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Pan Arabism and the Question of Palestine: A Reading of Yasmine Zahran's *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*

Kaustav Mukherjee
Michigan State University

Abstract

The narrative of Yasmine Zahran's novel, *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, situates the political ideology of Nasser's pan Arab project as a cultural construct. It reveals the Palestinian history as seen from the different ideological perspectives of the two protagonists. I dwell into the ideas of pan Arabism and why for Rayya, the female protagonist of the novel, Palestine's fortune is inextricably linked with the pan Arab movement. The narrative tries to give two vantage points of looking at the question of Palestine—one of a Palestinian revolutionary and the other of a British spy. It tries to promote the idea that the solution to the question is embedded within the ideological cooperation between them, while the hurt of history makes it seemingly impossible to bridge the differences.

[**Keywords:** Yasmine Zahran, *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, Rayya and Pan-Arabism, ideology, Palestine]

In this paper I will be looking at how Yasmine Zahran's novel, *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, tries to answer the question of Palestine through a re-positioning of the pan Arab political identity. The narrative employs two main tropes: one is the indirect allusions to, against and for the history of the region and its people; the second one is the clash of Rayya's and Alex's narratives as deliberate vantage points to look at this issue from different ideological positions. I will try to show how the narrative works with history and how the aforementioned ideological positions ascertain the ways the two main characters look at history.

The narrator is a Lebanese academic whose name is never revealed to the readers except near the end where we come to know that his last name is Foster. All we know about him is that he was born and brought up in Beirut, his first language is Arabic and after studying for some years in the United States, he had gone back to Beirut as a professor at the American University. The story commences during his visit to Petra, Jordan at the beginning of the year nineteen eighty. The narrative is dispersed between the past (through Rayya and Alex's narratives in their respective notebook and journals) and the present (that of the narrator). It is through the narrator's reading of their notes that the main plot concerning Rayya and Alex unfurls. The reader is told that exactly three years prior to Foster's visit, the couple had stayed in that same room in the rest house and that it was in Petra that Alex had met his death in an accident.

Alex is a British spy whose clandestine mission is centered on Rayya. The latter is a Palestinian activist, engaged in covert operations aimed towards the liberation of the

Palestinian Arabs; for her the strange duality about space and her own space in this world is symbolic of the dichotomy facing the Palestinian exiles. She is both a writer and an archaeologist by trade. Caught in the Al-Naqba of the past, she pins her hopes on the future. The past represents the history which she cannot escape while the future is symbolic of the hope she and her fellow revolutionaries carry within them. However, it is the present which confuses her.¹ Her current exile is presumably an emblematic representation of the Palestinian in exile.

The narrative depicts the clash between the postcolonial narratives of Rayya and Alex and the difficulty both of them face in their quest for their respective political missions and their private efforts to comprehend each other's history from two different ideological standpoints. Alex is frustrated at not being able to grasp the 'logic' behind Rayya's obsession with Palestine and pan Arabism. On the other hand, Rayya's narrative delineates her own difficulty at making Alex discern her position of an exiled postcolonial. The issue of prioritizing duty over love is problematized by their devotion towards each other. The tropes of travel and exile are highlighted regularly. Rayya and Alex are exiled in their love for each other; they are constantly moving; from Katmandu to Delhi, from Tunis to Paris. They meet at airports, and their meetings are always interspersed with long, painful months of separation. There is a kind of abstractness in their relationship which is magnified by their long partings from each other. Rayya is continuously troubled by her own exile from her motherland. Alex is troubled by Rayya's sense of exile which he cannot clutch properly. As their deceptive identities become a site for contention in their relationship, a war of attrition ensues between them. Alex's lies become clearer to Rayya and she becomes aware of his interest in her political endeavors. At one point, Alex, while going through her notebook discovers the existence of a former lover, an assassinated poet named "Z" with whom Rayya's ideological and cultural links were perhaps stronger than they could ever be with him. He is enraged at the vacuum their relationship has created and is jealous of the fact that Rayya is perhaps concerned more with the exiles of the Al-Naqba and the June War, than she is with Alex. He assumes that it is the Palestinian cause which has jeopardized their exilic relationship.

