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## “Trust neither the Horse, nor Modernity”: Explicating Mahmoud Darwish’s Allusions to Babylon, Sodom and Ancient Indians in “Counterpoint: Edward Said”

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the allusions to Babylon, Sodom and the Red Indians in Mahmoud Darwish’s tribute to Edward Said, which he entitled “Counterpoint.” This paper argues that these allusions add a new understanding to the significant contribution of Darwish’s poetry to postcolonial literature. It shows these allusions suggest that the postcolonial narrative is an encompassing narrative that is continuously renewed and retold by meta-narratives by authors whose peoples experienced colonialism for two reasons: first, colonialism has never ended, but it continues with new shapes; and second, allusions in postcolonial literature aim at reciprocating “postcolonial solidarity.” This paper further demonstrates that these allusions gesture toward sharing the belief that indigenous stories and struggles are more powerful and rooted when waged together against the colonialist negation of the history and culture of native people.

### 摘要

本文考察了马哈茂德·达尔维什 (Mahmoud Darwish) 致爱德华·赛义德 (Edward Said) 题为“对位”的悼词中的各种互文性实例。本文认为, 这首诗中的互文性对后殖民文学中互文性的意义作出了贡献, 并增加了相应的新认识。研究者们倾向于把后殖民写作中的互文性理解为西方世界对前殖民地国家的文化, 文学和其他形式的影响, 反之亦然。相反, 这首诗中的互文性表明, 后殖民叙事是一种包罗万象的叙事。这种叙事是由那些被殖民或非殖民化的作家所预言的元叙事在当下被更新和复述的: 第一, 我们仍然生活在一个后殖民世界, 殖民主义从未结束, 但它继续以新的形式出现; 第二, 互文性意味着文学中的“后殖民团结”。本文认为, 后殖民主义写作中的互文性倾向于分享这样一个信念: 当殖民主义者对土著人民的历史和文化的否定共同进行时, 土著故事和斗争变得更加强大和根深蒂固。这里的互文性使殖民地的故事得以延续, 它使我们能够带着一种真正强烈的反抗身份感将故事推向未来。通过在文本中嵌入互文性元素, 后殖民主义作家有责任更新故事, 暗示我们如何与世界互动, 并预言后殖民时期。互文性将文本呈现为一个“成长, 进化, 永不停息的过程”。语境进一步使写作或阅读/接触文化, 历史和政治的过程成为一个积极的过程。

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## 1. Introduction

The Palestinian writers and intellectuals Mahmoud Darwish and Edward Said had a strong friendship that was demonstrated textually. The best example of the textual representation of this friendship is Darwish's tribute to Said, "Counterpoint: Edward Said," published in Arabic in 2003. In this tribute, Darwish recalls his friendship with Said, and the intellectual harmony they enjoyed before his death. Most importantly, Darwish highlights in this tribute the intellectual contributions of Edward Said to many domains of knowledge including postcolonial studies, the contributions that were informed in many cases by Darwish's poetry.<sup>1</sup> While this tribute makes many allusions, Darwish, repeatedly and significantly, alludes to Babylon, Sodom and Native American people, the Red Indians. Darwish treats these allusions in ways that reflect the mutual understanding of Darwish and Said for their importance in shedding light on the struggle of colonized people for self-determination. The significance of Darwish's allusions should therefore be explicated in this light.

Allusion has become an increasingly significant literary device and an important topic in literary criticism (Irwin 288). M. H. Abrams defines allusion as "a brief reference, explicit or indirect, to a person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage" (110). Abrams makes the claim that while allusion can be either explicit or implicit, it is brief. Therefore, the reader is responsible for making connections to understand its significance. According to Michael Leddy, "allusion-words typically describe a reference that invokes one or more associations of appropriate cultural material and brings them to bear upon a present context" (114). This requires the reader's efforts to elicit the cultural associations of the allusions and the significance of their usage in specific contexts. William Irwin elaborates that "additional associations are more than just typical; they are necessary for correct and complete understanding" (288). The point of allusion is therefore not limited to making a reference to a certain event, person, place, etc. We need to realize the unstated associations, which are implicit and indirect, to fully understand and appreciate the literary text and its themes.

