Juxtaposed Realities of War and Welcome in Darwish's "State of Siege": Hospitality as an Act of Resistance in Poetics of Exile

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Abstract

Mahmoud Darwish's "State of Siege" presents life under occupation through images of war, loss, and everyday survival. This article studies how the poem places violence and hospitality side by side. Hospitality appears as a quiet but powerful act of resistance. It affirms dignity in a space marked by siege and exile. Darwish records the pain and collective voice of the Palestinian people. He presents their experience as lived reality, not as political abstraction. The poem blends personal memory with collective history. It expresses the struggle for identity, cultural survival, and the longing for a homeland. Ordinary acts such as baking bread and brewing coffee appear beside fear, curfew, and death. These moments protect Palestinian identity from being reduced to news reports or statistics. Darwish avoids heroic narratives of resistance. He remains faithful of daily life and emotional truth. This approach reflects T. S. Eliot's idea that poetry is about to feel first before it is understood.

"State of Siege" was written during the Israeli siege of Ramallah in 2002, during the Second Intifada and Operation Defensive Shield. The poem carries both political trauma and personal suffering. Darwish writes from direct experience of confinement and loss. This study places "State of Siege" within Darwish's wider poetry of exile and resistance.

It draws on postcolonial theory and trauma studies. Edward Said's concept of the "permission to narrate" helps explain how the poem asserts Palestinian agency. Trauma theory explains the fragmented form of the poem. From the point of comparative references, Pablo Neruda's views on political lyricism highlight the fusion of resistance and aesthetics in the poems of Darwish. The poem ultimately presents hospitality as an ethical response to violence. It affirms survival, memory, and human dignity in exile.

Keywords: poetics of exile, hospitality, palestinian resistance, displacement, trauma, identity

Introduction

Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) is considered one of the greatest poets of Palestine. He is widely recognized as the national poet of Palestine. He is also described as the prophetic voice of modern Arab poetry. His works emerge from the collective trauma of the Palestinian people. It records loss, exile, and dispossession. At the same time, it carries a strong universal appeal. His poetry speaks to readers beyond geographical and political boundaries. Darwish draws the ideas from the ancient Arabic poetic tradition. He blends the tradition with modernist experimentation. The fusion his poetry gives cultural depth and formal innovation. His poems move between lyric intensity and political reflection. They speak of personal memory and collective history. Through this balance, Darwish constructs a poetic voice that is both intimate and public.

Darwish does not merely describe political conflict. He reshapes it through poetic perception. His language transforms suffering into symbolic meaning. His poetry becomes a space for reflection rather than propaganda. In this way, his work resists simplification. "State of Siege" was composed during the Israeli siege of Ramallah in 2002. The poem reflects life under military confinement and constant surveillance. Darwish deliberately avoids the epic mode of conquest and resolution. He rejects heroic narration. Instead, he adopts a fragmented structure. He uses lyrical precision and controlled restraint. This narrative strategy mirrors the broken reality of siege life. The poem thus departs from epic tradition. It presents survival, endurance, and ethical reflection as its central concerns.

Aim and Objectives

This article examines how the poem "State of Siege" engages with themes of conflict, division, and displacement. It also addresses the questions of identity, memory, and cultural survival within the Palestinian experience. Darwish's imagery is concrete and symbolic at the same time. Each image carries historical weight and emotional depth. His poetry does not foreground political

ideology. Instead, it records human life under pressure. It preserves ordinary people and their daily struggles. The poem humanizes suffering rather than turning it into rhetoric. Darwish's focus remains on lived experience. Documentation fear, endurance, and fragile hope are recorded in his verses. Using the perspectives of postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and comparative literature, this paper traces a continuous tradition of resistance in Darwish's poetry. Resistance is not limited to armed struggle. It appears through memory, language, and cultural rituals.

Analysis and Discussion

Sensory Imagery and the Representation of Everyday Life

Darwish presents political violence as complex and morally layered. He avoids clear binaries of victory and defeat. His poems function as cultural archives. They store collective memory and also invite universal reflection on resilience and survival. In "State of Siege," life under military occupation is shown as contradictory. It is absurd and intimate at once. It is fragile yet persistent. Sensory imagery plays a crucial role in the poem. Darwish frequently uses olfactory images. The smell of fresh bread appears against the sound of shelling. This contrast highlights the clash between life and destruction. The ritual of Arabic coffee recurs as a symbol of continuity. It represents hospitality, dignity, and calm resistance. These rituals confront fear and reduce uncertainty. They affirm cultural presence in a space of erasure.

Historical Roots of Exile: The Nakba and Early Life

Darwish was born in al-Birwa, a Galilean village destroyed during the 1948 Nakba. The Nakba led to the displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians after the creation of the State of Israel. His family fled to Lebanon during the violence. They later returned illegally to their homeland. They lived as "present absentees." This term reflects a deep contradiction. It describes physical presence without legal or political recognition. This early experience shaped Darwish's poetic vision. Exile became both physical and existential. Loss of land turned into loss of certainty. These experiences form the central metaphor of his poetry. Throughout his work, exile is not only a historical event. It is a permanent condition of being in the present state. His poems give voice to this condition. They transform personal pain into collective memory.

