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The Ideology of Betrayal in Yasmine Zahran's Novel *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*

L'IDEOLOGIE DE LA TRAHISON DANS LE ROMAN DE YASMINE ZAHRAN "UN MENDIANT A LA PORTE DE DAMAS"

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Abstract

Yasmine Zahran's choice to write her novel, A Beggar at Damascus Gate in English, and her employment of a male narrator resulted in a work that almost defeated the author's intention to create a work that truly expresses the suffering of the Palestinian people. This can be noted through the cultural elements that the work highlights, and the male-oriented presentation of the narrative.

Key words: Postcolonial literature; Colonial discourse; Culture; Orientalism; Middle East politics; Diaries; Gender relations

Résumé

Le choix de Yasmine Zahran pour écrire son roman, un mendiant à la porte de Damas en anglais, et son emploi d'un narrateur masculin abouti à un travail que presque vaincu l'intention de l'auteur pour créer une œuvre qui exprime véritablement la souffrance du peuple palestinien. Ceci peut être noté à travers les éléments culturels que le souligne le travail, et la présentation axée sur les hommes de la narration.

Mots-clés: littérature postcoloniale; discours colonial; la culture; l'orientalisme; politique du Moyen-Orient; agendas; relations entre les sexes

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INTRODUCTION

Hans Berten (2002) raises some questions in *Literary Theory*: The Basics, concerning the treatment of literature written in European languages by people whose culture, language and ethnic origins are non-European, and the reception of such works by the European readership:

> Is it appropriate - and relevant - to read them in a 'Western' way, for instance from a New Critical, a structuralist, or a cultural materialist perspective? Can such a 'Western' approach do justice to a literary text that is the product of a non-Western culture? And is it at all possible for Westerners to read non-Western literature, even if it is presented in a European language, without any sort of prejudice? (p.198)

The questions raised by Berten provide a possible point of departure from where to approach Yasmine Zahran's novel, *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, which is written, not only by a non-European author who is supposedly the product of a totally different culture, race, religion, and even civilization, but a female who presumably suffers from double oppression and discrimination. The issues raised in Berten's quotation can be objectively viewed as expressive of a Westerner's initial response to the idea of dealing with the "otherness" of the author, on the grounds of origin, language, and culture through language. This approach reveals either a curiosity about the ontology of "otherness", and consequently the epistemological nature with which a Westerner should deal with it, or a total conviction that the two cultures with their difference cannot be measured by the same tools. In the first instance, the desire to know the "other" is natural, provided that one approaches that otherness without preconceived ideas, prejudice, or stereotyped images. In the latter case, it is important to think about the approaches of literary criticism adopted by different Western critics as a meaningless quarrel over how to read a text, when everyone finds a proper way to read, regardless of the prescribed rules that each school claims to be the "right" one. In an essay entitled "Against Theory," Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels (1982) state that "the whole enterprise of critical theory is misguided and should be abandoned" (as cited in Leitch, 2001, p.2461). This is not to say that we are going to participate in this endless argument about the usefulness/futility of theory, but to simply indicate that even within Western academia, there is no consensus on this issue. It is, therefore fruitless to take works written in English by foreign authors to task on the grounds of these theories. The problem that we probably find in works written in a foreign language relates to the adopted language of writing, because language can be considered a cultural vessel, and the employment of a word innocently by a non-native speaker can, perhaps, convey a message that may not be intended by the user.

Yasmine Zahran (1933-) whose education in the United States and Britain, encouraged her to write a novel about Palestine, seeing the great injustices committed against her own people, firstly on the hands of the British colonial power who, with the purpose of creating a Jewish state in Palestine, facilitated Jewish migration to Palestine, oppressed the indigenous people, and before ending their mandate, handed over all their weapons and posts to the Zionists, leading to a massive Palestinian exodus in favor of Western Jewish migrants who seized, expropriated and colonized the land; then on the hands of the new colonizers who perpetually degrade, humiliate and expose the indigenous Palestinian people who remained on their land to different forms of torture, humiliation and denial of their basic rights to exist on their land, Zahran in opting to tell her narrative in English had probably on her mind the English-speaking readership, and wanted to reveal the suffering of her people. The problem rests in how her narrative might be received by a Western audience, and whether she has opted for the right method and narrative technique that ensures the right expression to her ideas.

Zahran's employment of English as a means of expression, and an American male narrator to present her narrative, might be seen as a form of displacement of a culture through the use of a foreign language, and a negation of her right to speak as a female, delegating this authority to a Western male narrator. By surrendering her language and her gender to the American narrator, she not only places her female protagonist among the thousands of her silent sex, but by extention her own right as an author as well. This relegation of her right to speak, to express herself, whether as a writer or through her protagonist, Rayya, confirms the Orientalist's approach which Edward Said (1978) convincingly states about Flaubert and the Egyptian courtesan, Kuchuk Hanem:

> she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was "typically Oriental." (p.6).

