MOURID BARGHOUTI:  
THE BLESSINGS OF EXILE  

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Abstract: Although the reputation of poet Mourid Barghouti (b. 1944) in the west rests on two personal memoirs, this article suggests that Barghouti’s poetry deserves equal recognition. The long poem in *Midnight and Other Poems* (2005), the subject of this article, wrestles with the options of the modern exile. Suffused with memory, I argue that *Midnight* opens a creative window out of multiple historical sites and personal encounters that interrogates the notions of modernity and progress, victory and loss, and nationalism and patriotism. Out of political dilemmas emerge a beauty in words of resistance and defiance, “guns of mutiny” with deep ethical responsibility toward humanity. From within spiritual orphanage and alienation, Barghouti constructs clear, concrete poetry, an aesthetic that articulates the Palestinian memory, crossing borders of history, geography, and literary traditions. *Midnight’s* tender poetic images reposition the Palestinian exile alongside other unique voices worldwide within memory studies.  

Keywords: Mourid Barghouti, the exile, Palestinian poetry, history, memory studies, writing  

Mourid Barghouti (b. 1944) began publishing poems in Arabic in the Arab World in the early seventies, and his *Collected Works* was published in Beirut in 1997. To date, he has published twelve books of poetry, and his voice is recognized as an independent voice out of the seventies’ spiritual fatigue that characterized some Palestinian poetry of resistance.¹ In 2000, Barghouti was awarded the Palestine Award for Poetry. In addition, his remarkable autobiographical memoir *Ra’aytu Ramallah/I saw Ramallah* (1997), where he describes “writing as a displacement,”² has received many reviews that recognized its poetic rendition of the intractable conditions of occupation. The memoir was translated into English by novelist Ahdaf Soueif in 1997; it has been hailed in the Arab world as well as the west as a major literary work of Palestine since Mahmoud Darwish’s *Memory for Forgetfulness. I Saw Ramallah* won the Naguib Mahfouz Award for Literature in 1997.  

Translations of Barghouti’s poems into English, however, began to appear in the west only since 2003. Barghouti reads his poems at international venues where audiences are struck by “work of lasting rarity on first encounter”;³ but his poetry  

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is not as recognized in the west as his prose works. The last of his books, *Muntasaf al-Layl*, came out in Beirut in 2005. The English translation, *Midnight and Other Poems* by Radwa Ashour, was published by Arc Publications (UK) in 2008. The long poem in *Midnight and Other Poems* is the subject of this article. It is my hope to demonstrate that Barghouti’s poetry deserves attention along those of the older generation of Palestinian poets, those headed by Mahmoud Darwish, Samih al-Qasim, and Tawfiq Sayigh.

*Midnight* is a long poem comprised of several mini poems about exile, memory, history, and writing. Integrated into the conversation are the poet-speaker’s feelings and thoughts regarding family and place; the past, present, and future; displacement, country, and nation; and writing and the responsibility of the poet/intellectual. *Midnight* opens a window out of the poet’s exilic space, a window that seeks freedom from the multiple displacements the Palestinian poet has experienced since 1967 when the remaining land of Palestine was occupied by Israel. The poem also envisions a shared Palestinian experience, a vision that incorporates the circumstances of 1948 *Nakba* when Israel was established and more than 750,000 Palestinians were rendered homeless.4

There must be some other way!/There must be some other captain!

There must be a tougher sail!/There must be ships that don’t sink twice!

There must be a way to live first and die second!/There must be a woman to love and die for, without incurring the jealousy/ of the homeland! (*Midnight 96*)

An intimate and lyrical dialogue with multiple personae, impressionistic in its aesthetic arrangement, *Midnight* forges a plurality of vision out of memory regarding exile whereby Barghouti examines the options available to him and to his people. Out of memory, the history of Palestine is inscribed, and the imaginary is reinstated as a viable means of withstanding the continued colonization and occupation. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate how the experience of displacement is reenacted in the poetry; what existential exile implicates for Mourid Barghouti and the Palestinian people; how the poetry whispers and suggests the history of Palestinians from both memory and direct experience; and how the poet’s perception of his craft might heal the personal and collective rupture. The diverse and complex poem that is grounded in the historical and literary heritage of the Palestinian Arab gives rise to a few difficult questions: How does poetry reclaim the name of Palestine and Palestinian, when both names are not mentioned once? Could poetic expression accomplish the impossible task of revising the mythicized history when no archives exist? Can poetry nourish a subjectivity that is
politically radical and existentially sustainable at one and the same time? To contextualize the present and past of poet and people, I will first look at how the exilic condition emerged. Next, I will examine Barghouti’s stance regarding nationalist ideology. This section will delve into Palestinian history as the poet summons his ancestors and other anonymous characters who reverberate in his memory. The final section of this article will analyze Barghouti’s poetics as he posits ideas regarding the Palestinian writer’s responsibility toward self, people, and land.

Mourid Barghouti was born in Deir Ghassana, near Ramallah, Palestine, in 1944, four years before the establishment of the state of Israel. In June 1967, Israel occupied the remaining land of Palestine in the six-day War. Mourid was not allowed to return to his country because he was away in his last year of university in Cairo. He says, “Every Palestinian who was outside his village or place, for tourism, for education, for medication, for any reason, was considered as Not-Palestinian” (quoted in Introduction, Midnight 11). As of this writing in 2015, Israel continues to occupy Palestinian land. In addition to being exiled from Palestine in 1967, Barghouti has faced dismissals from many countries: from Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan; and he remained stranded in Budapest for many years. Until 2015, Barghouti remains a stateless Palestinian; but since the Oslo Accords (1993) and in 1996, he was able to visit Ramallah after 30 years of exile.