Irwin theorizes that the author plays a significant role in determining these associations. He calls this "the intentionalist view": when an author makes a reference in his or her text that he or she consciously or unconsciously intends it to be an allusion to a significant place, person, event or story (289). In a close reading of the text, the reader recognizes the existence of allusions that the author intends consciously or unconsciously; that is, allusion necessarily "requires authorial intent" (291). The reader therefore should establish the connection made by the author between the text and what he or she alludes to. In other words, the reader plays a vital role in his or her understanding of the allusion, but this understanding should be "in accord with the author's intent" (293). John Campbell suggests that "allusions invite us to select from our mental library, knowledge which is not in the text itself and without which the writer's intention will not be fully communicated" (293). Consequently, in order to appropriately understand the allusion, the reader must bring to his or her mind things not explicitly stated in the text. In this sense, the reader must call to mind what the author intends him or her to call to his or her mind, although this information might not be readily available to every reader.

The analysis of the allusion requires an active, creative and close reading of the text. This close reading of the text, especially a short poem or passage, is called in literary (new) criticism explication, “*explication de texte*,” which is a literary approach that originated in late-nineteenth-century France. Ross C. Murfin and Supryia M. Ray define explication (close reading) as “the nuanced and thorough analysis of a literary text,” and it “places particular emphasis on the interrelationships among textual elements (such as allusions)” (65). Explication in this sense suggests accounting explicitly for what is implicit in the text.

This paper explicates the implicit significance of the historical allusions in Mahmoud Darwish’s tribute to Edward Said in an attempt to understand ways in which this poem contributes to postcolonial representations of the struggle of the oppressed for self-determination and justice. While Palestinian writers draw heavily on allusions, Darwish, in particular, is very famous for this literary style, and allusions in his poetry are impressively related to the subject matter of his poems. Although some researchers have already analyzed his tribute to Said, none of them studied the significance of these allusions in this text. In *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, Judith Butler discusses how Darwish and Said address the future in this poem, focusing on their political and humanist thoughts, and Rebecca Dyer, in her article “Poetry of Politics and Mourning: Mahmoud Darwish’s Genre-Transforming Tribute to Edward W. Said,” focuses on Darwish’s style and genre-transforming, and how Darwish borrows Said’s term counterpoint to discuss their shared attitude toward politics.

This paper examines the allusions to Babylon, Sodom and the Red Indians in Darwish’s “Counterpoint: Edward Said,” arguing that these allusions add a new understanding to the significant contribution of Darwish’s poetry to postcolonial literature. This paper shows these allusions suggest that the postcolonial narrative is ever-present since colonialism has never ended. This paper specifically demonstrates that allusions to Babylon, Sodom and the Red Indians in Darwish’s poem gesture toward sharing the belief that indigenous stories and struggles are more powerful and rooted when waged together against the colonialist negation of the history and culture of native people. The following sections therefore suggest that the religious and historical allusions in this tribute aim to retell the story of the oppressed, and prophesy the postcolonial stage.

## 2. Allusion to Babylon/Sodom

In “Counterpoint: Edward Said,” Darwish states that he met Edward Said in 2002 in New York which he describes as Babylon or Sodom. He begins the tribute with the following words:

New York/November/Fifth Avenue  
 The sun a plate of shredded metal I asked myself,  
 Estranged in the shadow:  
 Is it Babylon or Sodom? (Darwish 175)

Sodom was a city in ancient Palestine that was, according to religious texts, burned down as a punishment from God because its people disobeyed their prophet Lut ibn Haran who warned them against their sexual transgressions and other corrupt practices. The city therefore has become a symbol for self-inflicted destruction and for enraging the Lord. As

such, referencing Sodom carries the modern significance of loss and disintegration, much of which seems to be self-inflicted. The revelation suggests that the US will be destroyed because its people “committed sexual sins and engaged in homosexual activities” (Jude 1:7) and because it preaches gay culture to other nations. Similarly, Babylon is described in the Bible as a sinful country that misused its capital and wealth. God said about Babylon, “your merchants were the great men of the earth, for by your sorcery all the nations were deceived” (Revelation 18:23–24). Darwish seems to say that the US, which used to be a Christian state, has disobeyed, and thus enraged God. Darwish makes the prophecy of the destruction of America as something inevitable. Both of the sites he refers to (Babylon and Sodom) were destroyed, therefore recalling their memory invokes and awakens a tragic history that will repeat itself.

