement, and that keeps the dead present and the demand for justice alive.

1.2. Problem Statement

Although Palestinian literature is studied widely as resistance literature, its specific role during wartime remains unexplored. Also, there exists no study that compares works of Mahmoud Darwish and Refaat Alareer. Mahmoud Darwish is the national poet of Palestine and Refaat Alareer is the contemporary voice of Palestine. They both write about the experience of Palestinians under war. Yet the themes of their poems are entirely different. Because they wrote from distinct eras and experience distinct violence. So, the specific question of how the functions of poetry evolves remain unaddressed.

1.3. Research Objective

- To explore the specific themes of witness poetry in the selected poems of Mahmoud Darwish and Refaat Alareer, identifying their contribution to construction of Living Archive.
- To analyze the evaluation of thematic functions of witness poetry from Darwish's era of censorship to Alareer's era of digital saturation.

1.4. Research Questions

- What specific themes of witness poetry emerge in the selected poems of Mahmoud Darwish and Refaat Alareer to transform their work into a Living Archive?
- How do the themes of witness poetry evolve when moving from Mahmoud Darwish's era of censorship to Refaat Alareer's era of digital livestreaming?

1.5. Research Significance

This research carries profound contemporary, theoretical and academic significance. First, it enters an urgent and unresolved debate about the meaningful role of literature during ongoing atrocities. Second, it establishes the first formal comparative academic dialogue between Darwish and Alareer as witness poets. Third, this study extends Forché's framework, which was developed in relation to twentieth-century European, Latin American and East Asian poets to a Palestinian context.

1.6. Delimitations

To ensure the scope of the research remains focused, this study establishes several delimitations. First, this study focuses on eight poems, four by each poet. They are selected to represent distinct witness modes across Forché's framework. These poems don't as a comprehensive account of either poet's full body of work. Second, the study relies on authoritative English translations of Darwish's Arabic originals. Consequently, this study excludes translation analysis and comparative linguistic study from its scope. The study also does not attempt to address the full range of Palestinian literature. The focus of this study remains strictly to the thematic analysis of poems as outlined in the research questions and objectives.

2. Literature Review

The existing research on Palestinian witness poetry can be divided into three distinct areas. The first area focuses on studies that uses witness poetry as theoretical framework, the second area focuses on studies that examines the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish through close readings of his individual poems and the third focuses on growing scholarships on Refaat Alareer works. This literature review studies the existing research to identify the gap that this present study addresses.

2.1. Witness Poetry as a Critical Framework: Forché and its Applications

The theoretical framework has been derived from Carolyn Forché's two anthologies: *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (W. W. Norton, 1993) and *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English, 1500-2001* (W. W. Norton, 2014). Forché first introduced this framework in 1993 and scholars across multiple literary traditions have adopted this framework. Her anthology includes works of 144 poets who wrote under different forms of violence and oppression such as Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, Stalinist Russia, Latin American military dictatorships and the apartheid system in South Africa. By bringing these diverse voices together, she establishes that witness poetry is not limited to one culture or conflict. But it is a literary tradition that emerges wherever people experience extreme violence, suffering or oppression. This framework has since been applied to contexts Forché did not originally include. Scholars have used it to analyze poetry from the Bosnian wars of the 1990s, from post-independence African literature and from contemporary conflict in Asia.

Zhila Gholami's 2022 study, applies Force's framework to Kurdish-Iraqi poets Choman Hardi and Nazand Begikhani. Gholami (1993, 2011, 2014), is one of the most recent applications of Forché's framework. Gholami identifies what makes poetry, as opposed to other documentary forms which are basically the formal properties of the poem, its use of compression, image, and direct address, this finding is directly relevant to the present study's argument about how Darwish and Alareer's poems do in wartime.

Despite this growing body of scholarship applying Forché's framework across multiple traditions, its application to Palestinian poetry remains limited. Individual Palestinian poems are frequently described as witness poetry in critical introductions and anthologies but systematic application of Forché's specific theoretical categories to Palestinian texts is rare.

2.2. Mahmoud Darwish in Literary Scholarship

Mahmoud Darwish's poetry has attracted extensive scholarship engagement. His work has been read through different lenses like postcolonial theory, discourse analysis, ecocriticism, semiotics, phenomenology and cultural studies. Broadly, the existing scholarship can be grouped into three strands. The first strand focuses on the themes of exile and alienation. The second strand examines his role in constructing Palestinian and Arab national identity. And the third strand explores individual poems through specific theoretical frameworks.

The most foundational strand of Darwish scholarship places his work within the context of exile and the Nakba. Singh's 2023 study presents Darwish as the central poet of the Palestinian experience of dispossession. He argues that his verse captures "the angst, anger, and alienation of the Palestinian people" in the aftermath of 1948 and that his voice represents the collective trauma of a displaced population (Singh 18). This reading establishes the socio-political conditions from which the poetry of Darwish emerges and positions Darwish within the tradition of protest literature.

Kamoliddinova (2024) addresses the question that how Darwish's works construct the collective Arab identity. She argues that his poetry plays a crucial role in shaping Arab national identity. This reading of Darwish is important for situating him within the broader context of Arab cultural politics. But it also raises some questions that Kamoliddinova's framework does not fully resolve. This paper studies the collective dimension of Darwish's work, they often overlook the way he explores the individual sufferings and in doing so restores the individual. Forché's framework addresses this directly through the restoration-of-the-individual function.

Third strand of Darwish scholarship focuses on individual poems. The recent study focuses specifically on poems that are part of this study's present research. Almazaidah et al. (2025) apply a social approach to "To My Mother." He reads it as prison

literature and argues that the poem shows the mother as a personification of the homeland. This reading is productive for understanding the poem's sociological dimensions. But it also reveals the limits of reading the mother as a symbol.