The Critical Framework

Edward W. Said’s essay “Reflections on Exile” sheds light on the exile in the twentieth century and explores the various options that would permit her to overcome a death, which is “without the death’s ultimate mercy.” 5 The exile experiences a rift between “a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (173). Said distinguishes between the twentieth century exile and the one in other historical periods. Whereas notions of humanism and aesthetics of the romantic exile could render the exilic experience comprehensible, such notions are futile for the twentieth century historical context. Said explains that this is so because imperialism, warfare, and totalitarian regimes that have dominated the twentieth century have caused many displacements, mass movements, and migrations. The modern age, he suggests, has been described as “the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration” (174). This geographic and historical context, therefore, must be taken into account in the study of the literature about exile.

Said relays how many people from the so-called “Third World” have experienced exile, which not only indignifies a people, but it also denies them identity. These exiled writers have written stories about the “miserable loneliness” of the exile, as they seek to recapture the mutilated history and geography of their
peoples. The creative output voices the muteness in order to “recuperate the undocumented,” to imaginatively represent the condition of the exile (176). Furthermore, Said questions whether nationalism offers a viable ideology for the exile, since it “is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage.” He wonders if nationalism succeeds in fending off exile by creating “a community of language, culture, and customs”; but he dismisses nationalist ideology, among other dogmas, for failing to alleviate the experience of the exile. Said asserts that the national narrative essentially promotes a collective ethos that consigns truths to some groups versus others; thus, nationalism’s inclusiveness fails to “touch the [singular] predicament of the exile” because her existence is a discontinuous state of being whose private emotionality cannot be articulated by the collective sentiments (176-177). Said concludes that the exile’s nomadic existence, “solitude and spirituality ...” “must cultivate a scrupulous subjectivity” through writing (181-184). It is noteworthy to mention that Said’s analysis of the exile has been disputed by recent scholarship for being essentialist, idealized, and universalized. Although these contentions pertain to the critique of Barghouti’s memoirs, a brief summary of the proposed arguments are pertinent, for they underscore the poet’s larger literary project in the poetry under discussion.

Writing about Barghouti’s *I Saw Ramallah*, Anna Bernard and Norbert Bugeja are in agreement that Said’s reading of the memoir posits the Palestinian individual and collective identity as solely defined by the 1948 *Nakba*. In their view, Said’s critique disregards Barghouti’s particular experience of the 1967 *Nazha* and his visit to Ramallah, in the aftermath of Oslo. *I Saw Ramallah* is the result of that visit, with the Palestinian Authority (PA) in operation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). Bernard suggests that in the memoir Barghouti does not represent a narrative of a unified shared identity, but one that is diverse and complex due to the historical events that Palestinians had experienced, in both the originary moment of exile of 1948 and the continuing occupation after 1967.

“While Barghouti repeatedly expresses his rage at the Israeli state’s dispossession and displacement of the Palestinians,” she adds, “he refuses to thematize exile, with its attendant connotations of either nostalgia or heterodoxy, as the defining characteristic of a collective Palestinian existence.” In Bernard’s opinion, Said’s introduction to the memoir warrants a corrective. She believes that “a materialist aesthetic” would offer a better approach since it “emphasizes both the circumstantial diversity of Palestinian lives and Barghouti’s sense of his own responsibility as a poet, to resist the temptation to reify the dynamic materiality of that diversity.” Bernard’s stance is intriguing, according to Bugeja, for it raises questions about Barghouti’s project to represent both the *Nakba* and the *Nazha*, as well as the continued occupation of the OPT. In Bugeja’s view, Barghouti’s memoir is a subtle attempt at narrating the complexity of exile and occupation at one and the
same time, within and without Palestine/Israel, and across the common existential and political parameters without evading the specificities of each group of Palestinians (40).

Karim Mattar, similarly, offers a post-Saidian critique of both *I Saw Ramallah* and its sequel *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*, following the lead of postcolonial critic Patrick Williams. Mattar proposes that a theorization in tune with postcolonial studies offers a wider, more fluid perspective of Barghouti’s memoirs more so than Said’s essentialist critique. Mattar says that the Allenby Bridge is underscored in both memoirs as the site where the temporal and generational modes of exile are defined (104). He rightly proposes that the Bridge illuminates the multiple “modes of dispossession experienced by Palestinians” (Mattar 103), as represented by Barghouti and as experienced by Mattar himself. These recent readings of Barghouti’s memoirs proffer enlightening views of Palestinian personal accounts in light of postcolonial theory. I want to suggest that the polysemous quality of Barghouti’s work renders multiple interpretations. The task of a reader and/or critic is not to fit a literary work to this or that theory, but to elucidate a cultural production so that various interpretations connect a certain text with other cultures and histories, other human beings, and their activities. I am aware that some of Said’s ideas regarding the exile are substantially essentialist, but reading *Midnight* against Said’s reflections about the exile still validates a Saidian reading of the long poem.