For [Darwish](#), the US is an imperialist world power that tries to disseminate its sins and vices. As he describes in “Madih Althel Alali,” “America is plague and plague is America” (9). Darwish argues that America is the cause of the suffering of human beings; it is the cause of the hardships and disasters. He also argues that America is the originator of the human misery and evil in this universe; it is controlling and guiding this suffering, so it will never end as far as America is in power. Darwish explains that America is leading colonialism and imperialism in the modern time, and it supports Israel’s attack against Palestine and many other Arab countries politically and financially. He states in the same poem that “we were awakened by the noise of the planes and the voice of America . . . America is behind the door,” the door of the Palestinian houses that Israel destroyed and evacuated the Palestinians from them (10). As Darwish describes in this poem, the US uses its financial power to deceive and destroy Arab countries, especially Palestine. Their financial and political support for Zionism sustained the establishment of Israel, the destruction of Palestine, and the continuation of the Palestinian displacement.

Darwish seems to suggest that the symbolic status of America in the present as the locus of power and tyranny stems from the bible. Some scholars have argued that this “mystery-Babylon/Sodomy” nation is America, provided that the Bible describes it as a melting pot of various nationalities, and is bordered by waters ([Coombes](#) 7). The Bible states that before the second coming of Jesus Christ, the world will be dominated by an oppressive nation that has an undefeatable military and a huge capital used to manipulate the presidents of other countries, and its power will be taken only by God. [Darwish](#) describes in “Madih Althel Alali” that all presidents around the world are begging the satisfaction of America and are thinking of it as the bringer of peace and justice; however, America does not listen to the pleas of the victims, and it is absurd to await peace from a state whose history is defined by tyranny.

Therefore, in “Counterpoint,” Darwish insists on describing the US as the new Sodom:

When I visited the new Sodom in the year 2002, he was opposing the war of Sodom against the people of Babylon and fighting cancer. The last epic hero, he defended Troy’s right to its share in the story ([Darwish](#) 182)

Darwish describes his visit to Said in New York in 2002, a year before his death. Darwish puts an emphasis on the textual fight of Said at the time against his own disease and US imperialism. For Darwish, Said, whom he describes as the last epic hero, noble, brave and

admired for his great achievements at many levels, continues his fight against the US imperial power, which is like cancer that devours other people's bodies/spaces. He gives Said the same image he gave himself, that of the Trojan hero who fights against the new Sodom. He expresses in an interview that

I consider myself a Trojan poet; the poet whose text was unfound by the human literary history ... I belong to Troy not because I am defeated, but because I am obsessed with writing the text of the absent, and I wished I was a victorious in the general sense. That is not to say that I belong to a defeated community; I instead examine my intention to act the role of the Trojan victim who can write its narrative (Qtd. in [Taha 96](#), author translation).

Darwish reflects on his own massive contribution to the Palestinian narrative, and he draws on many literary styles and techniques, including allusions, to reinforce the universal understanding and sympathy toward the Palestinian cause. He devoted his poetry to voicing the concerns of his people, trying to channel their story that was occluded by the powerful conqueror and victimizer. Like Said, Darwish stressed in his poetry the point that Palestinians and Arabs have been subjugated to the Orientalist and Neo-orientalist scrutiny that guides and paves the way for the colonizer to rewrite and reconstruct the Arab world.