Overall, this body of scholarship on Darwish establishes several important things like the socio-political conditions of his witness, the relationship between exile and poetic form, his role in constructing collective identity and the linguistic and semiotic strategies of individual poems. What it does not do is to apply Forché's framework systematically or address the question of how his poems function as living archives. The scholarship on Darwish is rich but dispersed across incompatible theoretical frameworks. Thus, no existing study provides the comprehensive account that the present study attempts.

2.3. Refaat Alareer and Contemporary Palestinian Poetry under Siege

Scholarship on Alareer is necessarily recent and limited than the decades of critical work on Darwish. Alareer was killed in December 2023, and the scholarly engagement with his work is still forming. Nevertheless, several studies have already appeared that address his poetry from different perspectives. And when taken together they establish the emerging critical conversation to which this thesis contributes.

The most focused study on a single Alareer poem is Hussein's 2025 article on "If I Must Die." This article explores how this poem transforms storytelling into "a powerful mode of cultural survival and a means of transcending physical destruction and preserving collective memory" (Hussein 87). Hussein's article is the closest existing study to the present thesis's argument about the living archive. It directly addresses how the poem outlives its author and secures an "afterlife" for the Palestinian narrative.

Khan's 2025 thematic analysis of Alareer's selected poems applies Judith Butler's concepts of vulnerability and precarity. He argues that Alareer's poetry vividly portrays the situation of the people of Gaza. This framework has genuine affinities with Forché's witness poetics. Since both Butler's precarity and Forché's extremity address the conditions under which human life is made expendable by political structures. Khan's analysis of "Freshly Baked Souls" and "And We Live On" is useful for the present study because it grounds the poems in the specific material conditions of the Gaza siege and provides the socio-political context within which Forché's functions operate.

Elzayat et al.'s 2025 socio-pragmatic study examines Alareer's works by presenting it as "internal voice of Palestine." He argues through Grice's Cooperative Principle and postcolonial theory that his texts communicate Palestinian experience and agency through deliberate conversational subversions. The focus on narrative agency and the "writing back" tradition connects to Forché's argument about the social space that witness poetry inhabits.

The emerging body of scholarship on Alareer reveals that critics are already recognizing the significance of his work. They are also beginning to theorize its relationship to Palestinian resistance, collective memory, and cultural survival. What this scholarship has not yet done is apply Forché's specific witness framework to his poems or situate his work in direct comparative dialogue with Darwish. Each of the studies reviewed above reads Alareer in isolation.

2.4. Research Gap

The three bodies of scholarship reviewed in this chapter reveals several gaps that the present study is positioned to fill. First, Forché's witness framework have not been applied the systematically to Palestinian poetry. Second, the most significant gap is comparative. No existing study examines Darwish and Alareer together as two phases of the same witness poetry tradition that responds to two distinct forms of Palestinian violence. This comparison is very important because it reveals how witness poetry reshapes its strategies depending on the kind of violence it faces. The present study therefore fills two connected gaps. By addressing both gaps simultaneously, through the application of Forché's framework to eight poems across two historical eras, this study produces findings that are relevant to both fields and that also contribute to the broader critical conversation about what literature does in conditions of ongoing political violence.

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative thematic analysis as its primary research method. This qualitative thematic analysis is conducted at three distinct levels. Each level serves a different analytical purpose. Level One applies Forché's witness framework to the four selected poems of Mahmoud Darwish. It examines how each selected poem performs specific witness functions within the particular historical context. Level Two applies the same framework to the four selected poems of Refaat Alareer. It examines how his poems perform the same functions within the radically different historical context of the Gaza genocide of 2023. Level Three conducts a comparative analysis of the two poets. It identifies how the same Forché functions operate differently when the nature of the violence changes. This three-level structure ensures systematic and non-repetitive analysis.

3.1. Research Design

The research design is interpretive and text-centered. It focuses on the close-reading of eight literary texts in relation to a theoretical framework. The analysis follows the sandwich method. First, each function is first stated in terms of Forché's theory. Then it is supported by at least three lines of textual evidence from the poem and finally followed by a justification that explains how those specific lines perform the function. This design also incorporates historical background. Each poem is introduced with a brief historical circumstances under which it was written. The theoretical framework by Forché provides the interpretive lens through which the poems are read.

3.2. Data Collection

The primary texts for this study consist of eight poems: four by Mahmoud Darwish published between 1964-1984 and four by Refaat Alareer between 2012-2023. The Darwish corpus includes "Identity Card" (1964), "To My Mother" (c. 1966), "I Come from There" (1984), and "The Earth Is Closing In On Us" (1984). The Alareer corpus includes "Freshly Baked Souls" (2012), "I Am You" (2012), "And We Live On," and "If I Must Die" (2011, widely circulated 2023). The four Alareer poems are drawn from the posthumous anthology *If I Must Die: Poetry and Prose* which was published by OR Books in 2024 following his death in an Israeli airstrike on December 7, 2023.

The Darwish poems are drawn from published English translations which are selected for their scholarly credibility and accessibility. "Identity Card" is taken from the translation by Denys Johnson-Davies, published in *BRIQ Belt and Road Initiative Quarterly* (vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 86-87). "To My Mother" is taken from the translation by A. Z. Foreman available through the Palestine Poster Project Archives. "I Come from There" and "The Earth Is Closing On Us" are taken from the translation by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché in *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems* (University of California Press, 2013). These translations are the primary scholarly edition of Darwish's work in English and is the version most widely used in academic study of his poetry.

3.3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs theoretical framework drawn from the introduction of two landmark anthologies of American poet and Editor Carolyn Forché: *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (W. W. Norton, 1993) and *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English, 1500-2001* (W. W. Norton, 2014). *Against Forgetting's* introduction established witness poetry as a distinct literary category. And *Poetry of Witness* extended that project and deepened the theoretical account of what witness reading and writing actually do. Together, these two texts provide the most rigorous theoretical account of witness poetry. And they also provide the conceptual vocabulary necessary for reading the selected poems of Mahmoud Darwish and Refaat Alareer.