Images ran before me like a film in reverse. Who was this Rayya? My lover? Or, like the assassinated Fida'i, only a lover of Palestine? Does this explain why she would not ever discuss a permanent relationship and could not tolerate my presence except sparingly? Her real world was not with me but with the furtive Feddayin with whom she talked of the day of liberation and of a future in which, alas, I cannot take part. (82)

The bridge between the two political ideologies, which each of them represents, is repeatedly highlighted by the vacuum of incomprehension which each tries to futilely negate. While reading Rayya's notebook, Alex at one point comes across a poem dedicated to him.

To Alex:

I cannot say to you—your people shall be my people

Your gods shall be my own
I try to hide from you, no—from myself
The horror that in their heyday
Your people sold my people
Your people gave away my land, my earth, my blood
Your kin bartered my heritage, my future
Can you forgive me, if I tell you
How often you who are so close to me
Seem alien, of the blood of those who sold my mother's grave.
Does this explain the moments
Of estrangement that creep between us
Could this be the void that stands
Between oppressor and oppressed? (72)

Rayya's poem summarizes some of the intrinsic problems she faces in her relationship with Alex. She acknowledges the burden that the hurt of history has placed on her. She cannot escape the realization that it was Alex's people who had partitioned the land of her ancestors; by using the word 'kin', she points her finger at Britain's and Israel's allies as well, the countries who voted her mother out of her grave in the United Nations emergency vote of 1948. Rayya compares her heritage to a commodity that got bartered by the Britain and her allies. She posits the bafflement within her relationship with Alex in the 'void' that stands between the colonizer and the colonized.

Alex makes Rayya hear his retort:

This is not a relationship between a man and a woman, this is a confrontation between two enemies, two races, two cultures. (72)

This polarity is what drives their narratives forward simultaneously. Alex seems to represent the 'oppressor' or the neo-orientalist while Rayya represents the 'oppressed' or the oriental. Alex is British; Rayya is from Palestine, a former imperial British Mandate. He is from the country which wove the Balfour Declaration; she is from the 'land with no people'. Alex represents those for whom Arab unification supposedly is a viable political and economic threat; for Rayya, Arab unification is the only solution for a Palestinian liberation. Alex is sent to spy on Rayya; Rayya knows the threat he represents against the most important mission in her life; yet, both fall in love. Their love is woven in a poetry of abstractness as it is unfathomable, in the sense that it is caught in the tussle between two cultures and two ideologies and cannot be quantified or described in either's co-ordinates of knowledge production. It is so to speak, a vacuum with a black hole effect which attracts both in a way which neither can escape.

It is again history that both of them look back to in order to enunciate their position around the issue of Palestine which dominates their own relationship. It is crucial to feel the note of bafflement that Alex perceives in his outsider's view of Rayya's dedication to the Palestinian cause, her fixation with a pan Arab revolution and her own bafflement with the Western construction of space. Her narrative gains voice through Alex's own writings where he observes Rayya's predicament about the constructed space of the Palestinian refugees and the partition of the land which is now Israel. There seems to be an abstract ideological bridge which neither Rayya nor Alex can overcome in their efforts to know each other better. Alex is aware of Rayya's obsession with the Palestinian cause. Conscious of the political history of the region, Alex tries to make Rayya understand the futility of her venture from his Western ideological perspective.

While dealing with a book as this one, one has to remember the importance of history in two timelines: one leading up to 1980, when the narrative begins, and the other extending into the 90s, when the work was written and published. In fact the final part of the narrative takes place in 1989 during the apex of the first Palestinian Intifada. The narrative works indirectly with the history leading up to this period and in order to do a critical study of the book, one must see it in the light of the history it is a part of.

Rayya and Pan-Arabism

As pointed out earlier, the idea of pan Arabism is mentally harnessed by Rayya; she hopes for a reversal of fortunes for the pan Arabists. Recent history does contradict her optimism. It is to be noted here that the book was first published in 1995, two years after the signing of the Oslo Peace Agreement between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin. The same year (1995) Oslo II happened. But in order to understand the important spots of contention between Alex and Rayya one needs to look further back into history starting from the formation of the United Arab Republic in 1958.