Strikingly enough, Foster, the American narrator in Yasmine Zahran's novel, *A Beggar at Damascus Gate* (1995), expresses an almost identical view as he decides to tell the story of Rayya:

> I felt all-powerful for I had the means to expose the story of a Palestinian girl to the light, lining up behind her thousands of silent women who lived in the shadows and who, culminating in her, had at last the power to speak (p.24).

This "power" to speak subsequently is not an innate, inborn ability, not through his own independent personality, but imparted through a mandate from a female foreigner who, in her capacity, gave him the right to represent her and thousands of her silent Palestinian women whose voices otherwise cannot but remain mute.

In this paper we shall argue that Yasmine Zahran's choice of an editor, interpreter and a narrator of Rayya's notebooks, who belongs to the imperial culture, presents an appropriation of the other, offering an imperialist vision of the narrative if not openly as a substitute for it, tacitly producing an ambivalent interpretation that gradually displaces the indigenous narrative by suppression, distortion, and mutations that render its credibility dependent on the narrator's own dominant cultural ideology. This dependency, we argue, results from the employment of English as a vehicle of expression, and a male American narrator. The work, in our view, attempts to present a sort of narrative that seemingly sympathizes with the Palestinian cause, Palestinian suffering, and a vision of the future for Palestine. The story of a Palestinian young woman out and in Palestine whose connection with people of different nationalities and ideologies creates an enigma, a charm that mainly attracts males to her. At a closer examination, however, the work offers a yet more sinister perspective that is gradually demystified as the narrative unravels a point of view based on a Judaeo-Christian culture, with its Puritan thought and ideology. This perspective is consolidated through the choice of the title of the work, the narrator, the editor and the interpreter whose presence undermines any possibility of viewing it as a genuine representation of the Palestinian narrative, and casts doubt on the representational nature of such a character who, both in terms of belongingness and gender, can properly be the spokesman for a woman and a country exposed to oppression and exploitation by the same imperial hegemony.

1. DISCUSSION

In her review of Yasmine Zahran's novella in *World Literature Today*, Marilyn Booth (1997) argues that the work is a narrative of "suspicion and struggle on a personal level" and contends that "it is simultaneously and metaphorically the twentieth-century story of global politics in and around Palestine" (p.213). This view is perhaps expressed more elaborately in al-Naqib's discussion of the work in *Diaspora* (2005), where she emphasizes that the work through the multiplicity of voices "expresses, …, a contrapuntal performance that destabilizes the habituated univocity of identity and opens up the possibility of an alternative, less restricted conceptualization of character, identity, place, and so on" (p.248).

In a book review of the novel published anonymously in *Al-Jadid* (1996), the work is viewed as an expression of the Palestinian suffering, embodied in Rayya's insecure life and experiences. The reviewer claims that the story "describes the passions, emotions, and suspicions between Rayya and Alex", and finds that the work "is really about Palestine." The anonymous reviewer goes on to say that

> Rayya's anguish over the loss of her homeland hangs over her relationship and over her life. The question and pain of Palestine flow from every word of this book."
> (Retrived from http://almashriq.hiof.no/general/000/070/079/al-jadid/aljadid-books/alj-br-2-71.html)

Al-Naqib in her article on the novel finds in Zahran's choice of presenting the novel in English, rather than Arabic, an employment of the colonial language "the previous colonizer's language, the language of the dominant global order, one of the languages of oppression for Palestinians" (2005, p.248).

Evidently, in the above studies of the novel, the writers accept Foster, the American professor's interpretation of Rayya's notebooks, his inferences and his judgments without casting any doubts on their authenticity, sincerity, and intentionality, in spite of the apparent cultural gulf that separates him from the world he presumably is presenting. The role performed by the editor/narrator of Rayya's copybooks and Alex's journal in *A Beggar at Damascus Gate* extends beyond the traditional boundaries that are prescribed for narrators/editors in many of the novels one may encounter. It is assumed that the author of the work is a Palestinian woman who chose to present her work in English, probably with the view that her work can convey both a political and social message that counters so many misrepresentations of her own people and gender, and promote certain human values shared by different peoples whose religions and political agendas are so often if not clash, stand in contradiction. The work probably succeeds to a certain extent in giving an expression for some of the suffering of the Palestinian people, and the injustices they have been exposed to. What the author missed in her choice, nonetheless, is that this same narrator based his work on the supposition of duplicity, pretention, concealment and undeclared warfare that goes on beneath a thin veneer of love, admiration and mutual trust. It is this duplicity which the work itself emphasizes that requires a reading that interrogates every aspect of the work, and the refusal of all declared statements, emotions, fears, trust, or distrust, probing beyond the professed views, judgments and general observations to uncover the truth that lies buried beneath them.