Phases of Darwish's Poetic Development

The writings of Mahmoud Darwish can be broadly divided into three phases. The first phase reflects early resistance poetry written within Palestine. These poems express anger, loss, and political awakening. The second phase belongs to the years of exile and includes his life in Beirut and Paris. Exile reshaped his voice and widened his vision. The third phase represents his mature writings. Works such as *Mural*, *In the Presence of Absence, and The Butterfly's Burden* belong to this stage. These poems move beyond direct protest. They reflect

philosophical depth, memory, and self-reflection. Across all phases, Darwish balances the collective suffering of Palestine with a personal search for meaning. His language speaks for a people. It also speaks from within the self. This balance gives his poetry emotional power and universal reach. Darwish does not treat exile as only physical displacement. Exile becomes an inner condition and state of estrangement and uncertainty. Darwish directly questions the idea of identity shaped by exile. In *The Butterfly's Burden*, he writes:

> Who am I, without exile?
> Exile is more than a geographical concept.
> What will I do without exile?
> And a long night staring at the water? (12).

These lines show exile as a defining force of the self. Identity is formed through separation. Belonging becomes unstable that's why poet does not imagine life without exile as freedom. Instead, he sees it as emptiness. Exile becomes both wound and source of creativity. This understanding closely aligns with Edward Said's reflections on exile. Said writes, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (*Reflections on Exile* 173). Darwish's poetry echoes this contradiction. Exile attracts the imagination and produces deep suffering. It is not only the loss of land. It is the loss of continuity and security. It is a constant dislocation of the self.

The Siege of Ramallah and the Historical Context of the Poem

In Darwish's work, exile becomes permanent. Returning does not guarantee for belonging. Home itself turns unfamiliar. This sense of inner exile shapes "State of Siege." The poem was written during the siege of Ramallah in 2002. The siege occurred during the Second Intifada, which lasted from 2000 to 2005. This period compressed with extreme violence and instability. It included military incursions and severe restrictions on Palestinian movement. In March 2002, Israeli forces launched Operation Defensive Shield. Several West Bank cities were occupied. Ramallah faced complete military closure. Tanks moved through residential streets. Curfews confined people inside their homes for days. Electricity and water supplies were disrupted. Medical services became limited. President Yasser Arafat was confined to his compound. Israeli forces surrounded the area.

Fragmented Time and the Reality of Life Under Siege

Darwish lived in Ramallah during this time. He experienced the siege directly. These conditions shaped the poem's structure and tone. Time appears broken, space feels restricted, they are entangled in losing memories. The poem reflects fear and endurance. Exile, in this context, exists within the homeland itself. The poet remains present time. Yet freedom remains absent. In "State of Siege," Darwish shows that exile does not require physical movement across borders.

Exile can exist within one's own homeland. It can exist under military occupation. The poem links personal exile with collective trauma. Individual suffering becomes a shared condition. Historical violence is transformed into lyrical testimony. Through this transformation, poetry becomes a space of survival. It also becomes a form of resistance.

During the siege, Darwish was living in Ramallah. He experienced the curfews and checkpoints firsthand. Constant surveillance shaped daily life. These conditions directly shape the texture of "State of Siege". Darwish rejects the sense of closure found in epic poetry. He refuses narratives of victory or heroic resolution. Instead, he adopts a fragmented structure. This structure reflects the broken experience of time under occupation. Darwish openly distances his poem from epic tradition. He writes, "No Homeric echo to things here. Myth knocks on our doors when we need them . . ." ("State of Siege" 19). This rejection of the "Homeric echo" signals a refusal to allow imperial or heroic narratives to define Palestinian history. The poem resists mythic glorification. It insists on lived reality.

Violence and the Distortion of Everyday Reality

The violence in "State of Siege" is not distant or abstract. It enters private spaces and disrupts daily routines. It reshapes human relationships. War invades the home. Ordinary life becomes unstable. Through this portrayal, Darwish exposes the intimate cost of occupation. He records endurance without romanticizing suffering. In one significant passage, Darwish writes:

There is no night in our night kept lit
By the glitter of artillery.
Our enemies stay up late.
They fill our dark cellars
With light. ("State of Siege" 11)

This image produces a sharp irony. Light is created by shellfire. It does not bring safety or knowledge. It brings fear and destruction. Under siege, normal meanings collapse. Darkness no longer belongs to night. Light no longer signals hope. Instead, light becomes a weapon. This inversion captures the distorted reality of life under bombardment. The language reflects the agony of civilians confined by curfews. Homes become shelters and cellars become spaces of survival. Daily life is compressed by fear and uncertainty. Darwish records this experience without exaggeration. His words carry restraint, it intensifies the emotional impact. Darwish also challenges the rigid division between occupiers and occupied.