This article will argue that *Midnight* is the culmination of Mourid Barghouti’s poetic expression since he began writing in the 1970s. Born out of life, the long poem celebrates life, working through displacement, exile, and uncertainty; transcending national and provisional limitations; crossing spatial and temporal borders. In the words of Hugo of St. Victor, Barghouti may be described as the “perfect [man] to whom the entire world is ... a foreign land.” Barghouti joins other world poets, a minority in the world for whom success is not guaranteed, and he continues to write “poems to restore respect for meaning and to give meaning to our existence.” To contextualize the exilic imaginary of Barghouti, I will now turn to a discussion of the historical context of the Palestinian exile.

**Midnight and the Exilic Context**

*Midnight* does not name Israel as the cause of exile but suggests it in the metaphor of the “Scorpion Enemy.” The stanzas dealing with the “Scorpion Enemy” are bracketed in the central section of the book between a prayer and the depiction of the outside world of fear, with an in-between romantic plunge into the natural world. In the face of continued injustice, death, and mourning to no avail, faith has been transformed into a quasi-religion that proffers no spiritual succor. In the first
person singular, the poetic persona seeks refuge and implores God to listen to him because his lack of identity is threatening his mere existence:

There is only You now,/no other face but Yours.

........................

Lord, if you do not listen to me,/my shadow on earth will be effaced.

To whom shall I pray/and, if Your hands lock me out,
in whom shall one like me take refuge?/I no longer possess a name
to be called or designated by;/my glass has been filled with poison,
and I have been reduced to a mere trace in my grave,/accustomed to perils.  
(Midnight 107-108)

Even the shadow of the poet has been reduced to a mere trace. The living poet whose identity has been erased has been “waiting in vain inside ... [his] grave,” that is, inside a living death! It also seems that the dead have already lost their faith, for their sacrifice has been wasted. Not only is the exile denied all recognition of being human, but the occupation continues to worsen with no end in sight. The bulk of this section resonates with Said’s discussion that “exile cannot be made to serve notions of humanism ..., [for] exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible ...” in the current world of alienation and anxiety (174).

The sorrowful mood is carried over into the arrival of a new day. The spring dawn whose sun brings no light reminds the poet of the cold in which he lives, for the “swine of history” has robbed him of the homeland:

But you,/with your wrist tied to a curse,/you are forced to follow up
what the swine of history/has done to your day,
as though you had a sun of your own,/a sun that will not give you light
unless you kick it with your foot/or whip it with a lash!
From your cold stove,/you take a piece of coal/and, with a firm hand,
you write upon the wall:/I must have a day that calls me by my name.
I must have a home that is not this page.  
(Midnight 122)

The poetic lover/Motherland offers no inspiration either, for she arrives either late or not at all. The conflicting emotions of silence and roaring invade the poet’s
consciousness, leading to a feeling of claustrophobia that threatens to devour him: “The roaring troubles me./silence troubles me./This silence does not bring good tidings./The curtain seems like a cement wall, only the roaring approaches;/an open jaw/is about to close on me./It draws ever nearer” (Midnight 126). As the reader enters the house of scorpions, a nightmarish, ironic world of estrangement is painted as the scorpion defines the “other” and performs its “noble mission”: the scorpion hunts people without explanation, it labels humans as befitting its own perceptions of the “other,” and it controls their present and future. Having originated from the “disturbed heavenly mess,” the scorpion stings all human plans, melodies, laughter, and first kiss. Even the sleepy cat, the not yet born, and the simple ritual of morning coffee are stung by the scorpion. The invocation of the beauty of the natural landscape proves to be vis-à-vis the impudence and selfishness of the new day. Romanticism is disclaimed as the poet is prompted of the time he was arrested, that being his exile. His anguish to reclaim his Palestinian identity and homeland, beyond verbal expressions, beyond writing, overrides natural beauty.

In the piece titled “Servants of War, and Their Language,” Barghouti speaks of the consequences of the Israeli occupation:

Prolonged occupation prevents you from managing your affairs in your own way. It interferes in every aspect of life and death; it interferes with longing and anger and desire and walking in the street. It interferes with going anywhere and coming back, with going to the market, the emergency hospital, the school, the beach, the bedroom, or a distant capital(43)

In addition to denying Palestinians a normal daily life, the occupation also controls their future. Mark Mazower’s review of I Saw Ramallah quotes Barghouti regarding the impact of the occupation on the Palestinians’ future. “Our hatred of the Occupation is essentially because it arrests the growth of our cities, of our societies, of our lives. It hinders their natural development.” For Barghouti exile, which is the result of the continued occupation of Palestine, is ascribed to the modern settler colony of the “Scorpion Enemy.” It must be noted, however, that the world as perceived in the above discussion expands beyond this modern Palestinian experience whose condition is “irremediably secular and unbearably historical,” as Said puts it (174).

The Exile and Modernization

Midnight extends Barghouti’s concerns to the many humans who have experienced injustices, mutilations, homelessness, and death under the auspices of modernity. In defining the modern, I follow the lead of Jürgen Habermas’ analysis of the many
processes whose effects on the west and the world at large have been cumulative. These include capital formation and mobilization of resources; the increase in labor and other forces of production; the emergence of centralized political powers alongside the formation of national identities; the dissemination of the rights of political participation, urbanization, and education; the secularization of values and norms; etc.\textsuperscript{13} It is the culture of capitalism and imperialism whereby powerful Western countries and/or corporations hold meetings to decide the fate of “lesser” people, and conferences to celebrate yet another success that brings about death to ordinary people:

And over there, up in the snowy heights/the high priests are preoccupied
with painting their fingernails/in the temple of Davos.
The champagne of death/overflows from crystal glasses
and runs down the slopes where we live.
Who bombed the street at this precise moment?
Who led the bullets to the buttons of the shirt? (\textit{Midnight} 134)