Traditional literary criticism often categorizes poetry as either "personal" (belonging to the private realm of emotion, lyricism and domesticity) or "political" (belonging to the public realm of the state, ideology and protest). Forché (1993) argues that this categorization is inadequate for understanding poetry produced under extreme historical pressures. Thus, she introduces a "third space," which she calls the "social." The social is the sphere in which the boundary between private life and political violence has been collapsed. It is the space of extremity, defined by conditions such as "exile, state censorship, political persecution... military occupation, warfare, and assassination" (Forché, *Against Forgetting*

agai30). In this space, the poet's personal suffering is inextricably linked to state violence. And thus the poetry becomes witness poetry. The witness poetry does not merely protest political conditions, nor does it retreat into private grief. But it serves as a testament to the experience of survival within this crushed social space. For Darwish and Alareer, the Israeli military occupation, the blockade of Gaza and the condition of exile represent the ultimate environments of extremity.

Based on Forché's theoretical writing across both anthologies, witness poetry performs a set of identifiable functions in times of historical extremity. This study draws on six of these functions as its primary analytical tools. And applies them to each of the selected poems to reveal how each poem performs particular function. Each function is described below.

3.3.1. Evidentiary Trace

The first and most foundational function positions the poem as physical evidence of historical extremity. In situations where those in power seek to destroy both people and their stories, Forché argues that the poem "exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence" (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 31). It is not merely a representation of an event but carries what she calls "the trace of extremity" within its lines. It functions as a proof that suffering occurred when all other forms of record have been suppressed or destroyed. She states this directly: "Poem as trace, poem as evidence" (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 31). This function is especially significant in the Palestinian context, where the systematic political denial of Palestinian historical presence has made poetry one of the few surviving archives of lived experience.

3.3.2. Poetic Memorial

Forché observes that oppressive regimes rely on what she following Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno describes as "a superstitious worship of oppressive force and by a concomitant reliance on oblivion" to normalize their violence (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 32). Witness poetry resists this enforced forgetting by functioning as a "poetic memorial" (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 31). It insists on keeping the historical record open. This forgetfulness, as Forché notes following Adorno, "is willful and isolating: it drives wedges between the individual and the collective fate to which he or she is forced to submit" (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 32). The witness poem refuses this isolation by preserving what happened in the permanence of language. It ensures that the protest against violence is not absorbed into the oblivion that power depends upon.

3.3.3. Restoration of the Individual

During wars, political violence reduces persons to categories, numbers, and abstractions. Forché writes: "The poetry of witness reclaims the social from the political and in so doing defends the individual against illegitimate forms of coercion" (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 45). When people are reduced to "the enemy," "the detainee," or the anonymous statistic of displacement and death, witness poetry insists on the face and the name behind the abstraction. It restores the singular person with a specific voice, lineage and inner life. This is not simply a humanising gesture but a form of political resistance. The poem that names a specific person, a specific home, a specific grief and thus commits an act of defiance against the systems that require people to remain nameless.

3.3.4. Communal Urgency

Forché identifies certain poetic modes like direct address, letters, and communal first-person plural, as "communal forms, ways of writing that stress the interpersonal aspects of poetry, the public side of literature" (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 36). These forms "underline the collective urgency that propels a literature of the social" (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 36). It creates what Forché describes as "a shared sense of humanity and collective resistance" (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 46). The witness poem does not speak for a solitary individual but as a voice within and to a community. It builds bonds of solidarity between writer, subject, and reader. In the Palestinian poetic tradition this communal voice has both literary and political significance. The collective "we" refuses the isolation that occupation and displacement seek to impose.

3.3.5. Habitable World

The fifth function addresses what witness poetry does in the face of destruction. Forché uses Hannah Arendt's argument that "the resistance to terror is what keeps the world habitable." She quotes Arendt's observation that "the holes of oblivion do not exist" because "one man will always be left alive to tell the story" (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 46). Within this framework, witness poetry "renders life possible in communal situations" (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 47). This function refuses to accept annihilation as the end of world. This function does not depend on hope in any usual sense. It just requires the insistence that life continues. And this insistence acts as resistance to terror. The resistance to terror is itself, as Forché argues through Arendt, is an act that "renders life possible" and keeps the earth a place fit for human habitation (Forché, *Against Forgetting* 47).

3.3.6. Reader as Witness

The sixth function shifts attention from the poem's writer to its reader. It argues that the act of reading is itself an ethical event. Forché describes witness poetry as fundamentally "a mode of reading rather than of writing" (Forché, *Poetry of Witness* 26). In this mode the reader is drawn into a direct encounter with the experience of the other. She argues that "the poem makes present to us the experience of the other; the poem is the experience, rather than a symbolic representation" (Forché, *Poetry of Witness* 46). Reading witness poetry is not learning about suffering from a safe distance; it is undergoing an encounter with it. This encounter marks the reader ethically: "when we read the poem as witness, we are marked by it and become ourselves witnesses to what it has made present before us" (Forché, *Poetry of Witness* 46). This marking carries a responsibility that Forché drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, calls "an awakening signifying a responsibility for the other" (Forché, *Poetry of Witness* 39). She describes it as "an infinite responsibility for the other one" (Forché, *Poetry of Witness* 46). The consequence of this process as Forché states is that through witness reading, "the text we read becomes a living archive" (Forché, *Poetry of Witness* 46).

The six functions outlined above are connected with each other. A single poem may perform more than one function at the same time. However, as the following analysis demonstrates, in each poem one or two functions are most important than the others. Therefore, this analysis identifies these dominant functions and explores them in detail rather than applying all functions.