The novel is based on extraliterary texts, that is, the notebooks, letters and papers of Rayya, together with Alex's journal which the American narrator rescues from oblivion in a damp closet inside his chamber in Petra. As Bakhtin (1981) argues, the representation of extraliterary discursive genres within the novel is one of the most basic and fundamental forms for incorporating and organising heteroglossia (p.320). Bakhtin outlines two ways in which extraliterary genres are incorporated in novels. First, they can be incorporated as structural components within a text (1981, p.323), and Second, they can be incorporated as organizing principles which directly determine and organize the structure of a novel (1981, p.323). In *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, it is possible to view the structure of the work as essentially based on these extraliterary texts, and the dominant ideology of the work is based on the selections the narrator chooses to present and comment on. The words of a character, as Bakhtin contends, express a particular ideological position, or "language world view," which "functions as one ideology among other possible ideologies" (1981, p.334). Thus the words each character in this novel says or writes can be considered expressive of a world view that may, or may not conform to other characters' visions. The problem that confronts the reader, then, is to determine whose words he/she is going to interpret, given the knowledge that Rayya's notebooks, letters and papers were written in Arabic; and therefore we are to read them in English through either Foster's own interpretation, or as quotations in Alex's journal, rendered in English. In presenting his narrative, Foster admits his selectivity from the notebooks in order to highlight one aspect of the narrative:

> I confess to a more serious and calculated prejudice in what appealed to me most, which were the passages that expressed their engulfing passion that excluded the time and space Surrounding them. it Is true that I made no additions, but I had to invent a temporal sequence for their actions, for neither of them had made a clear-cut notation of the order of events; they wrote of past, present and future in the same tense (Zahran, 1995, p.26).

It is true that much of this work is based on the notebooks and papers of Rayya, and the social and political views are given expression through Foster's comprehension and interpretation of these selections. Nevertheless, much of these views are reflected through a process of focalization that renders these views disputable and open to much doubt.

The concentration on the passion of love, reveals at least two significant facts: Firstly the male/female relationship which in one sense reflects the relationship colonialism views itself in relation to the Orient, one of dominator/dominated. Secondly, a reductive method which attempts to eliminate or reformulate any political ideology that may undermine the hegemony of the colonialist discourse. This elimination or reformulation comes through selection, interpretation and reconstruction of the spatio-temporal frame of the narrative:

> My intrusion upon the narrative was a painful detective work of interpretation, confirmation and assumption, an attempt at piercing their inner dialogue for the purpose of arriving at a coherent story (Zahran, 1995, p.26).

The novel is divided structurally into four parts, the first and last parts present the matrix narrative which is the narrator's own experiences, first in Petra where he discovers the raw materials for his work, and the last part in Palestine where he meets Rayya and obtains her consent for the publication of her story with Alex. The other two parts form the hypo narrative, Rayya's and Alex's story. The employment of paratextual strategies, such as footnotes, epigraphs, editorial comments, citations and so on, promote perspectives that usually mean to establish and confirm an ideology, embedded in the textual fabric of these devices that are incorporated within the work itself, forming a "dialogic" approach to history (Lacapra, 1980, p.274). The work contains five epigraphs, marking a point of view that one is supposed to unearth from the ensuing pages.

The employment of an American narrator to tell the story of a Palestinian girl reminds one of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), where the arguments of the British narrator, Marlowe in defence of the native inhabitants of the Congo ambivalently proves and refutes the oppressive role of the colonial agents and project where the colonial agents are guided, or misguided by "an idea" that "redeem(s)" the atrocities committed; "something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice" (p.6). Such a logic, perhaps, can guide an author like Conrad to expose and simultaneously cover up the evil that befell the indigenous people of Africa.

In A Beggar at *Damascus Gate* (1995), Zahran's narrator, Foster, offers some space for expressing the injustices and atrocities that were committed against the Palestinian people. This space, however, is not unrestricted, but rather filtered through the consciousness of a European male whose purpose of presenting these injustices crops out of purely egotistic quests. For instance, Rayya's reporting of the assassination of the Palestinian poet, Z, reveals the hard life Palestinians endure in exile, and the ordeal they undergo. This suffering is presented through a quotation which Foster finds in Alex's journal, rendering it in Alex's translation:

> I {Alex} thumbed the pages quickly, my eyes jumping over the lines until, by misfortune-for are we not always seeking our misfortune? I came upon a paragraph which mentioned me. The impact was so. cruel that my eyes were blurred: 'When I look into Alex's smooth face unravaged by stress, and see his indolent hands, his pampered appearance, his egocentricity and his undisturbed universe, I can't help comparing him to "z" who had the Same blondness, but upon whom life had not smiled. He had spent his childhood in a refugee camp in Damascus and then had received a scholarship to France where his mother sent him money earned by doing embroidery work at night and selling it at the gate of the camp. His domain was silence. He never spoke of his academic achievements,and he had had no childhood to speak of, nor love – for he was a lover of a captive land, a beloved of whom he had hazy memories. when I asked him what he remembered of Palestine, he replied, "I was eight years old when we left 1948, but I am lucky for I still remember. Think of my poor comrades who were born in exile and who are without memories, and who every day die for a Palestine they have never seen" He called me the '67 lot' as I called him the '48 lot', and both of us, as he said, marked the two stages of captivity. …. One midsummer day, the ascetic, timid youth was assassinated in his office in Paris, and when I gave way to my grief, Alex thought I was crying for him, for parting, for love. -- What irony. It made me want to laugh!
> (Zahran, 1995, pp.81-2).

Similarly, as Alex reads through the "Book of Sacrifice," in search for Rayya's words on the assassination of Z, he reads (translates and copies to his journal) her words that express sorrow and anguish:

> They killed him, but they can't still his voice. They filled his golden mouth with bullets, to stop the flow of his words -but generations yet unborn will sing his poems. His assassins saved him from the ravages of time, from the old age he feared, from the ugliness that comes with physical deterioration. I can see him gazing into my mirror examining his face and telling me: "Rayya, I am categorically against wrinkles, against white hair. If ever I get old, horribly old, it will be a Zionist plot against me!"
> I laughed loudly, for attributing all our ills to a Zionist plot was our way of laughing at ourselves. If one of us had slipped on ice and broken his back, we would have said it was a Zionist plot. It was our means of making light of the grotesqueness of things, easing the horror of reality. How odd that the Zionists he so feared helped to immortalize him. So, he always wins!' Zahran, 1995, p.84).

No doubt these passages reflect on individual suffering, misfortune, and tragedies. Yet, the collective sense of injustice, suffering, displacement and national identity remain twice removed from the scene. The first removal comes through the focaliser who, in this instance, is Alex, an English photographer who works for some secret service, and whose shock at the comparison/contrast shifts the emphasis from the victim of murder to the emotional victimization of himself. The second removal appears in the absence of the original text, and the presence of a translated one which Foster, the narrator includes in his selection. The minimizing of the idea of conspiracy to a joke, also lightens the tragic impact by providing a comic relief. Atrocities committed against the Palestinian people inside Palestine are not given prominence in the work, and even when they are referred to, they appear as brief comments, with no personal sense of suffering or authentication to support them. The narrative emphasizes the power of the Palestinian Liberation Army as an active force, inside and outside Palestine, with recruits from Muslims, Christians and Jews, working towards the achievement of a secular, democratic Palestine. This is clear in the remark which Foster makes when observing Rayya, disguised as a beggar:

> …. to my surprise I saw a bespectacled Israeli soldier bend down to drop his coin, his gun protruding behind him. My heartbeats were so loud. I was not imagining. I knew that she was saying

> something to him because her lips moved, and when he turned to go, she cried with a ring of joy in her voice, "Alms in the name of Allah." I left off bargaining for a while and walked past her. Could she be conspiring with an Israeli soldier? - and lo and behold! another youthful soldier stopped by to drop his coin. Could Rayya have formed a cell from disgruntled soldiers who were sick and repulsed by the brutality and inhumanity of the repression of the Intifada? I had gone back to continue bargaining for the coffee pot when a religious Israeli, with his black clothes, hat and locks dancing on the side of his face, stopped in front of Rayya, dropped his coin and plainly said something to her.
> "Ah," I said to myself, "she has also conspired with some religious Jews who are anti-Zionist." I chuckled inside and returned to my hotel
> (Zahran, 1995, p.145).

By these remarks, the narrator attempts to shift the burden of atrocity committed against the Palestinian people from the idea of expropriation of land, displacement of the indigenous people and their replacement with new colonial population, to a question of political decisions. Israelis replacing Palestinians in their homeland become amiable and even opponents to their government. As for the power of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), the presence of Rayya in Jerusalem, the disappearance of Rayya's notebooks and papers from his room in the hotel, the arrangement for his meeting with Rayya, all these happen under the nose of the Israeli internal and external intelligence unnoticed. This is how the narrator expresses his impression about Issa's arrangement for the meeting between Foster and Rayya:

> He {Issa} must have prepared this longed-for encounter by his trip to Jerusalem, the call to the Consulate and the invitation to Acre. It was the sign that I had been waiting for, only given after a thorough check of my identity and my political motives. I smiled with gratitude at him, thinking that the Palestine Liberation Army must have the quickest intelligence service in the world (Zahran, 1995, p.153).