The United Arab Republic was officially formed on February 1, 1958 with the amalgamation of Syria and Egypt. The popular support this move garnered was immense in the entire Arab world, more so in Egypt and Syria where, as Dawisha points out 'the referendum in the two countries registered almost unanimous approval of the new united state, 99.25 in Syria and 99.8 in Egypt.' (202)

Pro-UAR poetic slogans filled up the streets of Damascus:

wahdat Misr wa Surya
 jisr al-wuhda al-'Arabiya
 shawka bi 'ayn al-raj'iya
 dhid al-isti'mar wahlaful
 al-'askariya

(the unity of Egypt and Syria/ is the bridge of Arab unity/ and a thorn in the eye of reaction/ against imperialism and its military alliance) (Dawisha:201)

badna wuhda 'Arabiya

Islam wa Nisraniya

wa 'adala ijtima'iya

(we seek Arab unity/ of Islam and Christianity/ and social justice) (201)

huriya lil Jaza'ir

lil watan al-'Arabi al-

Tha'ir

(freedom to Algeria/ to the revolutionary Arab/ homeland) (201)

The idea of a pan Arab nationalism thus came with the idea of an Arab stance against imperialism and unity. The popular secular tone, as shown by the second excerpt of the song above is the impulse that pushes Rayya to proclaim the following:

Our first real voyage was to Tunis. It was a journey that I knew he deeply desired, but he feigned reluctance and insisted that I was luring him into my world. On arrival I became painfully aware of his separateness. This cleavage deepened further in other lands with his reaction against what he called bitterly my 'professional Arabism', which left him out. It was an accusation that I considered derogatory since it turned a passionate feeling into a trade, touching a sensitive cord, and I asked myself whether attachment to Arab nationalism, which we Palestinians carried like a banner was excessive or seemed so only to Western eyes. *Perhaps this excessiveness was our reaction to the international movement of Zionism—in the face of which we needed the power and depth of Arabism. After all, Arab nationalism is built on geography, history, culture, religion and language and is more embracing than Zionism, which is built on religion alone.* (37-38-my italics)

We see here two interlinked causes. One is that of pan Arab nationalism and the other is Palestinian liberation. She differentiates between Zionism and her 'professional Arabism' on the grounds that the latter is more secular, more encompassing and with a continuous history (like that of the Palestinian Arabs in comparison to the Jewish 'invaders')² Before we move on, it is important here to look back at the ideology behind Rayya's inference about the pan Arab cause.

George Antonius in his work *The Arab Awakening*, discusses the definition of the term 'Arab'. He says:

It gradually came to mean a citizen of that extensive Arab world—not any inhabitant of it, but that great majority whose racial descent, even when it was not of pure Arab lineage, had become submerged in the tide of Arabisation; whose manners and traditions had been shaped in an Arab mould; and, most decisive of all, whose mother tongue is Arabic. The term applies to Christians as well as to

Moslems, and to the off-shoots of each of those creeds, the criterion being not Islamisation but the degree of Arabisation. (18)

The figure of Sati al-Husri has to be explored in any discussion of the ideology behind the formation of the idea of pan Arab nationalism. Husri's initiation into this sector was influenced heavily by the German philosophy about nation being a cultural construct and hence being a prequel to the formation of the state. This differed considerably from the Anglo-French school of philosophy which placed the state ahead of the nation which it regarded as a political construct. Husri developed his notion of nation and cultural nationalism under the heavy influence of German philosophers like Herder, Fichte and Ernest Arendt. The close similarity between German statelessness before 1870s and the Arab statelessness during the 1920s might have played a major role in influencing Husri's predilection towards this school of thought.³ Thus his concept of Arab unity through culture (history and language) has startling similarities with the German *volk* and *volksgeist* as propagated by Herder. Husri is quoted by William Cleveland in his book *The Making of an Arab Nationalist*:

Every person who speaks Arabic is an Arab. Everyone who is affiliated with these people is an Arab. If he does not know this or if he does not cherish his Arabism, then we must study the reasons for his position. It may be a result of ignorance—then we must teach him the truth. It may be because he is unaware or deceived—then we must awaken him and reassure him. It may be a result of selfishness—then we must work to limit his selfishness. (127)

For Husri, history and culture, and not religion form the most important aspects behind the formation of a nation and the idea of nationalism. He cites several examples from history to bolster his definition of nationalism and contends that the future of Arab nationalism has to be secular and culturally all-Arab encompassing in order to succeed in its effort to form a pan Arab nation. Charles Malik in his article "The Near East: The Search for Truth", gives a definition quite similar to that of Husri. But he is more wary of the problems that such a pan Arab nation might face if it does not take into account the heterogeneity present within the Arabs. In fact it is in this failure to acknowledge the heterogeneity on the part of the pan Arab thinkers and their followers that Dawisha locates the inevitable collapse of Arab nationalism. In his book *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, he traces the illiberal streak of the German school of nationalist thought which Husri and the other Arabs (including Nasser and Michel Aflaq of the Syrian Baath party) embraced as the main cause for the gradual breakdown of the pan Arab impulse. He states that the biggest setback for the propagation of their ideology lay in the fact that they placed the nation ahead of the individual and overlooked the political and (in some sectors) cultural differences; like their German predecessors, "unifying the nation was the supreme goal and a sacred act, which necessitated subsuming individual will into the national will. Notions of liberty or freedom were distractions, and when they contradicted the national will, they had to be repressed." (298)

Adeed Dawisha locates the downward slide of Pan Arab nationalism from September 11, 1958 when 'Abd al Salam 'Aref was asked to relinquish his position of Staff Colonel by General Abd al-Karim Qasim of Iraq. The duo had previously played important roles in the Iraqi revolution early in the same year which saw the forced demise of the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq. King Faisal II, crown prince Abd al-Ilah and Prime Minister Nouri al-Said were all assassinated by a coup led by Colonel Abd al-Karim Qasim (The royal family were executed simultaneously in the premises of their palace while Nouri al-Said was murdered later by Qasim's followers). Iraq had previously refused to join Nasser's United Arab Republic and had instead joined hands with the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan to create the federation of the Arab Union. Lacking the kind of public support that the UAR procured, the Arab Union staged its own motivation towards a pan Arab nation by pointing out that the Hashemite Kings, Faisal and Hussain, were the true inheritors of the legacy of the famous Arab revolt of 1916 and were better suited to achieve Arab unity than the UAR under Nasser's leadership. Thus when the coup happened in Iraq, Nasser and his followers were naturally expectant of the new Iraqi government to show a strong preference towards joining the UAR, specially in the wake of 'Abd al Salam 'Aref's vocal support for the pan Arab cause. So when 'Aref was removed from his position and was subsequently arrested, Nasser knew that Qasim's *wataniya* project would hold sway over his own *qawmiya* mission. Thus started the downhill slide of Nasser's Arab nationalism; before the most important jolt of the Six Day War of 1967, which Fouad Ajami, Dawisha and many others describe as the 'waterloo of pan-Arabism' (Ajami in fact locates 1967 as the retreating point for pan-Arabism), several political developments in the middle-east had ensued which would go on to threaten the legitimacy of Nasser's UAR and eventually lead to its demise.

In 1958 the matter was divided into two camps—the conservative anti UAR camp of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq and Tunisia (though the support Tunisia's Habib Bourguiba extolled from his own people could not be compared to the support the Hashemite kings and King Sau'd had from theirs') and the *progressive* anti-western regimes of Egypt and Syria. But the most important blow came from within so to speak in 1961; the Baathist leaders of Syria, who had seen their party getting dissolved in the wake of the formation of UAR and who had been a staunch ally of Nasser in his project, soon became frustrated with Nasser's unitary autocracy. There was unrest within the Syrian army as well, which was quite discontent in playing second fiddle to their Egyptian superiors. Furthermore, the stringent measures of 'Abd al-Hamid Saraj, Nasser's closest ally and the most powerful man in Syria by 1959, had created political and public discontent which had percolated into the leaders of the erstwhile Baath party. The economy of Syria too had been suffering under the influence of the UAR leadership. Consequently, Syria broke away from the UAR in September 1961, citing leadership failure as the cause; they however vocally maintained their loyalty towards the idea of a pan Arab nationalism. The note of cordiality was however soon to be severely undermined by the ensuing mudslinging between Egyptian and Syrian diplomats during the Arab League conference of August 1962 in the town of Shtoura in Lebanon.