The diction and ironic tone of the above lines recapture modernist motifs and images, where the have-nots in the slopes continue to suffer at the hands of the haves in the heights. Without mentioning specific ethnicities or countries, the reader senses the larger parameters of the “civilization of quasi-barbarism” of modern culture, to use George Steiner’s words (quoted in Said 174). This is the modernity of the soldier who might take a break from war and play his harmonica outside his tent, and in which his fellow soldiers join him with song; but from there, “without thinking,/without mercy,/without doubt,/they will resume the killing!” (\textit{Midnight} 98). Barghouti believes that this modernity is currently being carried into the twenty first century as neo-imperialism with its terrorism, individual and state: fundamentalism, fanaticism, and preachers of globalism (“Servants of War” 47). This is the modernity where “Man who was created in the best of forms” receives training at the best academic institutions, to learn how to destroy:

You are the center of the Universe!/Raise your buttocks!
Lower your head!/They’ve dressed you in the newest fashion:/a hood,
nothing but a hood made of our sacking,/one beyond compare.
The dog that was trained at West Point/tears the world to pieces:
“the falcon cannot hear the falconer”/and “the centre cannot hold.”

…………………………………………………………………..
Your limbs?/sink deeper into numbness!/Your eyes?

Try to construct the shape of the dog/in your imagination!

Now you will not see the foot of the philosopher that kicks you!

Now you will not see the thumbs-up!/You are the centre of the universe!

(Midnight 102)

The sixth line in the above quotation, a direct reference to W. B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” connects Midnight to Yeats’ apocalyptic vision of Irish resistance to the 700 years of English occupation. The allusion resonates with the Irish poet’s modernist representation of the heartless, mindless beast of the Christ figure who is slouching toward Bethlehem, trying to be reborn. Barghouti’s feeling of affinity with Yeats’ pitiless vision conveys the cruelty and debilitating lack of spirituality that both poets feel regarding the humanistic ethos. In their opinion, this modernist mind-set has brought about militarism and wars, and alienation and spiritual orphanage to both peoples. I must mention an interesting twist in the English translation to one of the lines in Barghouti’s poem. Whereas the Arabic version reads “The dog who was trained at Harvard/turns the world to pieces” (my translation), the English translation substitutes “West Point” for “Harvard.” I think the Arabic is more appropriate for being more inclusive of Western institutions which continue to perpetuate superior perceptions about Western cultures vis-à-vis the “other.”

Nationalist Ideology versus Nationalist Spirit

Similarly, nationalism offers no respite for neither Barghouti nor the Palestinian people since nationalist ideology was the product of individualism, scientific progress, and modernization promulgated by humanistic tenets, the same concepts that were unable to halt colonialism and imperialism. Indeed, it was the League of Nations that incorporated a permeable to legitimize the British Mandate of Palestine, in 1922. Massive Jewish migration and settlements into Palestine were aided and supported fully by the Mandate government, while the majority indigenous population were suppressed and disarmed. Under the Mandate, which lasted until 1948, Palestinians possessed no legal rights, and their hopes for an independent state were thwarted. As Walid Khalidi emphasizes, “While the British prevented the Palestinians by force of arms from exercising their rights as the majority, the Zionists relentlessly revolutionized the status quo in Palestine in their favor through massive Jewish immigration and strategic land acquisition.”14 The same strategy of power has been employed by Israel, with the help of the US, in its dealings with the nationalist agenda of the Popular Liberation Organization (PLO), as will be discussed below.
Therefore, in Barghouti’s view, the humanistic values of nationalism could not avert the implementation of the *Nakba* and the *Nazha* in the Palestinian case in 1948 and 1967, respectively. Here Barghouti is in agreement with Said when he suggests that although nationalism arises from a condition of estrangement, “in time, successful nationalisms consign truth exclusively to themselves and relegate falsehood and inferiority to outsiders” (“Reflections” 176). In *Midnight*, nationalism is dismissed as it has been practiced by the PA and by Arab and Western leaders:

And you will see the devils of your own times  
As, with their dyed hair and Italian shoes,/they play prophet  
On golf courses, and in the corridors of banks/and on CDs.  
You’ll hear promises tailored to be neglected,  
like a wedding dress, the day after.

…………………………………….

You’ll see the coffles on the Silk Road/carrying their loads of khaki  
stuffed with the living and the dead,/helmets riddled with bullets  
and helmets retaining their sheen. (*Midnight* 56-58)

In fact, it was in the name of nationalist ideology that Yasser Arafat, the then leader of the PLO, who secretly negotiated and signed the Oslo Agreement with Israel in 1993. True, Arafat won the recognition of the PA as the representative of the Palestinian people, but it was at an immense cost to the Palestinian people. To delve into the specific terms of the agreement is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it say at this point that Oslo was a “protracted, disorderly, hypocritical, and undignified surrender [to Israel].”

Although Barghouti worked with the PLO as a representative and cultural attaché in the World Federation of Democratic Youth in Budapest, his experience with Arafat and his team was unrewarding. Barghouti tells Mannes-Abbott of the problem he had with the policies of the Palestinian leaders: “... I was on the left of my leadership, radically against the Arab regimes when Arafat’s policy was to be on good terms with all the Arab regimes.” The poet’s uncompromising views isolated him from the PA physically, emotionally, and ideologically especially in the aftermath of Oslo. He explains:

I was fed up with being in the same place as the entire Palestinian leadership, the whole lot of them. Wherever they were, I go away. When they went to Tunis after the invasion—when Sharon entered Lebanon—I refused to enter Tunis!”