It is evident from all the quotations presented that the focaliser is not the speaking Rayya, but the translators of her notes, whether Alex or Foster; and even when the first-person singular pronoun is employed to quote Rayya's words, it is presented within a context whose focalizing self is not the speaker, but the presenter of that text. Robyn McCallum in Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent *Fiction* (1999), *claims* that

> a speaker in a novel occupies a discrete subject position not dominated by the authorial or narratorial voice or position. Characters and narrators alike are constructed in and through language. They are constituted by a particular intersection of social and ideological discourses and they occupy discrete subject positions which are discursively and ideologically situated within a represented social world in dialogue with each other (p.28).

This claim, perhaps, breaks down when all events of the narrative are arranged according to a scheme in which characters are made to speak, act, or/and behave in a manner that consolidates the point of view a narrator advocates. All the characters speak similarly, and the textual discourse reflects no real subjectivity. A strict uniformity is placed on the manner in which all characters speak (or write); and this causes some confusion over the identity of characters.

The epigraph, or imperfect statement, that confronts the reader before the incipit of the work poses several questions whose answers remain doubtful and unsatisfactorily answered. The spelling error in the word "ficticious (sic): raises doubt about the nature of such an erratum, especially that it appears before the beginning of the narrative, and cannot have escaped the eyes of proofreaders. It invites an interrogation of the rest of the epigraph, particularly the word order which, when one examines, reveal a form of anagram, "only Palestine is real" (p.iv). This epigraph with its oxymoronic implications focuses the careful reader's attention on the central issue of the struggle, that is, the land of Palestine, with its long, Arab history and culture, all of a sudden transformed into a global colony, the expulsion of its indigenous population with the purpose of providing room for a colonial population, with a Biblical narrative closely linked to the founding fathers of the European migrants to the Americas[2] whose performance and implementation of the same story, destroyed the indigenous population and their cultures, replacing them with the country and culture of the dominant white.

A thoughtful meditation on the outcome of the work leaves one in doubt whether the narrator is really a sympathizer with the Palestinian cause, or a second packaging of the English Alex whose presence and absence trigger the whole events that commence with his introduction to Rayya, his unmatched talent in dissembling, his manipulative nature, and the ultimate assassination of Palestinian patriots. Alex's death which comes after a decade of successful masquerading comes apparently after the end of his mission, a case that gives rise to further interrogation about the real cause of its occurrence in Petra, "the graveyard" of both Roman and Nabatean civilizations.

The second epigraph, "Love has constantly changing landscape" discloses a tendency to postulate the shift in feelings that control a human being, depending upon the spatio-temporal conditions. This "constantly changing" allegiance, with its embedded antithetical nature offers the reader a possibility of suspecting what the narrator may openly declare to be a belief at some stage to be of transient nature, depending on the "landscape" where he/she may stand. The most important epigraph is, perhaps the fourth which initiates the third section of the novel "The Hidden face of the Moon," where the epigraph states the core of the novel: "If you want to look for the truth,examine the lie" (Zahran, 1995, p.63). With this epigraph, the concluding part of the deceptive relationship between Alex and Rayya is exposed, and through this exposition, the reader is invited to explore a new relationship that will develop between the narrator himself and Rayya.

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[2] In their book, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism* (1991, p.9), Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury describe the religious myth that drove the founding fathers to establish a New country, replacing the indigenous people in their land, without a sense of guilt:
"The myth remains shaped by European sources, but now one source above all, the Bible, and especially its opening chapters, Genesis and Exodus, the tale of the Chosen People and the Promised Land. …. the essential tale was a religious one of travail and wandering, with the Lord's guidance, in quest of a high purpose and a millennial history. When Puritans wrote of the New World and the allegory of the Puritan diaspora, they were, by following out the biblical types, telling nothing less than the tale of God's will revealing itself in history."

As in Conrad's work, the novel presents another angle of vision, one that justifies the atrocities committed against the Arabs in general, and the Palestinian people in particular. Though putting the words, seemingly as a quotation which Alex employs, his words seem to express a conviction held by many European and American politicians:

> I {Alex} wondered if it ever occurred to Rayya that interests In the Arab world all of its own, and an image flashed in my mind of a very honorable gentleman moving his cane over a huge map and saying: 'If you follow my cane you will see the measure of the area we call the Arab world; look at it vis-a-vis Europe, and reflect on the consequences. If that dream of Arab unity is one day realized, it will become an immediate way of life and our standard of living. Just remember that raw Materials will become expensive and scarce. Industrialization and improved agriculture will close the Arab World as a market for Western goods, especially British products. Strategically,we will be at their mercy, for they are at the crossroads of a shrinking world.' And here, his cane against the desk in front of him and said In a whisper: 'We must buy time against this projected unification,which threatens our very existence, and the group of people that you must watch, split, harass and if necessary destroy are the Palestinians, for they, more than any other Arab people,need this unity for survival. Strike at the Palestinians and you shatter the core of Arab unity. Please note that every Western power is aiming at the same target by different means.' And he concluded with his voice rising above a whisper: "Do not let us deceive ourselves: Arab unification is inevitable; all we can do is to delay its course,and it is here that our interests converge with those of the Israeli, for they also are buying time" (Zahran, 1995, p.69-70).