Darwish probably refers above to Edward Said's textual fight against America's invasion of Iraq in 2003, to which he alludes as Babylon. Said published an article a few months before he passed away in which he questions the deaftism of Arab nations and their submission to the American plans that attempt to remap the Middle East in ways that serve the colonial and imperial interests of the US and Israel. According to Said, what happened in Iraq at the time is typical of colonialism and it is similar to the Israeli colonialism of Palestine. He argued that the American war against Iraq was used as a pretext for advancing democracy there, but it instead aimed for the submission of Iraq to the American policy by signing a peace agreement with Israel and allowing the US domination of the oil market that yields profit for the US. Said illustrates in this article the ways in which the colonial and imperial powers feel entitled to write the narrative of the colonized countries, without them "sharing in this narrative," in Darwish's words. Darwish perhaps refers to the news published in the US media just before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 that an assistant professor in law working at New York University called Noah Fledman will be in charge of drafting the new Iraqi constitution. The news mentioned that this assistant professor is highly qualified in Islamic law; he knows Arabic, and he is a religious Jew. Said adds that "he never went to Iraq, and he does not have a practical and legal background in the problems in Iraq after the war." Said asks, "is not this an immediate and obvious practice of superiority and contempt not only for Iraq but also for Arab lawyers and Muslim scholars who could have done this in more useful ways that serve the future of Iraq?" (Qtd. in [Khalaf](#) para. 5, author translation). In many works of his, especially *Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism*, Said highlighted the ways in which Western textual representations and intellectual practices were put into the service of colonial and imperial powers, and he described America's huge involvement in the Arab world after its emergence post World War II as the most powerful country in the world. Darwish and Said share the point that indigenous people should speak and represent

themselves, and they are not racially and intellectually in lesser positions than others.

### 3. Allusion to Ancient Indians

Darwish's description of America as the new Babylon or Sodom, and the imperial country that seeks to reconstruct and impose its own power over other countries, is reinforced by Darwish's allusion in "Counterpoint" to the Native Americans who arguably share with Palestinians the same story of colonial invasion and destruction. Darwish writes:

I don't recall going together to the cinema in the evening.  
Still I heard Ancient Indians  
Calling: Trust neither the horse, nor modernity (Darwish 175)

The idea that Darwish does not remember whether he and Said went to the cinema in the evening, and the association of that with the recommendation of Native Americans not to trust the horse, nor modernity, is very telling. The cinema reflects memory narrative in its fullest and meaningful sense, and it has become a dominant mode of narration (Kilbourn 17). This mode of narration suggests in this context that memories function as the store of tragic histories that Darwish seems to share with the caller. Darwish's memory of that particular point in time invokes the call of Native Americans. George Lipsitz in his book, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, argues, "instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen" (5). Darwish seems to suggest that he and Said share a common destiny with Native Americans at the national level.

The parallels between the historical experiences of dispossession and colonization of the Native American and the Palestinian, and the similarities in the discourses of belonging and owning the land, are depicted in Darwish's poem "Speech of the Red Indian." Darwish in this poem embodies the persona of the native American figure facing the violent colonial conquest, merging the figure of the Native American and Palestinian together, calling Columbus, "then go back, stranger/Search for India once more" (2). The call suggests a helpless plea for an irrevocable past, indicative of the profound dispossession of Palestinians and Native Americans. Darwish seeks to insinuate the shared story of Native Americans and Palestinians into the heart of postcolonial discourse since the kinds of literature of both "stand apart from the other postcolonial literature engaging with the questions of identity and exile, as they do not fit comfortably into contemporary definitions of the postcolonial cannon" (White para. 11).<sup>2</sup> This is attributed to the fact that "both groups have not gained a decolonization process in their homeland" (White para. 12). This allusion therefore suggests that both peoples share narratives and identities that provoke collective and individual tragic histories.