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This stance is suggested in *Midnight* when the speaker reprimands the mourners who are mourning the martyr:

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Quiet, quiet:/you who stammer around his dead body now
Like a chorus that has forgotten its lines,/he does not want anything from you.

He has chosen and you have chosen./He will not say what you want him to say.

Quiet, all of you assembled in the forum,/quiet!
you, who, at this very moment,/spread the banner over his dead body,
with your eyes fixed on the spoils,/do not ask him to explain
(you would be afraid if he did). (*Midnight* 80-82)
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Barghouti would approve of Said’s evaluation of Oslo and the continued “Peace Process” as testimony of the PA’s failure to protect its people. He says that the PA is there to facilitate more injustice, expropriation of land, and the existence of its bureaucracy. In an article published in *Le Monde Diplomatique* on April 2, 1998, Said reflects on his recent visits to Palestine. He says that everywhere he went, he heard of the “stain of Oslo.” He adds that “The PA is perceived basically as guaranteeing security for Israel and its settlers, furnishing them with protection, not at all as a legitimate, or concerned, or helpful governmental body vis-à-vis its own people.” Said goes on to say that not only are the PA leaders pursuing their own personal gains. They also demonstrate lack of care for their people: “each Palestinian is alone in his or her misery, with no one so much as concerned to offer food, blankets, or a kind word. Truly one feels that Palestinians are an orphaned people.”

**Political Verbicide**

In a similar vein, *Midnight* rejects the Arab governments’ consensus regarding the Palestine question and their collaboration with Western peace efforts that exclude dissidence:

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What can you do?/Face a consensus that you try hard to avoid
and majorities that exclude you?/Can you oppose the muscles of this world
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with an army of metaphors?/Can you with the eloquence of porcelain,
plead against their discourse of iron? (Midnight 60)

Thus, Said’s reflections about the PA and Oslo, as well as the rest of the authoritarian regimes across the Arab world, resonate with Barghouti’s feelings. He feels estranged from the smog of political language regarding both land and world at one and the same time, for this “verbicide” of a language brings not truth but death and hell to life, even to a momentary happy encounter:

I don’t like my home. / I don’t like this home of a world.
I don’t like what the history teacher has taught us / or what might happen tonight.
The mystery of your arms is the only thing I like.
In them lies my first and last desire.

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I found you again / in the corridors of this world.

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While death was busy distributing / his leaflets
in the market place, advertising his wares,
we found time to be who we wanted.
The world, my lady, is bigger than its terms,
larger than the dome of a helmet, / clearer than the tears of regret richer than the wine of the victorious. (Midnight 144-148)

The poet goes a step further and connects the political corruption with the pollution of language that he feels is rampant in today’s world. For him, the “Peace Process” has been a “hypocritical manipulation of language and a euphemism for prolonged suffering and absent justice” (“Servants of War” 44).

According to Barghouti, the many forms of fanaticism and fundamentalism that have spread in the twentieth century are also the result of the pollution of language. Political discourse seems to be mere rhetoric: “a language that kills, a stupid language that yields clever bombs and sends young men and women to the killing fields.”19 This is the language of politicians that oversimplifies and manipulates usage for purely political ends. If politicians decide to redefine a single
word, such as “Palestine,” they “redefine an entire nation and delete history.” In
the name of Jewish nationalism, “Israel” has replaced “Palestine” in world news,
media channels, history books, world maps, and memory; and in Barghouti’s
opinion, “the battle for language becomes the battle for the land.”20 In his poetry,
he insists on employing simple language, as “a normal person trying to say some-
thing about this life in which we are living,”21 as he says of poet Badr Shakir
al-Sayyab who inspired his him as a boy. This brings the discussion to the subject
of the poet’s perception of poetry and its healing power.

*Midnight* and the Language of Poetry

Though Barghouti dismisses nationalist ideology as “verbicide,” his radical
nationalist spirit persists in seeking justice for the Palestinian cause. As a poet and
an intellectual, Barghouti is invested in the intellectuals’ role in shaping a culture.
He says:

> The importance of the brave intellectual minority in each and every society cannot
> be underestimated. And in this *khaki* age that we live in they are most needed. In
> the battle for language, silence is definitely not the answer and connivance is a
> crime. (“Servants of War” 45)

In *Midnight*, the speaker prods the poet to be daring and aggressive, cunning and
reckless, and mysterious and unaccommodating:

> Be present, hidden/like electricity in two clouds.
> Be solid and evasive./Be devilish in your ways.
> Because you,/contrary stranger,/for your self respect
> Must lie to this world! (*Midnight* 52)

Similarly, Barghouti is critical of what is usually referred to as the progressive
paradigm upon which the modern west prides itself, and which was part and parcel
of nineteenth century European nationalism. In *Midnight*, Barghouti works
through the loopholes of modernist progress and rejects it as humanly unviable.

> Why then does the respected gentleman/from Westminster say
> that I made no contribution to the world?
> Sir, in your discomfort,/let me tell you one more thing:
> I will not send a spaceship/to discover life on planet Mars.
I will try to discover life here/on this earth.