This warning of a potential danger posed by Arab unity and the rights of the Palestinians may, perhaps, unconsciously be sensed, and lead to a protective and cautious approach to this question, awaken the dormant mythical beliefs that demonise the other, and justify brutality. It is true that the speaker in this quotation is neither Alex nor Foster, but the inclusion of this quotation in the work uncovers an identification with the speaker, first by Alex, and by extension the narrator as well. The editor in many instances sympathises with Alex, to the extent of total identification. Right from the beginning of his interpretation of the notes, one finds a concealed identification with Alex, and a condemnation of Rayya's behaviour. The translation of the notebooks, or the quotations selected for interpretation, echo the Biblical story of Samson and Dalilah, a Palestinian woman leading an Israeli man to his doom. The emphasis on the ancient Nabatean gods removes Rayya from the world of revealed religions to the world of idolatory, much to the disadvantage of the people he claims to support and more to the refusal of their ideals. Furthermore, and before the story proper begins, we are presented with a verdict pronounced on the Palestinians as a whole that comes enveloped in a form of praise to the Palestinian cook's talent in masquerading:

> "It was a mask he wore, though I did not know why. What amazed me though was not his {the Palestinian cook's} anglophobia, *for it is rare to find a Palestinian who is not*" (Zahran, 1995: 17 italics Added)

This view of the Palestinians in general helps to prejudice, and evoke a sense of reservedness on the part of the reader who, is most likely to be an English-speaking citizen from the West, blocking any sympathy that might arise toward the people who are assumedly pathologically inclined towards the hatred of anything that is English.

Likewise, and before the editor puts the reader into the details of his discovery, he emphasizes the duplicity of Rayya through highlighting two select quotations, with the purpose, perhaps, to create a cautious attitude on the part of the reader towards what she will say or do:

> "Duplicity is an art raised even to the status of philosophy, and like the Al-batiniah the artist raised a screen and takes pleasure in playing games with his audience," and "Veiling your beliefs from the eyes of the vulgar is an act of self-preservation, thus avoiding the jealousy of men and gods." (Zahran, 1995, p.16).

In order to heighten the awareness of the reader of the purpose for this select quotation, the editor employs a paratextual device by adding a footnote informing his audience of what the "al-Batiniah" is, offering more precautionary measures to the reader. Moreover, and with the purpose of giving credibility to his narrative, the editor right from the beginning introduces himself as an American academic whose knowledge of Arabic comes as a result of being brought up in Beirut, receiving his higher education in the States and occupying an academic position, as his father did, in a well-established academic institution, the American University Beirut (Zahran, 1995: 8).

The title of the work itself, moreover, presents a discrepancy in the view to the assumed sympathies and support declared by the editor to Rayya and the cause she assumedly advocates. By employing a Biblical appellation to a Palestinian site, the whole narrative becomes somewhat eschewed, suspicious and unreliable. The "Bab al Amoud" which presents the Palestinian appellation is replaced with "Damascus Gate", a change that can be seen as a displacement of the Arab narrative in the interest of a theological alternative that runs in line with policies adopted by Westerners in the colonial projects, whether in Africa, the Americas, and obviously in Palestine[3] .

It is surprising that the depiction of Rayya's character appears flawed, to the extent that makes one wonder over the author's knowledge of how females feel and think. The author's presentation of her male characters seem more convincing than female ones who are either strangers to their societies, or unjustifiably presented in an unconvincing manner. What we see of the major female character lacks substantiation in the narrative. She is simply presented as a woman who seeks to ensnare males for no clear purpose, and the intellectual rigor bestowed upon her seems naively added to cover or compensate for the lack of substance. Moreover, the name "Rayya" itself, cannot be considered one of the proper female names common in Palestine. Al-Naqib (2005), in her discussion of the work tries to find an explanation for the employment of this naming of the character; her discussion offers a view many would think proper:

> Because the word "banner" in Arabic is raya, phonetically close to Rayya, it would not be a stretch to read Rayya allegorically as a banner for or representative of the anger, urgency, radicalism, and growing nationalism of Palestinians during this period of resistance (p.242).

In reality, many girls bear the name Rayah (banner) in Palestine and the Levant, whereas Rayya is more common among Arabs in North Africa, particularly Egypt. In the Wikipedia, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raya_and_Sakina- we find that the name, "Rayya", is usually associated with two female serial women murderers, "Rayya and Sakina," who lived in Alexandria in the early 1920s, and whose crimes were so terrifying to the extent that they fuelled several horror films and plays in Egypt. The names of the two major characters of the work, when placed adjacently, ironically, form the name of Alexander-Rayya, closely linked to the Egyptian city of Alexandria.