4. Analysis

4.1. Mahmoud Darwish and the Poetry of Witness

Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) wrote across the most turbulent years of Palestinian political history. When he was six years old, his family fled from Birwa during the Nakba of 1948. When his family returned months later they found their village destroyed. He grew up as "present absentee", internally displaced Palestinians within Israel's border. Later, as a grown poet, he experienced the 1967 Six-Day War, exile and displacement, the rise of the Palestinian national movement, the 1982 Siege of Beirut, the First Intifada, and the Oslo Accords. These are not simply the biographical facts about Darwish's life. They are the very conditions of extremity: "exile, state censorship, political persecution...military occupation, warfare" (Against Forgetting 30) that makes his poetry, poetry of witness.

This chapter applies Forché's framework to four of Darwish's poems: "Identity Card" (1964), "To My Mother" (1966), "I Come from There" (1984) and "The Earth Is Closing In On Us" (1984). Each poem is analyzed through the specific functions it most clearly performs.

4.1.1. "Identity Card" (1964)

"Identity Card" was written in 1964. It was a period during which Palestinian citizens were living under Israeli military administration. The Israeli military administration required Palestinians to carry identity papers at all times. In this context, the identity card was not a neutral document of identity anymore. It was a tool of surveillance that made Palestinians a suspect in their own land. Darwish's poem 'Identity Card' responds to this directly and act as evidence to how Israel attempted to erase Palestinian's identity. Forché writes that a witness poem "exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence" when powers seek to destroy people and their stories (Against Forgetting 31). Darwish achieves this by structuring poem as a direct command to an unseen Israeli officer by Palestinian. He orders them to "Write down! I am an Arab / And my identity card number is fifty thousand" (Darwish). By speaking the number aloud and demanding it be written down, the speaker rescues it from the state's archive and places it inside the poem, where it cannot be erased. Later, the speaker accuses, "You have stolen the orchards of my ancestors / And the land which I cultivated / Along with my children" (Darwish). These lines record the economic and geographic violence inflicted on his family. And when the speaker adds, "you left nothing for us / Except for these rocks" (Darwish), this poem becomes a proof and evidence of all the sufferings.

The poem also restores the individual. When the speaker turns to his lineage. "My father ... descends from the family of the plough / Not from a privileged class / And my grandfather ... was a farmer / Neither well-bred, nor well-born! / teaches me the pride of the sun / Before teaching me how to read" (Darwish). These lines restore a specific person to view in the way that Forché describes: they give back the "face" behind the category. Through these details, this poem establishes that this was not just one of thousands but a specific human being with specific voice and history. By forcing the oppressors to acknowledge his family, his hard labor and his connection to earth, Darwish successfully restores the individual that identity card was designed to erase. Through evidentiary trace and restoration of the individual, "Identity Card" transforms the very document of subjugation into a weapon of resistance and testimony.

4.1.2. "To My Mother" (1966)

On the surface, "To My Mother" is a simple poem about longing for a mother's presence. But this poem was written in 1960s when Darwish was in internal exile. And within these political conditions, the simplicity becomes more meaningful. During wars, humans are reduced to numbers statistics and categories such as five hundred prisoners, seven hundred in exile etc. In this poem Darwish talks about one person and his relation with his mother. And in doing so "reclaims the social from the political" and defends the individual against coercion (Forché, Against Forgetting 45).

The opening lines list sensory details: "Dearly I yearn for my mother's bread, / My mother's coffee, / Mother's brushing touch" (Darwish). Each item mentioned here is concrete and specific. Bread is not any food in general; it is made by his mother's hands. Coffee is not a beverage; it is prepared in his mother's kitchen. The "brushing touch" is a gesture that cannot be generalized. These details restore the mother as a unique person, not a symbol. These details give the reader not a displaced Palestinian but a particular son who misses the exact feeling of a particular woman's hand. Darwish then asks his mother to "Fasten us with a lock of hair, / with thread strung from the back of your dress" (Darwish). A lock of hair and a thread are not any political rights but are ordinary worthless objects. But they are her mother's. They carry her scent, her touch, her presence. By mentioning these gentle domestic details, Darwish insists on singular person behind the political category of prisoner. And how that one person is longing for her mother. This poem is insisting that this is a specific human being, not an allegory.

The poem also makes world a habitable world. The phrase "if I return" appears twice across the poem's middle stanzas. Forché, drawing on Arendt, argues that witness poetry "renders life possible" (Against Forgetting 47) by refusing to accept that the world has been wholly closed off. In this poem, the speaker imagines returning home but not as a triumphant hero but as fuel

for his mother's oven or a clothesline stretched in her hands. Now, these are humble, domestic uses of a dead body. They transform death from an end into a continued presence in the mother's daily life. It shows that even death cannot end hope. And even his death can be useful for his mother. And that hope makes world habitable. Through restoration of the individual and habitable world, "My Mother" shows that witness poetry doesn't always survive by resisting oppression, but sometimes through preserving identity.

4.1.3. "I Come from There" (1984)

By 1984, Darwish was living in exile following the Israeli siege. After Beirut siege, the Palestinian national movement had lost its last organized territorial base. In this context, the poem's opening sentence: "I come from there, and memories are what I have" (Darwish, "I Belong" 34) is more of a statement of resistance rather than of fact. For years the Israeli state had always denied the existence of a prior Palestinian presence on the land. Golda Meir's famous 1969 claim that "there is no such thing as a Palestinian people" was perhaps the most public version of this position. It also appeared in property laws, in the erasure of Arabic village names, in the demolition of houses. Thus, against this erasure, "I come from there" is the poem's act of memorial

This is where the poem performs Forché's poetic memorial function. As Forché argues that witness poetry resists the "forced erasure" through which power normalizes its violence and that modernity is marked by a "concomitant reliance on oblivion" (Against Forgetting 32) that witness poetry must actively oppose. To fight this, this poem insists on keeping the historical record open. The poet begins by stating "I was born just like you; I have a mother and a home with many windows" (Darwish, "I Belong" 34). By listing specific stolen elements of his life he refuses to give up on it. He talks about mother, brother, home and prison. By capturing these images in the text, Darwish protects the memories that oppressors try to erase. This poem ensures that the protest against violence is not forgotten. It keeps the memory of land alive.