Who knows, I might yet find proof/of the possibility of life here
on this planet! (Midnight 138)

The subtext of the above lines rebuffs the old colonizers’ claim of their superiority vis-à-vis the “backwardness” of the colonized—the colonialist discourse that was constructed to justify colonialism via the “civilizing mission.” That Barghouti works through the Western value systems as truly inauthentic for its dehumanizing effects on the world at large is evident. Implicit is also the belief that scientific and/or technological advancement have not only led to catastrophic wars that caused the death of millions of people worldwide. But that the race for progress and economic dominance continues to uproot people and produce more exiles. In the words of Said, exile “tear[s] millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography” (174). Renowned French philosopher Simone Weil has likewise highlighted the significance of rootedness when she proclaimed, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need for the human soul” (quoted in Said 183). So how does the rootless poet reconnect with his people, his land, and the world? How does he face up to the scorpion enemy with faith in neither a political ideology, nor a spiritual or natural world? Is the exile able to turn around the nightmare of living death of “monumental powerlessness,” for individual and community? Can time be reconfigured so that a “sky without pavements” and “a road without a single cloud” be constructed? (Midnight 132-134). How can a human who fights monsters resist becoming a monster himself, as Barghouti put it?22 These questions bring the discussion to the final section of this article: the subject of time, memory, and history as these issues are represented in Midnight.

The Exile: Time, Memory and History

Midnight opens with a metaphoric journey into hell. The poetic persona urges the speaker to hurl the calendar into the dustbin, for time has stopped among “the droning of disasters” (Midnight 30). With death at the speaker’s heals, the temporal is being reconfigured to interrogate the common notions of life and death:

Here is Death,/wearing padlocks as pendants;
his well-trained hounds at his heels;
His eternal belt/stuffed full of addresses. (Midnight 30)

As the speaker embarks on his creative journey to articulate memory, he summons real and imaginary people with whom he dialogues about the present, past,
and future. Family members and anonymous individuals, soldiers and political leaders, ancient poets and young lovers enter the poetic conversation. There are also interior monologues in the first person pronoun about the poet’s conception of his responsibility and the value of the imagination. First in a black dress, the speaker’s mother paces deliriously in “endless mourning,” “desolate and silent” against the mutilated landscape of olive groves and the eternal hunting for blood (*Midnight* 36, 40). The threatening danger is invoked by the “thunderous hulk of metal/with complacent wings and an unerring aim,/circling as it hunts for its next target,” which could be the mother who is asleep or hanging out the clothes on the clothes’ lines. “It hounds her into streets/whose bruises are still warm./It seeks out her blood/today;/it will seek it out again tomorrow/and tomorrow and tomorrow” (*Midnight* 38; 40). These images reflect the daily experience of Palestinians, children, and adults alike, invoking the nightmarish atmosphere of a war zone that comingles history and geography. The speaker’s mother may represent the poet’s mother or perhaps Palestinian mothers in general whose “revolution [was] realized every day, without fuss and without theorizing,” in the words of Barghouti. In his “Introduction” to *Midnight*, Mannes-Abbott suggests that Barghouti “celebrates the constancy and sheer day-to-day industry of the women—’our mothers.’ Women, mothers, like his own mother Sakina ... who stayed, continued, created and sustained life.” Similarly, the poem celebrates the life and work of an ordinary ploughman and a taxi driver for their daily persistence to nourish their families. Barghouti’s feelings here are reminiscent of the words of Spanish Surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel who says:

> You have to begin losing your memory, if only in bits and pieces. ... To realize that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all. ... Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action, without it, we are nothing ...  

The most memorable figure remembered, however, is that of the poet’s grandfather. Twice he enters: once from the memory of the young boy of four and a second time as a witness to the destruction of the old family house. These two memories collapse the historical defeats of 1948 and 1967, the Nakba and Nazha, respectively. From the recessed memory of the young boy of four, Mourid remembers a time and a conversation he had had with his grandfather. In a small orange and lemon orchard, during the month of March, the childhood experience charges the adult poet as he writes using the “I”:

> I went in playfully / when, suddenly, / the scent of flowers made me feel dizzy  
And were it not for my grandfather’s arm,
I would’ve fallen in a swoon / of pleasure and death
(there’s always an arm without whose help we die).
Can oranges kill you? / Boy, what a disgrace! (Midnight 70)

This vivid recollection seems to have been part of life in Palestine before 1948. The oxymoron of “pleasure and death” arrests the reader’s attention regarding the power of the past, and the sensory experience provokes fresh thought about the relation of memory to history. When asked about the correlation between memory and exile in an interview by Jonathan Derbyshire, Barghouti responds, “Long wars, long dictatorships and long occupations make you the son not of geography, but of the idea of it ... the remembrance of it, the marks of it on your heart and your brain and your memory.” Barghouti’s memory of his grandfather inscribes an imaginary conversation between the two. The conversation envisions the poet’s future career, one akin to that of the most prominent Arab male singer, Abdel Wahab:

Can oranges kill you?/Boy, what a disgrace!
He said to me, as if he had said to me:/Boy! you will learn how to love a woman
and, like Abdel Wahab, you will write poetry./Who’s Abdel Wahab, Grandpa?
Why, he’s the village madman./he did nothing but write poetry
and poetry is all he left./He said to me, as if he had said to me:
I’ll always worry about you. (Midnight 70)

Simultaneously for the four-year-old, the conversation poignantly recalls the historical moment of 1948:

I rubbed the leaf of the orange in my hands,/as I had been told to do,
So that I could smell its scent/but before my hand could reach my nose
I had lost my home and become a refugee! (Midnight 70-72)

This tender recollection of the historical tragedy demonstrates Barghouti’s ability to maintain a critical perspective whereby beauty is created as a source of hope. Rather than falling “prey to the petulant criticism as well as to querulous lovelessness” (Said 183), out of memory Barghouti finds moral courage for artistic creativity.