Hospitality as Ethical Resistance

He introduces a gesture that appears simple. Yet it holds deep symbolic meaning. In a striking moment, he writes: "You standing at the doorsteps, enter and drink Arabic coffee with us" ("State of Siege" 21).

This invitation carries ethical weight. Hospitality becomes an act of resistance. The ritual of Arabic coffee represents culture, dignity, and continuity. By offering to the "enemy," Darwish refuses hatred as the only response of violence. He asserts the endurance of Palestinian identity. He also affirms the possibility of human recognition, however fragile it may be occurred. This gesture does not erase political reality. Hospitality is not surrender in the moral assertion. It insists the cultural survival even in under siege. Through this act, Darwish reclaims agency.

Exile Beyond Geography: Temporal and Existential Displacement

Although "State of Siege" is rooted in the immediate geography of Ramallah, its emotional landscape extends beyond the present moment. It is shaped by a longer history of displacement. This displacement is not only physical. It is also temporal which disrupts historical continuity and inherited memory. Darwish returns to this idea in another poem. In "The Earth Is Closing on Us," he asks, "Where should we go, after the last frontiers? / Where should the birds fly after the last sky?" (14). All these questions express terminal exile. Movement itself becomes impossible. Through such images, Darwish shows that exile is not only a condition of space. It is a condition of time, memory, and belonging. These questions evoke a sense of terminal exile. Escape itself seems impossible. Even metaphors of flight and movement collapse. The Palestinian experience of exile is therefore not limited to crossing borders. It is a condition of permanent uncertainty. It is a life lived in an impermanent state.

Memory, Sensory Detail, and Cultural Survival

Darwish resists erasure through attention to sensory detail. He recalls ordinary experiences. He writes of "the aroma of bread at dawn" and "a mother's voice calling us home." These images are not sentimental. They are acts of preservation. They anchor identity in daily life. They protect memory from disappearance. Through such details, Darwish affirms continuity amid destruction. This resilience finds resonance beyond Palestinian literature. Albert Camus expresses the similar strength in *Return to Tipasa*. He writes, "In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer" (Camus 91). This insight mirrors Darwish's poetic endurance. Both writers locate survival within inner resistance. Hope emerges not from external freedom but from moral and emotional strength.

Theoretical Perspectives: Modernism and Postcolonial Voice

Darwish's rejection of epic tradition in "State of Siege" aligns with modernist aesthetics. T. S. Eliot argues that "genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood" (*The Sacred Wood* xiii). Darwish's fragmented and lyrical form follows this principle. The poem does not rely on linear narrative. It communicates through rhythm, image, and emotional immediacy. This structure reflects the fractured reality of siege life. From Postcolonial

perspective, Edward Said's idea of "permission to narrate" is central. "State of Siege" asserts the Palestinian right to tell their own story. It resists silencing and appropriation. The poem becomes an act of narrative self-determination.

Comparative Reflections on Displacement and Resistance

John Berger offers a parallel understanding of displacement. In *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, he writes, "To be displaced is to be cut off from one's sense of place, yet one continues to live in the shadow of that loss" (56). Darwish's poetry inhabits this shadow. It records loss without surrender. Through language, memory remains alive.

Conclusion: Poetry as Memory and Resistance

Mahmoud Darwish's "State of Siege" stands as a powerful example of resistance poetry. It moves beyond the limits of historical documentation. The poem transforms lived experience into cultural memory. Darwish's work resonates with other traditions of resistance writing. His poetry recalls the voice of Pablo Neruda, who also transforms personal and collective suffering into a universal call for justice. Like Neruda, Darwish blends political urgency with sensual imagery. He refuses to separate the body from the body politic. Everyday life remains central to political meaning. "State of Siege" is more than a record of Ramallah in 2002. It is a poetic intervention against erasure. Darwish rejects closure and heroic resolution. He embraces fragmentation and lyrical restraint. These formal choices reflect the fractured reality of life under siege. Through images of bread, coffee, light, and darkness, Darwish grounds resistance in ordinary acts. Survival itself becomes an ethical stance.

The gesture of hospitality occupies a central place in the poem. Hospitality asserts dignity in the face of violence. It preserves cultural identity when political structures attempt to destroy it. Through this gesture, Darwish challenges the logic of domination. He affirms the possibility of human recognition, even under extreme conditions. In Darwish's hands, poetry becomes both archive and battlefield. It preserves Palestinian history and also confronts dominant narratives imposed by power. "State of Siege" asserts the right to memory and narration. It insists on presence in a context designed to enforce absence. Through language, Darwish resists silence. Ultimately, Darwish's poetry speaks beyond Palestine. It addresses all who experienced exile, occupation, and displacement. His work transforms suffering into testimony. It turns survival into resistance. "State of Siege" remains a lasting reminder that poetry can defend humanity when political systems fail.

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