This poem also calls the reader directly into the position of witness. The poem begins with an act of equivalence "I was born just like you" (Darwish, "I Belong" 34) that directly addresses the reader, insisting on shared humanity. This pronoun "you" creates an immediate bond between the reader and the writer. In this way, the reader is forced to recognize that they are the same kind of being. They both have a mother. They both have a home. All these details closes distance between the reader and speaker. This move is deliberate.

The poem's final lines bring both the memorial and the witness functions to a point: "I learned each language suitable for the court of blood so that I may break the rules. I learned the entire language, then disassembled it, in order to compose a single word: homeland" (Darwish, "I Belong" 34). The speaker has learned every language available in the world as it exists under occupation: the language of law, of negotiation, of petition, of political argument. He has learned all of it and taken it apart. What is left, after dismantling every official form of speech, is a single word that should not have needed to be assembled from fragments in the first place. The word "homeland" is not a grand political declaration here. It shows sacrifice and hardships. For the reader, encountering this line is to understand something about what it costs to maintain a claim to belonging when every institutional form of that claim has been denied. Forché writes that the poem "makes present to us the experience of the other" (Poetry of Witness 46), and this is precisely what these closing lines achieve: they make the reader present to the effort, not just the fact of Palestinian cultural survival.

4.1.4. "The Earth Is Closing In On Us" (1984)

"The Earth Is Closing on Us" was written in response to the 1982 Israeli siege of Beirut. And that forced evacuation of thousands of Palestinians from Lebanon that eliminated the last organized Palestinian refuge outside the occupied territories. The poem opens as: "The Earth is closing on us / pushing us through the last passage / and we tear off on our limbs to pass through" (Darwish, "Earth" 36) which is a devastating portrait of an extreme physical and psychological suffocation during war. The image of tearing off limbs is not hyperbole but it is violent and precise. And it is this precision that makes the poem function as an evidentiary trace. As Forché writes that the witness poem carries "the trace of extremity within its lines" (Poetry of Witness 25). During sieges, people are forced through narrow passages such as military checkpoints, gaps in walls, tunnels. And to survive, they may have to abandon belongings, leave behind the wounded, or contort their bodies beyond human limits. This poem records that bodily sacrifice of Palestinians as a trace. The limb is not a metaphor; it is a real part of a real body that has been torn.

The word "last" also act as an evidence of hopelessness in this poem. It appears five times: the last passage, the last frontiers, the last sky, the last breath of air, and the last passage again at the end. This repetition is not just for repetition sake. Each use of "last" removes one more possibility for existence or escape. And when speaker asks "Where should we go after the last frontiers? / Where should the birds fly after the last sky? / Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air?" (Darwish, "Earth" 36). It documents an environment where even the fundamental rights of dream and survival are violently choked off. And through the repetition of "lasts," it shows how people can be brought to a point where no option remains. This is not a description of hopelessness but a record of a historical situation in which hopelessness was the rational response.

The poem also shows communal urgency. There is no use of "I" in this poem at all. The speaker always uses "we" like "we tear off our limbs," "We will write our names with scarlet steam," "We will die here" (Darwish, "Earth" 36). Here the choice of "we" over "I" is not simply a linguistic choice. Forché identifies communal forms as those that "underline the collective urgency that propels a literature of the social" (Against Forgetting 36). And the poem ends by bringing both functions together: "We will die here, here in the last passage. / Here and here our blood will plant its olive tree" (Darwish, "Earth" 36). The olive tree has appeared across Darwish's earlier poems as a marker of Palestinian culture which is a communal possession often owned by a village or a family line. However, here the olive tree is planted by blood, which means that it is planted by death. By planting it with collective blood, the poem transforms death into a shared inheritance. The blood that plants the olive tree is evidence. It is the final evidentiary act of a people who have been pushed through the last passage and who, in dying, ensure that the fact of their dying will not go unrecorded.

Through evidentiary trace and communal urgency, "The Earth Is Closing In On Us" shows that witness poetry under siege must speak with one voice, bearing the physical marks of violence while turning the very ground of death into a future garden.

4.2. Refaat Alareer and the Poetry of Witness

Refaat Alareer (1979-2023) was a poet, academic and editor who was born, raised, and educated in Gaza. He spent his life inside the territory he wrote about. He taught English literature at the Islamic University of Gaza and used his writing as a form of resistance against Israeli military operations. He was killed in an Israeli airstrike on December 7, 2023 along with members of his family. This biographical fact is not peripheral to the analysis that follows. It means that Alareer's poems were written under conditions that what Forché describes as "conditions of historical and social extremity" (Against Forgetting 30) that basically makes Alareer poetry as poetry of witness.

This chapter applies Forché's framework to four of Alareer's poems. The four selected poems are "Freshly Baked Souls" (2012), "I Am You" (2012), "If I Must Die" (written before his death in 2023), and "And We Live On". Each of the selected poems is examined through the specific functions it most fully performs.

4.2.1. "Freshly Baked Souls" (2012)

"Freshly Baked Souls" was written on November 20, 2012 during Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense. It was a military campaign that killed more than 160 Palestinians in eight days. This poem captures the horror of bombardment. The poem opens by describing children watching what they think is a spectacle in the sky: "As fire balls and sparks descend, / And the little ones rejoice, / Look up, and cheer, unable to comprehend" (Alareer 141). Through the lens of Carolyn Forché's framework, these lines act as an evidentiary trace "exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence" (Against Forgetting 31). These lines create a stark contrast. For normal children living outside of conflict zones, bright objects descending from the sky are playful phenomena like fireworks or shooting stars. However, for the Palestinian child, these lights are lethal aerial bombardments. The children look up and cheer, "unable to comprehend" that they will soon "be blown." This records the exact psychological and physical horror in which the population is trapped. Furthermore, this poem utilizes the metaphor of freshly baked souls for human death bodies. While freshly baked bread is daily breakfast for common people. Here, for Palestinians freshly backed souls are more common than freshly baked breads. By documenting a reality where human beings are slaughtered at the rate of baked goods and served to the "hollow minds" of the oppressors, this poem serves as undeniable evidence of the systematic massacre.