Two other important events of this period further undermined the socio-economic and ideological status of Nasser's pan Arab nationalism. Nasser had built up his doctrine of Arab unity on the twin grounds of anti-Western or anti-imperialism and anti-conservatism. But when British troops were called into Kuwait by the Kuwaiti government in a bid to thwart off Qasim's open inclination to make Kuwait a part of Iraq (as it had been during the Ottoman times), Nasser openly supported the Kuwaiti cause, albeit it was a pro-Western nation standing up against an anti-Western and progressive Qasim. This broke away from the ideological stance which Nasser had been advocating thus far. The second incident took place in 1962 when Nasser decided to send Egyptian troops to Yemen in a bid to support the revolutionaries who had toppled the Imam Ahmed of Yemen in their effort to end his supposed tyranny and to take the country forward to the Arab nationalist path. Nasser's move was planned as a cushion against the King of Saudi's pledge of support for the Imam's son in terms of money and military. Embroiled in this front, by 1965, about 70000 Egyptian soldiers found deployment in this area, which naturally took a heavy toll on the military and economy of Egypt.

Then came the Six Day War of 1967—the 'waterloo' of Arab nationalism. Following the Arab defeat in the war of 1967, the idea of a pan Arab nationalism underwent some significant modifications and more importantly, it received severe irrecoverable setbacks. Nasser, who was the pioneering figure in the post World War II era behind the burgeoning idea of Pan Arabism, died in 1970. After Nasser's death, Sadat became the President of Egypt. Though he pulled off the Yom-Kippur war of 1973 in conjunction with President Assad of Syria, Jordan for the first time did not join her erstwhile allies in the fight against Israel. After making good inroads into the Sinai desert (the Egyptian army however could not move deeper than twelve kilometers from the Suez as its anti-aircraft guns would have been nullified in its effects otherwise) they were eventually driven back. The Syrians too after initial advancement in the Golan Heights were forced back by the Israeli force. However, the initial 'victory' was hailed significant by the Arabs and the idea of the invincibility of Israel following the 1967 war was critically questioned. Instead of fathering the cause of Palestine, however, Sadat's links with the U.S.A improved considerably; as a result Camp David happened in 1979. Leaving Nasser's *qawmiya* project behind, Sadat like his political Arab rivals embraced his *wataniya* mission whole heartedly. Egypt became the first Arab country to acknowledge Israel's right to exist. Both Sadat and Begin got the Nobel Peace Prize. As Eric Rouleau has pointed out,

It (Camp David Accord) does not mention any further withdrawal (apart from the Sinai that is) of Israel from the Occupied Territories. The autonomy mentioned in the agreement does not....apply to the territories but only to the population of the Occupied Territories, in other words Israelis could continue to confiscate land create settlements, which they did. The autonomy which was supposed to be given was practically no autonomy at all and there was no target date. Sadat tried very hard to get a target date by which to have autonomy set up; Begin refused. In other words, Israel could remain as long as it wanted without autonomy being created, and this happened: autonomy was never organized (201).

The PLO, in the meantime, were ejected from their base in Jordan by King Hussein's troops with Syria and Jordan coming quite close to open war around this issue, a big blow to the idea of Pan Arabism. For the first time Israeli air force moved into Jordan's airspace in a bid to help one Arab nation fend off the threat from another Arab nation. Though no direct fighting happened, this event achieved a momentous breakout from the idea of pan Arab unity. Lebanon then became the PLO's headquarters before the siege of Beirut happened in 1982. Israeli forces joined hands with (Bashir and Pierre) Gemayel's Maronites to flush out the PLO from Lebanon. The massacre in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla by the Maronite Phalangist militia (with the tacit help of Israelis) in September 1982 after Bashir Gemayel was assassinated in August stands out in this campaign for its sheer brutality. Yasser Arafat and his comrades fled to Tunis which subsequently became their new headquarters.