In this regard, Barghouti seems to be in agreement with contemporary scholars who find in memory an alternative to recorded history, such as the work done by Andreas Huyssen. Although Huyssen’s memory studies focus on how German
and European cultures have been recently engaging the memory of World War II and the Holocaust, among other events, his critical approach could well expand to include Palestinian culture and the ways creative writers such as Barghouti represent their culture. Huyssen proposes that the past must be articulated or represented in creative form to become memory. He adds that because cultural representations are based on memory, forms and cultural constructs are “invariably contingent and subject to change.” Huyssen concludes, “The fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable. Rather than lamenting or ignoring it, this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity.”

Memory, I suggest, is thus being employed in Palestinian creative writing to inscribe the Palestinian historical consciousness by a Palestinian. For Barghouti, among other Palestinian writers, memory counteracts the abuses Palestinian history has suffered as a result of the official Israeli and Western version of Palestinian history.

The second instance when the grandfather is summoned by the adult poet describes the demolition of the old family home where the child used to take refuge, “before the advent of helmets and bulldozers!” (Midnight 86). Here memory plays “a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity” to merge the more recent history of occupation. The punitive act of the occupying forces, which has been ongoing against Palestinian property for decades, is changed. The painful memory, described in a detached tone, is transformed into the poignant image of the cloak!

My grandfather’s cloak gets hooked/on the bulldozer’s teeth.

The bulldozer retreats a few meters,/empties its load,
Comes back to fill its huge shovel,/and never has its fill.
Twenty times, the bulldozer/comes and goes,
My grandfather’s cloak still hooked on it. (Midnight 86)

Christopher Harker’s article “Spacing Palestine through the Home,” tells of the destruction of Palestinian homes by the Israelis, which has had a long history since 1948, and into the 1967 Six-Day-War and Oslo. Harker offers statistics collected by the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (Btselem). Since 1987 through 2004, 4,353 Palestinian homes in the OPT were demolished, as punishment for alleged military purposes or for being built without an Israeli-issued permit (Harker 323). Btselem tells that home demolitions continue to be in operation in the OPT as of 2015. In Midnight, the grandfather’s cloak imaginatively captures
the concrete scene to gently direct the reader’s emotionality to the historical injustice. Thus, Barghouti’s focus on this specific instance of history implies that spatial violence, individual and collective, will always be present when immortalized by creative writers. Mannes-Abbott puts it nicely when he says that Barghouti’s “manoeuvre [sic] of selective offering is crucial. It relates to an extraordinary precision in his poetry, the light touch of capturing things in a glance or a snapshot.”

The Exile and His Vocation

_Midnight_ ultimately tells of the poet/intellectual’s vocation in the first person pronoun to define the role of the poet. The exile’s only hope out of this “awful matter” is to try to “build,” “construct” the borders of his country, within his small apartment of four walls of hope, one “where the air is under lock and key” (_Midnight_ 162-164). It is here where the estranged lives “in that hidden silent spot within himself, [and where] he is careful of his mystery.” This site will be illuminated by the oil of the poet’s madness where the various appliances, vegetables, and other condiments will be construed as functionaries of a miniature state. The ironic tone of this section in _Midnight_ demonstrates Barghouti’s mind-set toward the political verbicide mentioned above. The poet is “a small craftsman/in the workshop of this world,” who knows that there is no answer to the causes of the “night sickness” (_Midnight_ 158). His existential search yields a realization of the facts of life and death: an earth that brings forth “fruits and reptiles, grains and earthquakes, fashion shows and insects, tulips and monkeys, and the others I have in mind” (_Midnight_ 156). An orphan who lost all battles, the exile does not lament. In writing, he asks simple questions that break down barriers, questions that see the two sides of the coin: those of the mourner and the mourned, the friend and the enemy, the winner and the loser.

The mourner resembles the mourned, /plumed hats

_Are followed by others who wear them,/nobody mourns the bare-footed

but the bare-footed,/and you are like us,/our bodies are yearning

for more than a victory; (_Midnight_ 108)

Similarly, with a tone underscored by humor, madness, understatement, and satire, the poet interrogates common notions of heroism and patriotism, victory and defeat, loss and success:

Like a master ordering his servant around,/you issue orders to yourself.

Confess that you have lost your convictions.
Say that you doubt all that gives you no reason for doubt.

..........................

Say that, whenever they mention heroism,
you see frailty obscured and highjacked!

..........................

Whenever they say “he lost,”/I imagine what he won. (*Midnight* 160)

It is already been mentioned how Barghouti alludes to W. B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming” to reflect on the modern conditions of existence. Barghouti also dips into one of Shakespeare’s most famous soliloquies from *Macbeth*. These two references are thematic and stylistic strategies on Barghouti’s part that collapse the temporal and spatial framework within the larger modernist period.

Thematically, the Shakespearean quotation, indicated in italics in *Midnight*, is placed immediately after the poem speaks of the ambiguity of the Arabic words for “midnight” and “midday”:

The two hands meet;/it’s midnight.
The spent half is night,/and the coming half is also night.
Have you ever thought of that?
..........................