The poem's second stanza shifts focus from the children to Israeli forces and this is what makes this poem as poetic memorial. As when anytime people will read poem, this poem will remind them of those oppressors who were watching Palestinian deaths with appetite, "Who wants freshly baked flesh for breakfast? I have just eaten but crave for more" (Alareer 141-42). These lines are among the most disturbing in Alareer's work, and their purpose is precise. They preserve, in the poem's permanent record, the moral condition of those who watched the bombardment from positions of comfort and safety. Forché argues that witness poetry resists the "forced erasure" through which power normalizes its violence and relies on the "concomitant reliance on oblivion" that modernity enables (Against Forgetting 32). The poem denies that erasure by writing the watchers into the same record as the watched. It ensures that the indifference of those who observed without acting is not forgotten alongside the names of those who died.

4.2.2. "I Am You" (2012)

"I Am You" was written on November 1, 2012 during a period of escalating military pressure on Gaza. This poem is addressed directly to an Israeli soldier Rather than addressing a Palestinian community or a general reader. This poem draws a tragic parallel between trauma of Jewish people and the ongoing oppression of Palestinians and demonstrate that oppressed through a tragic twist of history has evolved into the oppressors. The opening is specific: "The butt of your M-16 on my cheekbone / The yellow patch it left / The bullet-shaped scar expanding" (Alareer 122). These are not generalized images of suffering but they are the record of a specific interaction between a specific body and a specific weapon. The M-16, the cheekbone, the yellow

patch: these details restore the Palestinian speaker in the precise way that Forché describes. She writes that witness poetry restores the "face" behind the abstraction, defending the individual against the "illegitimate forms of coercion" (Against Forgetting 45) that reduce people to categories. The poem begins with a face that has been struck and in doing so insists on the reality of the person who was struck. This person was not just one of thousands, he was a specific human being with a specific voice. The speaker's refusal to surrender his agency demonstrates a powerful defense of the individual spirit against state oppression.

However, what makes this poem's restoration of the individual unique is that it also restore the individuality of enemy's soldier. The soldier is not "the enemy" or "the occupier." He is someone whose mother and father were killed. The line "The very same bullet / That had killed your Mom / And killed your Dad" (Alareer 123) gives the soldier a family history, a trauma, a past. The poem also connects speaker's present condition to the historical suffering of the Jewish people under Nazism: "Like it did to you / 70 years ago I am just you" (Alareer 122-23). This is not a simple equation of suffering. It demonstrates how violence reproduce itself throughout history. The yellow patch mentioned in beginning connects to the yellow Star of David that Jews were forced to wear under Nazi rule. The bullet-shaped scar expanding "like a swastika" across the speaker's face makes the same connection. The poem's central claim that "I am just you" is its most radical act of individual restoration. Because it refuses to allow either the Palestinian or the Israeli to remain an abstraction. It says: you were a specific person who suffered a specific persecution and I am a specific person suffering a specific persecution, and these facts are related. The individual is restored on both sides, and the restoration is what makes the poem's central claim legible.

The poem also builds toward a habitable world in its closing stanzas through a series of conditional questions. He says, "I do not hate you. / I want to help you stop hating / And killing me" (Alareer 124) This is a radical gesture. During conditions of extreme violence, it is expected from opponents to hate each other. But the speaker's refuses to hate. He asks the soldier to close his eyes and look in the mirror. The mirror is not a weapon. It is a tool for self-recognition. The world becomes habitable in this poem at the exact moment when recognition is possible, when the person holding the gun sees himself in the person it is pointed at. That belief, however fragile, is an act of world-building. The speaker's request "Would you stop shooting? / For a moment? / Would you?" (Alareer 125) – is an attempt to clear a space for listening. These questions are not naive. They are asked by someone whose cheekbone has been struck, who knows what the gun can do. But they keep open the possibility that the world could be otherwise, which is what Forché, drawing on Arendt, identifies as the essential function of witness poetry: rendering "life possible" (Against Forgetting 47) by refusing to accept that violence is the only available condition. Through restoration of the individual and habitable world, "I Am You" shows that witness poetry can build a shared humanity even with the person holding the gun.

4.2.3. "If I Must Die" (2013)

"If I Must Die" is the poem for which Alareer is now most widely known. Alareer was killed on December 7, 2023. And within days of his death the poem was shared across social media platforms, translated into over forty languages, read aloud at vigils, projected on buildings, and quoted in speeches at the United Nations. This circulation is not incidental but the poem itself is a set of instructions for exactly this kind of transmission. Its opening lines are the most direct call in Alareer's entire body of work: "If I must die, / you must live / to tell my story" (Alareer 38). Here, the speaker does not say you may live, or I hope you will live, or please remember me. He says you must live. From the first line, the poem places a clear and complete responsibility on the reader.

This is how the poem performs what Forché calls the reader-as-witness function. Forché writes that witness poetry is "a mode of reading rather than of writing" (Poetry of Witness 26) and that reading the poem marks the reader, making them bear "responsibility for the other" (Poetry of Witness 39). In most witness poems, the readers become witness through the act of reading. But this poem directly places that responsibility on readers. The poem does not allow the reader to simply be an observer. It gives them a specific task to tell the story, sell the things, buy cloth, make a kite and make it white with a long tail. These are concrete instructions. The reader who has received them cannot claim not to know what is being asked. The line "my kite you made" (Alareer 39) explicitly transfers ownership of the kite from the poet to the reader. The reader's hands will cut the cloth, tie the strings and launch the kite. The reader of this poem is marked by the responsibility to make a kite. The child who sees the kite "thinks for a moment an angel is there / bringing back love" (Alareer 39) that child's belief depends entirely on the reader's action. If the reader does nothing, the child sees nothing.