The above gives a brief sketch of the gradual demise of the pan Arab cause, Nasser's *qawmiya* project, which the Palestinians had regarded as their main hope in their fight against Zionist nationalism. These developments pan into Rayya's consciousness when she demarcates between Arab nationalism and Zionist nationalism and tells Alex that "perhaps this excessiveness was our reaction to the international movement of Zionism—in the face of which we needed the power and depth of Arabism. After all, Arab nationalism is built on geography, history, culture, religion and language and is more embracing than Zionism, which is built on religion alone" (37-38). In his book *The Question of Palestine*, Edward W. Said discusses how for the Palestinians who were affected by the partition, Zionism had lacked any other definition apart from it being regarded as a colonial endeavor based on religion. Caught off guard and bereft of the 'discipline of detail' that the Zionists exhibited, the Arab leaders clustered around the negatives that the Zionist approach entailed for them. He discusses that the exodus of the Palestinians in 1948 should be regarded as a result of the lack of preparation and response to Zionist effectiveness on the part of the Palestinian political leaders which consequently gave rise to a concomitant mood of failure and terror. Rayya infers that bereft of any official military, the only way Palestine can get back her land from the invaders is with the help of the other Arab states. That is why her vision towards pan Arab nationalism and unity is somewhat pessoptimistic (using the term inspired by Habiby's Saeed). She knows that this mirage of Arab unity has failed the Palestinians whose survival had crucially depended on its success; she knows that this mirage will continue to fail them but their hope in this unity will never be relinquished.

I told him, that if we were the flag-bearers, the missionaries, the zealots for Arab unity, it was because in the last analysis our survival in Palestine depended upon it. 'We are therefore ever ready to adopt its prophets and to champion any party or movement that raises the Pan-Arab banner.' (38)

This realization is the product of Palestine's own interest at surviving the Zionist encroachment which has not only left the Palestinians without a state and a political self-definition it has also disabled the production of state apparatuses like a regular army. Thus for Rayya, Palestine's survival is inextricably linked to a popular pan Arab uprising

against neo-imperialist forces. Alex's refusal to acknowledge Rayya's pessoptimism has a dual basis. One is the postcolonial history of the region as clarified earlier. The other origin stems from his own neo-imperialist roots as shown in the novel. The narrative portrays him as a secret agent working for a Western power for which pan Arab unity mirrors a massive socio-economic danger. During one of his journal entries, Alex reminisces back to his encounter with a 'very honorable' man of his own world who once said:

If you follow my cane you will see the measure of the area we call the Arab world; look at it vis-à-vis Europe, and reflect on the consequences. If that dream of Arab unity is one dat realized, it will become an immediate threat to our way of life and our standard of living....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, needs 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.....Do not let us deceive ourselves: Arab unification is inevitable, all we do is to delay its course, and it is here that our interests converge with those of Israelis, for they are also buying time. (69-70)

The above statement problematizes the way one needs to look at the relationship between the two protagonists. The natural question that arises then is whether Alex's attempt to discourage Rayya stems not from knowledge of history per se but from his knowledge of the collusion of the West and the Zionists in history and his role in that history? Salim Yaqub in his book *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* discusses thoroughly this issue of collusion between Israel, U.S.A and some 'favored' countries of the Middle East as a bid to not only negate the threat from communist Soviet Union but also to restrict the radical path of Nasser's Arab Nationalism. By luring a majority of the Arab governments with promises of aid and military protection, the Eisenhower administration tried to coax them to side with the West in the dual policy of containing the Soviets and isolating Nasser from his friends and possible helpers in his quest for a pan Arab unity. The conversations and arguments between the two main protagonists are set against the permanent shadow of a devastating history and both of them indirectly utilizes it as a means to bolster and negate each other's arguments.⁴