The two hands meet;/it’s mid-day.
They look the same./What, then, is the problem? (*Midnight* 134-136)

Mannes-Abbott mentions the unique wording in Arabic that mixes day and night—“a more pregnantly ambiguous notion than that of a pivot or a starting point” (Introduction 14). I’d like to add that the Arabic words for the clock hands, “*’akraban,*” means two scorpions, which refer the reader back to the “Kingdom of Scorpions” that sting human present, past, and future across borders. Thus, the mechanical time, which controls human existence including that of the exile, is ultimately futile because as Shakespeare’s fool says, “it [life] is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury./Signifying nothing” (*Midnight* 140). Thus, by re-temporalizing and re-spatializing common notions of time and space, Barghouti crosses borders, as he reconfigures spheres that are universally timeless.
Conclusion

If time and space are out of joint, what kind of rapprochement does Barghouti propose? Can writing offer a possible order to a life doomed by death? Poetry and other modes of writing bring answers close to home for Barghouti. I believe that Barghouti succeeds in opening a window to “escape from the dominant language,” finds new metaphors out of “the chains of the collective and the tribal approvals and taboos,” as he puts it. The process of writing ascribes the poet agency to reject the “credulous nature of the political party, ... the idea of unconditional support,” while simultaneously sustaining human existence and celebrating life.36 Whereas death is collecting his victims, the speaker’s joy at realizing he is alive is immeasurable, though many others have been martyred. Born for the joy of life, the speaker-poet observes the panorama of “those assembled in the forum” (Midnight 34), celebrating his ancestors and remembering the unrecorded history of his people. The plunge into the painful memories of the nightmare of history, therefore, functions well for Barghouti to also celebrate life despite life’s unsettling force:

And although you can’t recall the details, / your extravagant joy, now mellowed, comes back again to you.

Silence and fury befit you,/resolve befits you.
It befits you to fly between two seagulls/as if you were a bridge spanning the banks of joy and sorrow,/that speaks not of its burdens because, but for the nagging of a hundred aches and pains,/you were born for joy.

(Midnight 32; 36)

Barghouti’s poetry offers a lyricism that is original, refreshing, a poetry that creates beauty out of pain. Universal in its reach, this poetry finds joy in small, concrete things:

To each is given a star in the sky,/that is his,/that recognizes him alone,
the way a baby’s lips/recognize its mother’s breast.
This (never lie to it)/is your star./It alone knows what you conceal.
It alone knows how you are threatened,
It alone knows that you are but a fragile crescent/in a powerful halo,
a crescent that does not know what to do with itself.

The sky has no roads/and no-one to ask for directions. *(Midnight 148)*

If that sounds romantic, it is not. According to Jayyusi, Barghouti rejects the romantic vision of the poet as hero or sage with all the potent tone of the prophet. In his quest for freedom from the occupation and his reconfiguration of the exile, Barghouti has simultaneously sought freedom from other impositions such as those of patriotic, committed, or resistance poetry. Having come of age in the 1980s, Barghouti, among others of his generation, ventures outside the parameters set by the abstract experimentation of some Palestinian and Arab poets.37 Darwish had voiced similar feelings regarding the constraints Palestinian and Arab poets face as they search for appropriate form to voice their concerns. He says, “The abstractions of this poetry have become so rampant that it has turned into a non-phonetic phenomenon where parasitical creations devour the essence.”38 For Mourid Barghouti, writing is the link between the mutilated exile and existence. From within the fragmented temporality and spatiality, the poem establishes a bridge between the mental imaginary and the living reality, between memory and history. Casting an optimistic note toward the future, *Midnight* discards the idea of Palestine, opting for the concrete reality of land and people. Barghouti says that in his poetry he “resort[s] to the concrete rather than the abstract, to the eye’s perception rather than to the mind’s contemplation,” and that he writes “in concrete and physical language.”39 In the process, the poet redefines the cultural role of the writer/intellectual in the modern period by paying homage to personal ancestors, the old poets of *al-Jahiliyya* (The Age of Ignorance), and to other poetic traditions. Mourid Barghouti neither essentializes the return as a pre-requisite to the national allegory, nor does he underscore intrinsic features of the *Nakba* and *Naza*. *Midnight* reinstates the historical concepts in the textual imaginary of the Palestinian Arab, to exhort future generations to comprehend the past and present, so that a more viable future may be born.

**Notes**


4. For the controversy regarding the number of Palestinians who were forced to leave their homes in 1948, see Rashid Khalidi, “The Palestinians and 1948: The Underlying Causes of Failure,” in Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 2nd ed.), 13. Khalidi explains the dispute over the exact number of the Palestinian refugees, which has been difficult to ascertain. He says that Benny Morris, in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1, speaks of “some 600,000-760,000” refugees. Khalidi suggests that the former figure is too low, while the latter is closer to UN estimates at the time, n. 5, p. 32.


9. Quoted in Said, *Reflections on Exile.* It is worth quoting the excerpt from the twelfth-century monk, Hugo of St. Victor: “It is, therefore, a source of great virtue for the practiced mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about invisible and transitory things, so that afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his,” 185.


17. Ibid., 19.


20. Ibid., 41.


22. See “Servants of War” where Barghouti quotes Nietzsche for saying “When you look long into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you,” 39.
27. Huyssen, *The Twilight of Memory*.
35. The quotation from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* reads as follows:

   Tomorrow and tomorrow, and tomorrow,/Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
   To the last syllable of recorded time,/And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
   The way to dusty death./Out, out, brief candle!
   Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
   That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
   And then is heard no more; it is tale
   Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing. (Midnight 138-140)