The poem's second function, the restoration of the individual, is performed through the figure of the child in Gaza and the absent father. "So that a child, somewhere in Gaza / while looking heaven in the eye / awaiting his dad who left in a blaze / and bid no one farewell / not even to his flesh / not even to himself" (Alareer 38). The father who left in a blaze is a specific person and not a type. The detail that he bid farewell to no one, not even to his own flesh, not even to himself, restores his death to its full human weight. The child waiting and looking up at the sky is equally specific. He is a child in Gaza and not one of the thousands child. In this way this poem restores both father and child.

4.2.4. "And We Live On" (2024)

"And We Live On" was written during Gaza genocide 2023. This poem describes daily life of Palestinians under Israeli aerial bombardment and drone surveillance. The speaker lists what Palestinians endure daily. The poem begins with three short lines that perform a precise act of documentation, "Another day in Gaza / Another day in Palestine / A day in prison" (Alareer 84). The word "another" is very important in these opening lines. It signals repetition. And the fact that this is not an exceptional day but one in a series is what this poem sets out to record. This poem doesn't document a single atrocity but it documents a condition, the daily, normalized experience of living inside a territory under military siege.

The lines, "Israel's very much identified flying objects / That we see more than our family and friends" (Alareer 84) refers to drone surveillance which by the time Alareer was writing had become a part of daily life in Gaza. The phrase "very much identified" is not just a phrase, it is a record of violence gnawing at their lives. Similarly, the lines "Like lead / Cast upon the head / As we sleep" (Alareer 84) is a reference to Operation Cast Lead which was Israeli military operation of 2008-2009 that killed over 1,400 Palestinians. Here, Alareer is not only describing present conditions but placing them within a sequence of operations, each one named and documented. As Forché writes that witness poetry carries "the trace of extremity within its lines" (Poetry of Witness 25). And this poem carries that trace through the record of specific operations, specific weapons, and specific daily conditions and describe it in terms of lived experience.

The poem uses "we" throughout. As Forché describes communal forms as those that "underline the collective urgency that propels a literature of the social" (Against Forgetting 36), building "a shared sense of humanity and collective resistance" (Against Forgetting 46). In this poem, community speaks as one body. The urgency is communal because every line describes a threat that applies to everyone equally. The flying objects are seen by all. The death sentences are cast upon every head. The birds of death hover two meters from every breath. The phrase "Clinging to life even harder / Every time a dear one's life / Is forcibly rooted up" (Alareer 85) shows that the community's survival is a collective act. And each death makes the survivors cling harder to each other.

The poem's final world habitable: "We live. / We live. / We do" (Alareer 85). This repetition across three lines is not just for emphasis. Each repetition reminds why living is impossible: the drones, the airstrikes, the death sentences delivered like lead, the prayers blocked on their way to God. But Against all of it, the poem asserts "We live" (Alareer 85). Forché, drawing on Arendt, argues that witness poetry renders the world habitable by insisting that people did not comply entirely with terror, that some people refused to be wholly destroyed (Against Forgetting 46-47). It does not describe what makes life worth living. It does not offer consolation or hope. It simply states three times over that life continues.

4.3. Same Functions, Different Violence

Mahmoud Darwish and Refaat Alareer wrote from the same tradition of Palestinian witness poetry. And their poems perform the same functions that Carolyn Forché identifies across her framework. Both poets document suffering, resist erasure, speak to collective experience and draw the reader into a position of witness. Yet reading their poems alongside each other reveals a significant difference in the nature of those functions. Darwish wrote from displacement, from the condition of a people whose land was being taken, whose identity was being denied, and whose existence was being erased from official history. Alareer wrote from annihilation, from inside a territory under active bombardment, where the question was not where Palestinians would live but whether they would live at all. This distinction does not produce different literary traditions.

Both poets utilize the evidentiary trace acting as "the sole trace of an occurrence". But they record entirely different manifestations of violence. Darwish's "Identity Card" records an ID number: "fifty thousand." That number is a bureaucratic trace of military administration, a document that controls movement and defines legal status. This poem acts as a receipt for stolen property and officially record the economic and geographic violence inflicted on his family. He testifies that the state stole the "orchards of my ancestors" and left nothing "Except for these rocks". Alareer's evidentiary trace, however, records physical slaughter. In "Freshly Baked Souls," Alareer was not documenting what was taken but what was destroyed. He documents the photo album that must be buried with the dead which is not a record of stolen property but the last remaining trace of a family that no longer exists. He writes of aerial bombardments turning human beings into "freshly grilled balls of flesh". Darwish proves that a people existed and were removed. Alareer proves that a people exist and are being murdered.

To defend the individual against "illegitimate forms of coercion" both poets restore specific human faces to the abstraction of victimhood yet they use contrasting mechanisms. In Darwish's "To My Mother," the speaker restores himself and his mother as living, feeling people: "Dearly I yearn for my mother's bread, / My mother's coffee, / Mother's brushing touch" (Darwish, "To My Mother"). In Alareer's "If I Must Die," the individual being restored is already figured as absent. He is the father who "left in a blaze" and "bid no one farewell / not even to his flesh / not even to himself" (Alareer 38).. Alareer is not restoring a living exile but giving posthumous specificity to someone already killed. In Darwish the coercion is the removal of a person from their land. In Alareer it is the removal of a person from life itself.

