

OPENING THE GATE THROUGH DIALOGUE

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The event of the quest is part of a story told by the It, and yet a story to be told by the human questioner, if he wants to articulate the consciousness of his quest as an act of participation in the comprehending story. The “story” thus emerges as the symbolism that will express the awareness of the divine-human movement and countermovement in the quest for truth...The story is the symbolic form the questioner has to adopt necessarily when he gives an account of his quest as the event of wrestling, by the response of his human search to a divine movement, the truth of reality from a reality pregnant with truth yet unrevealed¹.

Eric Voegelin, In Search of Order

This symbolic form of expression called ‘story’ has existed throughout history in all civilizations and cultures. Every culture presents itself via a story. It is an ancient method, not just for entertainment but also for teaching and passing knowledge. Human beings try to understand the world by telling stories about it. Thus, many scholars and novelists have claimed that human beings are ‘narrative animals.’ We need stories to make sense of our lives, cultures and experiences. As a form of expression and symbolization ‘story’ conveys not merely personal-subjective experiences but most importantly the human quest for knowledge. It addresses several aspects of humanity with all of its virtues and vices. It is a reflection of how we experience our existence that emerges from the “It reality.” It contributes to the human search for order, explores being, and illustrates our common humanity and human realities. Thus, as a reflection of reality, stories are not simple. However, like the nature of the reality they unveil, they are complex. They require the reader to be imaginatively engaged in order to see the world as it is “given” by experience.

In this paper I am interested in presenting the Palestinian narrative, which is rarely heard in the West. Like all narratives, the Palestinian’s narrative is a product of their experience. The fact that the Palestinians and the Israelis have conflicting narratives of same events does not

¹ Voegelin, Eric. *Order and History (Volume V): In Search of Order*. University of Missouri, 2000. P. 38.

make either of them untrue. Each community has its own collective memories that bind them together. For example the Israelis call the 1948 war their war of independence, while for the Palestinians the same war is called Nakba or catastrophe. These symbolic words “independence” and “Nakba” are reflections of both peoples’ perception and interpretation of the event. The story of the war of independence and the story of the Nakba provide each community with a context for self understanding and an apprehension of their collective existence as a community and a nation. This point was beautifully illustrated by Voegelin, when he argued that the idea of a community “cannot be found anywhere except in the mind of the people belonging to the community and in their intellectual creations²”. Similarly, the idea of the Palestinian community can only be found in the mind of the Palestinian people who believe in it. For this reason narratives are real regardless of their historical accuracy or conflicting symbolizations. As Voegelin said, “The symbols in which a society interprets the meaning of its existence are meant to be true.” They express reality even if they are the creation of the imagination for imagination produces reality. Furthermore, Edward Said, a Palestinian-American literary theorist, said, “The one place in which there’s been some interesting and innovative work done in Arab intellectual life is in literary production generally, that never finds its way into studies of the Middle East. You’re dealing with the raw material of Politics... You can deal with a novelist as a kind of witness to something³.” Thus, there are many reasons to present the Palestinian narrative through a novel. I will explore the novel *A Beggar at Damascus Gate* as a narrative of the Palestinian experience in diaspora.

² Voegelin, Eric. *Race and State* (The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 2). University of Missouri, 1997. P. 120.

³ Singh, Amritjit and Johnson, Bruce G. *Interviews with Edward W. Said (Conversations With Public Intellectuals Series)* University Press of Mississippi, 2004. P. 52

A Beggar at Damascus Gate is a novel written by Yasmin Zahran, a Palestinian archeologist and a writer. Zahran was born in Ramallah, Palestine. She was educated at Colombia University and the University of London. She earned her doctorate degree in archaeology at the Sorbonne in Paris. Zahran worked for UNESCO for a number of years. She also taught at the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology in Jerusalem. Her career as an archeologist and her education in the West allowed her to include both the West and the East in her works. Zahran's first novel, *الحن الاول* (The First Melody) was directed toward the Arabic reader, for it was written in Arabic in 1991. However, in 1993 Zahran decided to address a Western audience by writing her second novel A Beggar at Damascus Gate, in English.