The work opens with the narrator going to Petra, coincidentally on the same time of the year the first diary notes that confront him are written, in an unexplicable mission, disregarding the warnings of a friend in Amman not to go there at this time of the year:

> Go to Petra if you must, but I warn you, it is not the season. Tourists, even archaeologists, go to Petra either in the spring or in the autumn" (Zahran, 1995, p.6).

The unconscious ideas of the editor of the notes seem to lurk even from the outset at discovering Rayya's notebooks and Alex's journal. The first allusion to Rayya's so-called magical recipes uncovers a profound ideology that has been already fostered in the editor's mind. They are, according to the editor, similar to "what the astrologists called the "seal of Solomon", and goes on to surmise that they "may have originated in the Jewish Kabala" (Zahran, 1995, p.8). This allusion uncovers a profound conviction already adopted by the editor about the people and land that the whole novel centers around, and therefore any interpretation of the notes is likely to lead to conclusions closely associated with, if not wholly identical to his own ideology.

The diaries and papers of Rayya stand in sharp contrast to the journal which Alex used, and through this contrast one would sense the unconscious identification of the two white men. Rayya's notebooks and papers were divided into seven notebooks with notes, dates, entries and poems on sheets of paper, "extracts of letters or the letters themselves attached here and there" (Zahran, 1995, p.15), a sign of disorderly presentation of matter, usually attached by imperialists to the orient; whereas Alex's "elegantly bound leather journal" revealed a more civilized person: "The writing was that of a man, and the neat, precise, clean pages featured no scribbles and no sketches" (Zahran,1995, p.16). Thus the female, the oriental who lacks order in form, and who is linked to superstition, magic and charm is placed in contrast to the male, occidental who is disciplined and rational, a portrait that imbues the whole work with its political and sexual purport.

Expressing his feelings and attitude toward the two characters, the narrator admits his identification with Alex:

> At times it was a relief to put aside Rayya's notebooks and go back to Alex's journal, for I felt more at home, or perhaps I understood him better. Rayya's excessiveness, mysticism, pessimism weighed heavily upon me, as it must have weighed on him. It was a pleasure to read Alex's clear-cut, precise lines (Zahran, 1995, pp.57-8).

An important part of his identification with Alex is his desire to occupy his place, and to take part in his adventure, repeating to himself the words addressed to Rayya by Alex:

> I found myself whispering; to this unknown being the words of the lover that she had recorded herself: "Be still my big cat, my desert flower" and I wanted, like him, to stroke her hair, to sleep. (Zahran, 1995, p.12).

And on his way to Amman in the car, dozing he dreams of the two lovers, "I could half see them alone on the plateau, … he fragile, pale, and, she feline, alert, dark" (Zahran, 1995, p.21). Nevertheless, the portrait presented here of Rayya reveals some unconscious foreboding. The adjective "feline" with its different implications, contrasts sharply with Alex's portrait as "fragile, pale"; they seemed to the narrator in his dream as two opposite forces: "I was amazed at how they completed each other-the twin forces of light and darkness" (Zahran, 1995, p.21). Moreover, the image of Rayya as a "cat" and Alex as a "bird" is frequently presented, reflecting the image of destructive charm, hypnosis, and treachery (Zahran, 1995, pp.22, 30).

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[3] Imposing place names is part of imposing control and passes judgment on ownership, according to Palestinian American scholar Rashid Khalidi. "This process of naming," Khalidi says, "is an attempt to privilege one dimension of a complex reality at the expense of others, with the ultimate aim of blotting the others out, or decisively subordinating them to Israeli domination." (Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness,* New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 14–15). Khalidi notes that Israel frequently imposes Hebrew or Arabicized Hebrew names on Arab locations. For instance, Jerusalem is called Yerushalaim in Hebrew and al-Quds al-Sharif in Arabic, but official Israeli documents in Arabic, as well as Israel's radio and television broadcasts in Arabic, use the word Urshalim, the Arabic translation of the Hebrew name.