Thus when Rayya tells Alex that if and when the idea of pan Arabism fails for the Palestinians, they would "rouse the Moslem world and will call upon religion" (38)⁵ one has to just look back in time and observe that the rise of the modern Muslim fundamentalist movement does date back to the late 1970s, a time which incidentally historians say coincide with the demise of the idea of a pan Arab nationalism. Bassam Tibi locates the Six-Day-War as the starting point for the Islamic revival. It is in the late 70s that Martin Kramer posits the Islamic revival. He discusses how the fundamentalist ideological 'spadework' kicked in during this period mainly through the ideas and teachings of Mawlana Abu al-Ala Mawdudi of Pakistan, Sayyid Qutb of Egypt and of course Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran. It is important to note that the same Sayyid Qutb wrote his major work behind the closed bars of one of Nasser's prison camps during the

time of Nasser's own quest for an Arab secular unity. Kramer elucidates on how the 'revolutionary violence' was unleashed citing examples of the seizure of the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1979, assassination of Sadat in 1981 (killed by 'a group moved by Qutb's teachings'), the rebellion by the Muslim Brethren against Asad's regime in 1982. He deliberates on the actions of the Shi'ite movements as well which tried to raise Iraq's Shi'ites in revolt in 1979, welcomed Iran's Revolutionary Guards into Lebanon in 1982 and the near fatal suicide bomb attempt on the ruler of Kuwait in 1985. In fact the publication of Zahran's own novel coincided more or less with the first Intifada which lasted roughly from 1987 till 1993, though it is important here to distinguish between the rise of Muslim fundamentalism and the popular Intifada in question here. The last portion of the narrative takes us into Jerusalem of 1989 where the narrator ultimately meets Rayya who is still immersed in her revolutionary work for the Palestine Liberation Army dressed up as a beggar in front of the famous Damascus Gate. But with that meeting comes the realization that she has at last come back to her own place putting a temporary end to her exile. Having set up a meeting, the narrator manages to persuade her to allow him to publish his notebook and her story. For the Lebanese narrator this means a production of a Palestinian voice which he figures is largely ignored in the Western world.

The world is indifferent to Palestinian pain, but the people of the nations who have allowed such injustice must know what they have done; I vowed that the blood of the Palestinian people should never be washed from their hands. (86)

In conclusion, in this paper I have tried to discuss how Yasmine Zahran's novel, *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, reveals the Palestinian history as seen from the different ideological perspectives of the two protagonists. While making my argument I have delved briefly into the ideas of pan Arabism and why for Rayya, the female protagonist of the novel, Palestine's fortune is inextricably linked with the pan Arab movement. The narrative tries to give two vantage points of looking at what Edward Said might regard as the very question of Palestine—one of Rayya's and the other of her boyfriend Alex's. It tries to promote the idea that the solution to the question is embedded within the ideological cooperation between them, while the hurt of history makes it seemingly impossible to bridge the differences.

Notes

¹ I was constantly in the process of trying to capture her in her oscillation between the past and the future, and I often told her bitterly, 'It is only the present you miss!' (47)

² At one point Rayya talks about this continuous history of her people which separates them from the 'invading lot':

“We”, the Gebusites, the Edomites, the Canaanite, the Philistines, the Hellenized, Romanized, Arabicized natives of this land—“we” are the continuous dwellers, and this link cannot be broken by an invasion—can you not see, Alex? Can you not see? (43)

³ For more information and a detailed study of the above see Kohn, Hans. *Prelude to- Nation States: The French and German Experience, 1789-1815*. London: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1967.

⁴ At one point Alex looks back at history and states:

I only want to know how this projected utopia of a united Arab world would help your cause. Your Arab brothers seem to have forgotten Palestine. (38)

⁵ But what if this mirage of Arab unity fails you,’ he retorted.

‘It has already failed us and will fail us again and again, but we won’t give up,’ I replied.

‘But just suppose, for argument’s sake, that Arab unity is impossible to achieve,’ he said.

‘In that case,’ I replied, ‘we will rouse the Moslem world and will call upon religion.’ (38)

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Kaustav Mukherjee is working towards his PhD degree from Michigan State University. He currently teaches in The English for New Media program at Dakota State University. His research interests include postcolonial South Asian, African and Middle-Eastern literature and history.