The Native American recommends Darwish not to trust modernity, which he links with the dispossession of both Palestinians and Native Americans. As Paul Gillen and Devleena Ghosh argue, the concept of modernity from 1450 to the aftermath of World War I is linked to colonialism (32). Colonial powers claim that their colonization of other countries is for the sake of modernizing primitive people and under-

developed places in these countries; however, they opine that indigenous people impede progress and do not appreciate their favor. It can be argued through using wider historical and cultural lenses that there is an allusion embedded in the representation of modernity to the virtue of the invasion of America, the idea of America itself as a place constructed “on a hill,” “the virgin soil,” “the wide, wild West.” The colonization of America was premised on myths of glorifying a foreign land/a country of plethora of natural resources, and teemed with the cult that the country would provide bountiful opportunities for both economic success and personal fulfillment – “The American Dream.” However, the story of movement to America as a trope for opportunity, conversion and success does not show the other version of it. It needs to address “central stories, often untold: tales of marginality and exclusion, which cast a different light on the grand narratives of nationhood, of progress, of democracy and of modernity” (Cresswell 20). Tim Cresswell further argues, “a different kind of story emerges when we look at the marginal cases and use them to reflect on undifferentiated and glorious story of ‘America.’” Beneath the current America is another nation that was populated and dominated by Native American people. They had their own language, tradition and conventions before the invasion of the European countries, which aimed to exploit the place and its natural resources and inhabitants.

European travel writers played an immense role in privileging the narrative of European Christians over that of the indigenous inhabitants of America/Palestine, and they thought of their texts as an assisting tool in bringing modernity and civilization to uncivilized and backward natives (Qabaha 1036). Their writings consolidated the myth that Puritans/Zionists are the new “chosen people” to whom the land of America/Palestine was “promised,” and their existence in America/Palestine was justified on the basis of their entitlement by God to modernize the wilderness. Darwish in “Speech of the Red Indian” alludes to the claims of the Whites: “we bring you civilization, we’re the masters of time, come to inherit this land of yours” (Darwish 7). Europeans/Zionists claimed that their aim is to benefit America/Palestine, to instruct and advance (for their own benefit) the Natives, to formulate America/Palestine, to give it shape, identity, and to aggrandize its importance to imperial strategy and its “natural” role as an appendage to the West (Qabaha 1033). Millions of Native Americans and Palestinians faced radical dislocation from their homelands – what Ilan Pappé called “ethnic cleansing” – through colonialist practices (Noam Chomsky and Ilan Pappé 26). Both groups were dislocated from their homes, and their land was confiscated and given to non-native settlers. The experience of widespread dislocation, and the denial of a unique cultural past, became the hegemonically imposed definition of modernity for both Native Americans and Palestinians.

Like modernity, colonizers used horses as a tool for colonialism and domination, according to Darwish’s Native American persona. The horse was typically associated in Arabic poetry with power, courage, love and victory, and it had common support and destiny with Arabs. It was also a bear witness to historical events and catastrophes (Al-ayaydah 63). The horse in Darwish’s poetry is also associated with loss and collapse. Indeed, the image of the horse has been transformed in Darwish’s poetry from power into powerlessness. As Atef Al-ayaydah argues, the horse in Darwish’s poetry represents the loss of Palestine (66). He further argues that this representation of the horse suggests that Arab Palestinians had traditions, power and order before the colonization of their



countries. Therefore, the horse, like the colonized, enjoyed glory and freedom in the past, but it has now become a figure of rupture and oppression. In fact, the horses are nowadays used by Israeli soldiers to attack Palestinians who are not allowed to use horses and even donkeys in certain areas without permits from the colonial power (personal communication).

Darwish's understanding of the Native American's recommendation not to trust the horse goes along these lines. Native Americans used to have kinship and affinity with animals, including horses, before colonialism. Animals were highly symbolic in early Native American culture; each of them stands for certain cultural and psychological meanings. Animals and humans merge in Native American belief and myth, and they demonstrate mutual support, respect and common destiny. The horse was seen in Native American culture as the source of power, strength and guidance (Hassan 37). European settlers have reconstructed the ecosystem and violated the unity and the mutual support that Native Americans and animals had. Native Americans struggled against the colonialist subjugation of the environment and animals. In "Speech of the Red Indian," Darwish addresses European colonizers, using the persona of the Native American:

Oh white master, Lord of the horses  
 What do you want from those making their way to the night woods?  
 Our pastures are sacred, our spirits inspired,  
 The stars are luminous words where our fable  
 Is legible from beginning to end  
 If only you'll lift up your eyes:  
 Born between water and fire,  
 Reborn in clouds on an azure shore  
 After judgment day  
 .....  
 Tamer of horses, teach your horse  
 To ask forgiveness of nature's soul  
 For the way you have treated our trees  
 (Darwish 1)

Darwish stresses that European colonizers misused the natural resources and animals while trying to dominate Native America. Peter Beidler adds that animals were used by colonizers to destroy Native American communities (18). Native Americans gained horses from Europeans, which impacted their lives drastically, and in the beginning, they trusted the settlers and their horses; the relationship between them was of mutual benefit and they reciprocated agricultural and commercial skills. However, it turned later into a relation of subordination of Native Americans to colonial material support. As Herman Viola (7) argues, Native Americans later discovered their naivete in trusting the horse and its owners. Darwish recalls the fact that European settlers were interested in gaining control over the land of the Red Indians because it was fertile and replete with gold, which makes it the perfect place to live in and make lots of money. In "Speech of the Red Indian," Darwish opens his poem with a quotation from the speech of Seattle who was the chief of the Red Indian tribes Suquamish and Duwamish: "Did I say dead people, None of them there, what happened there was only exchange of worlds" (1). Darwish alludes to the full control of the European settlers over the Native American people who defended themselves and their world against the new world that was imposed on them. He refers to the heritage of the Red Indians before they were

massacred by European settlers who took over America entirely in 1854 and imposed on them a peace treaty.

#### 4. Conclusion

Darwish perhaps makes a pessimistic prophecy that Palestinians might share the same defeat as Native Americans. Darwish's "The Speech of the Red Indians" was written a year before the Palestinian Authority and Israel signed Oslo Peace Accords in 1993, which Darwish and Said both refused and described elsewhere as surrender accords. The Oslo Accords granted the PA a limited responsibility of self-governing some areas of Gaza and the West Bank. Issues such as sovereignty, the rights of refugees, and the status of Jerusalem were, however, postponed. Darwish and Said thought that these accords would postpone the establishment of the Palestinian state, or even make it impossible.<sup>3</sup> Nicely, Darwish ends his tribute to Said with the following words:

He also said: If I die before you,  
My will is the impossible.  
I asked: Is the Impossible far off?  
He said: A generation away.  
I asked: And if I die before you?  
He said: I shall pay my condolences to Mount Galilee,  
And now, don't forget:  
If I die before you, my will is the impossible (250–251).

"My will is the impossible" entails what we might call "temporal uncertainty" which will last, according to Said, for a generation. "My will is the impossible" situates the prophecy of Said and Darwish for a better and yet unrealized future in the realm of the impossible, but this prophecy can be fulfilled after one generation. In spite of the textual and material power of colonialism and imperialism that could destroy nations, both Said and Darwish insist on the necessity to fight continuously on the side of the victims/the colonized against the victors/the colonizers, and to defend "the right of troy/to share the narrative" and represent and speak for itself, which is the point of postcolonial studies. Darwish in his poetry represents the endeavor of postcolonial writers to find distinctive ways to tell their story that the powerful conqueror occludes and manipulates, hence the necessity for a postcolonial tendency that merges postcolonial narratives together to understand colonialism better; to empower indigenous stories and struggles against the colonialist negation of the history and culture of native people.

#### Notes

1. See for example Edward Said, "On Mahmoud Darwish," *Grand Street*, 48 (1994), 112–115.
2. I should note that many postcolonial critics have debated the marginalization of Palestinian literature and Native American literature from the postcolonial canon under the pretext that these literatures do not quite fit into the definition of postcolonial literatures. On Native American literature and postcolonial literature, see Deborah L. Madsen, *Beyond the Borders: American Literature and Post-Colonial Theory*. London: Pluto Press, 2003. And on

Palestinian literature and postcolonial literature, see Patrick Williams & Anna Ball, “Where is Palestine?,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50 (2014): 127–133.

3. See Said’s full perspective on Oslo in *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*. London: Granta, 2000.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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