The presentation of Rayya's character reveals, probably, a weak confused feminine, indeterminate character. A being who is attracted physically and emotionally to a man whose protection she desires, and yet plots to murder. The excessive emotional flow voiced through Foster's translation of her diaries, echoes a profound profusion of emotions and feelings of love, fear, yearning and remorse. Moreover, the reference to Rayya as a "wild cat," by both Alex and Foster evokes the negative connotations of this word as *"A woman who is regarded as spiteful," as The American Heritage Dictionary puts it. In addition, she is also considered as "a desert flower," an uncivilized beauty*. This odd amorphous admixture of feelings reflects negatively on the character and makes her seem more of an object to be controlled than a real human being who has the will and power to act. Writing of the last visit to Petra with Alex, Rayya says:

> It was he who shielded me; his paleness stood between me and chaos, between me and darkness. 'his frailty is all I have to guard me against the night. I trembled so that he took off his duffle jacket and wrapped it around me. I could not explain to him as we walked the pebbled wadi bed and the remnant of the paved Roman road to the Temple of Jupiter, that I was trembling with fear, and that I felt the menace over him so threatening that when I saw him move and talk, I wanted to kneel and cry my thanks and joy to Allat-Menat and Dhu-Shara, the ancient Nabatean gods whose beneficent presence I suddenly felt.' (Zahran, 1995, p.12).

The flow of emotions that is presented to the reader, and which might raise some identification with Rayya, is quickly undermined and eroded by a second quotation taken from the diaries in which she confesses her complicity in Alex's murder:

> "It was I who acted as destiny and dragged him to this forsaken corner of Arabia. It was I who acted as the channel of fate and attracted him to this bare, stark, wind-swept corner of my lostv world. It was I who exposed him to all these lurking, past forces. What pity I felt when I saw his pale eyes scanning the wasteland slowly, as one does in dreams." (Zahran, 1995, p.12).

Al-Naqib (2005) rightly identifies the relationship between Alex and Rayya as an allusion to the British conquest of Palestine in the first decades of the twentieth century, and goes on to say that

> The dynamic of their relationship—full of heated arguments, misunderstandings, betrayals, and rigid stereotypes—can be read to represent the adversarial dynamic between colonizer (Britain) and colonized (Palestine) (pp.242-3).

This colonial relationship can, perhaps, be extended to explain Foster's role, as representative of the neocolonialism or imperial ambitions of America, filling the vacancy left after the demise of the British empire.

CONCLUSION

In her attempt to present a narrative of the Palestinian suffering, Yasmine Zahran chose English to tell the narrative, and a male narrator from the West. These choices, in fact had their own drawbacks that affected the message to the reader through the inability to select the right terms of expression to the ideas she might have had on her mind, producing a distorted image of the Palestinian people, and presenting a narrative that is loaded with cultural connotations that almost refute the whole narrative and provide the reader with a somewhat vague argument for the Palestinian cause. If Fredric Jameson (1986) finds in "*the story of the private individual destiny" usually "an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (p.69; original emphasis) this "allegorisation" seems not fit an expression for the Palestinian culture and people. The use of Biblical appellations for Palestinian sites, the concentration on the heathen gods of the pre-Judaeo-Christian theism in Rayya's speeches, removes the sympathy towards the other narrative that is ideologically counter to the one Zahran attempts to present. Moreover, the employment of certain terms, such as "settlements" (Zahran, 1995: 156) in stead of "colonies" gives the action itself a more neutral stand, taking into consideration the European conquest of territories in Africa, Australia, Asia and America where they established their settlements, a term that indicates empty lands inhabited for the first time by those colonizers, without any indication of violence or displacement for the indigenous populations. Edward Said (1999), in describing how the Palestinian narrative is usually presented in art may best express this situation:

> Since our [Palestinian] history is forbidden, narratives are rare; the story of origins, of home, of nation is underground. When it appears it is broken, often wayward and meandering in the extreme, always coded, usually in outrageous forms—mock-epics, satires, sardonic parables, absurd rituals—that make little sense to an outsider. Thus Palestinian life is scattered, discontinuous, marked by the artificial and imposed arrangements of interrupted or confined space, by the dislocations and unsynchronized rhythms of disturbed time. (p.20).

It is true that the narrator's encounter with Rayya and Issa in the last part of the novel somewhat presents an approach that is more humane and sympathetic attitude towards the Palestinian people, and thus creates a better understanding extended by an American to the Palestinian people, but even this attitude is sometimes marked by phrases that still bear signs of pity rather than sympathy. In his conversation with Issa, Foster remarks:

> I bowed my head and said to Issa, "I was born and raised among Arabs, and I foolishly thought I understood them, but I admit that Arab subtlety is beyond my comprehension" (Zahran, 1995, p.154).

The closing lines of the novel, said by the narrator, reveal something more of a sympathy towards Rayya, and ironically enough, her image shifts from the "wild cat" and the "wild flower", to a "fraill" human being, a quality ascribed to Alex all through the novel:

> A great compassion for her engulfed me, for she was in the lion's den under the nose of her enemies, and who knew where she would sleep that night and where she would be the next day. I wondered under what mask she would surface again, and under what assumption she would metamorphose. My heart gave a sharp pain for her loneliness, for her human frailty, and I called after her and murmured, "Rayya, go if you must, for this landscape will never give you peace, until it is free." (Zahran, 1995, p.157).

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