Both poets use communal urgency, the collective "we" but the community they are speaking to is different in each case. In "The Earth Is Closing In On Us," Darwish's "we" speaks from a state of extreme compression: "we tear off our limbs," "We will write our names with scarlet steam," "We will die here" (Darwish, "The Earth Is Closing In On Us"). This is the voice of a people who have been expelled from one place after another and who are running out of ground to stand on. In Alareer's "And We Live On," the communal "we" is not dispersed but enclosed. The poem's community is not running out of places to go but it is trapped inside a territory being systematically destroyed from above. In Darwish, that urgency comes from the desperation of having nowhere left to go. In Alareer, it comes from the impossibility of leaving at all.

The reader-as-witness function, which Forché describes as a "mode of reading rather than of writing" that marks the reader and calls them to "an awakening signifying a responsibility for the other" (Poetry of Witness 26, 39), is the function that most clearly shows the shift in the ethical demands the two poets place on their audiences. In "I Come from There," by highlighting the ordinary similarities that connect the speaker with the reader, the reader is turned into witness: "I was born just like you; I have a mother and a home with many windows" (Darwish, "I Come from There"). The reader is asked to recognize that the speaker is a person like them. And through that recognition to feel the weight of what has been taken. The ethical demand is to not forget that this person existed and that this dispossession happened. In Alareer's "If I Must Die," the poet does not ask the reader to understand, it gives them instructions to buy cloth, cut strings, make a kite, make it white with a long tail. The responsibility being assigned is not to remember but to act and to act in a specific way that will produce a specific result for a specific child.

5. Discussions And Conclusion

5.1. Discussion and Findings

Carolyn Forché writes that in the poetry of witness, "the poem makes present to us the experience of the other, the poem is the experience, rather than a symbolic representation. When we read the poem as witness, we are marked by it and become ourselves witnesses to what it has made present before us. Language incises the page, wounding it with testimonial presence, and the reader is marked by encounter with that presence. Witness begets witness. The text we read becomes a living archive" (Forché, Poetry of Witness, 46). The primary objective of this thesis was to apply this framework to Mahmoud Darwish and Refaat Alareer to uncover exactly how their poetry constructs this living archive across different historical periods. And ultimately, to answer the central question: what is the purpose of wartime literature?

The analysis of the poems by these poets established a clear pattern. The analysis proves that both Darwish and Alareer's use witness poetry for same purpose. For instance to act as evidentiary trace, restoration of the individual, communal urgency, habitable world and reader as witness. But the themes of their works differ because they reflect different historical moments. Darwish's poetry explores themes of displacement, identity, exile and loss of homeland. Alareer's poetry explore contemporary realities such as bombardment, mass death and destruction of civilian life. The tradition did not change. The violence did. And what the comparison reveals is that witness poetry is not a fixed form. It reshapes its strategies while preserving its purpose.

This finding directly answers the central question: what is the role of poetry during atrocities? The analysis shows that poetry does not stop bombs or return stolen land. What it does is more fundamental. It preserves the evidence of what happened, the names of the dead, the humanity of the individual and the demand for justice. It does this by performing the functions that Forché identified. It records traces that would otherwise vanish. It memorialises the dead against the state's reliance on oblivion. It restores the individual against the state's reduction of people to numbers. It builds communal solidarity against the state's isolation of individuals. It constructs a habitable world against the state's destruction of all habitability. And it draws the reader into ethical responsibility against the state's assumption that no one is watching. Readers who read these poems become witnesses in their own right and carry the poem forward. Witness begets witness. The archive stays alive because it keeps producing new witnesses in every era. And through all these themes, the text becomes exactly what Forché describes. Not a stored document but an active archive. As every time someone read it, he was moved by it. This is the purpose of wartime literature. Not to record what happened. But to ensure that those who were not there are made to feel the weight of it and are given no choice but to respond.

5.2. Limitations

This study acknowledges several constraints in its approach. The first is that the study claims that witness poetry activates ethical response in readers but does not empirically measure that response. This study also rely on just one theoretical lens. By just using Forché's model of witness poetry, this study excludes other productive lenses that would yield different readings of the same poems. The application Arabic poetic frameworks could have challenge or deepen the conclusions this study reaches. The third limitation is temporal. This study was produced while the Gaza genocide was still ongoing. The full historical record of both the violence and the literary responses to it is not yet complete.

5.3. Recommendations for Future Research

This study opens several directions that future scholarship could pursue. Firstly, the comparative framework applied here to Darwish and Alareer could be extended to other Palestinian poets whose work spans different phases of the conflict. The witness poetics framework could be applied comparatively to other contemporary conflicts like the ongoing war in Iran and Sudan, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Finally, future research should examine how witness literature might move beyond the production of ethical feeling toward accountable and transformative political response.

5.4. Conclusion

This study is animated by a central question that wartime makes unavoidable: what is the role of literature during atrocity? The four chapters of analysis this study builds converge on a single, clear answer: witness poetry does not document suffering but transmits it. As Forché describes when she writes that witness begets witness, meaning that each reader who is marked becomes part of the chain of transmission the poem sets in motion, carrying it forward to the next reader and the next crisis. The poems of Mahmoud Darwish and Refaat Alareer constitute that chain, in that their poems trace the evidence of suffering that official history attempts to erase, make the world habitable when violence tries to close it off entirely, ensure that what happened is remembered, restore the individual human being behind the statistic, and position the reader as a witness who cannot claim not to know. These are not incidental qualities of accomplished poetry but the specific functions that Forché's framework identifies. The comparative analysis contributes one further finding: that while both poets work within the same witness tradition, the era of violence shapes how those functions are carried out. That adaptation is precisely what wartime literature is for: not to record what happened to those who suffered, but to ensure that no one who encounters the record is allowed to remain untouched by it, because these poems do not let the reader look away, and because they become, in Forché's exact phrase, "a living archive" (Forché, *Poetry of Witness* 46), one that remains alive for as long as there are readers who open them and are changed by what they find.

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