Nakba: The Palestinian Catastrophe

In order to understand the Palestinian perspective, we need to listen to their stories from within their frame of reference. We need to see their history through their eyes and not through the lens of our own beliefs and biases. We need to grasp the Nakba and its traumatic effect on the Palestinian people. Thus, before delving into the novel, I will provide a brief background of the Palestinian Diaspora as it is perceived and narrated by Palestinians.

“Being at home or going home is something most people take for granted, but for many Palestinians having a homeland and feeling at home are not part of the daily experience⁴.” The Palestinian exile started in 1948. Palestinians refer to this year as the year of *nakba* (catastrophe). This term “nakba” depicts the disaster that had befallen them in 1948. The Palestinians refute the Zionists’ claim that Palestine was a land without a people and argue that the massacres that took

⁴ Hammer, Juliane. *Palestinians Born in Exile: Diaspora and the Search for a Homeland*. Austin University of Texas Press, 2005.

place during this year and that led to the dispersion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians confirm the opposite⁵. This Zionist slogan that Palestine is a “land without a people for a people without a land” was first coined by Britain and specifically by Lord Shaftesbury:

If Lord Shaftesbury was literally inexact in describing Palestine as a country without a people, he was essentially correct, for there is no Arab people living in intimate fusion with the country, utilizing its resources and stamping it with a characteristic impress; there is at best an Arab encampment⁶.”

In 1914 Chaim Weizmann, president of the World Zionist Congress who later became the first president of the state of Israel said:

In its initial stage, Zionism was conceived by its pioneers as a movement wholly depending on mechanical factors: there is a country which happens to be called Palestine, a country without a people, and, on the other hand, there exists the Jewish people, and it has no country. What else is necessary, then, than to fit the gem into the ring, to unite this people with this country?...⁷

Like all colonial movements, the Zionist movement dehumanized the Palestinians in order to justify their occupation. The Palestinians were depicted as “conniving”, “dishonest”, “lazy”, “murderous” and “Nazis”⁸. In 1930, Menahem Ussishkin, one of the leading figures of the Zionist Yishuv⁹ said: “If there are other inhabitants there, they must be transferred to some other place. We must take over the land. We have a greater and nobler ideal than preserving several hundred thousands of Arab *fellahin* [farmers]¹⁰.” Palestinians were displaced by Jewish people and a part of Palestine was renamed Israel. It was an artificial concoction. The expulsion of the Palestinians was the main strategy of the leading figures in the Zionist movement such as Israel Zangwill, Chaim Weizman and David Ben Gurion. In the 1930’s, the Zionist plan was to transfer

⁵ Masalha, Nur. The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem. Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2003. P,12.

⁶ Ibid, 13.

⁷ Aruri, Naseer, ed. Palestinian Refugees: The Right of Return. Sterling, Va. Pluto Press, 2001. P, 37.

⁸ Masalha, Nur. The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem. Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2003. P,12.

⁹ The term Yishuv refers to the Jewish community living in Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel.

¹⁰ Masalha, Nur. The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem. Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2003. P,14.

the Palestinians to Syria, Iraq and Transjordan, following the precedent of the transfer of the Greek and Turkish populations in the 1920s¹¹. They conducted their plan, first by putting restrictions on Palestinians such as issuing taxes and confiscating their lands. The evacuation of the Palestinians was done with the help of the British government, for Palestine was still under its mandate. Weizman held extensive secret discussions with Britain, to transfer one million Palestinians to Iraq in order to settle Polish Jews in their place¹². However, this plan of transformation was later replaced by an expulsion plan. The intention of the Zionist movement was revealed by Yosef Weitz, the director of the Settlement Department of Jewish National Fund (JNF) and the head of the Israeli government's official Transfer Committee of 1948. In his diary Weitz wrote:

Amongst ourselves it must be clear that there is no room for both peoples in this country. No 'development' will bring us closer to our aim to be an independent people in this small country. After the Arabs are transferred, the country will be wide open for us; with the Arabs staying the country will remain narrow and restricted ... There is no room for compromise on this point ... land purchasing ... will not bring about the state ... The only way is to transfer the Arabs from here to neighbouring countries, all of them, except perhaps Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Old Jerusalem. Not a single village or a single tribe must be left. And the transfer must be done through their absorption in Iraq and Syria and even in Transjordan. For that goal, money will be found – even a lot of money. And only then will the country be able to absorb millions of Jews ... there is no other solution¹³.

Likewise, Ben Gurion believed that the indigenous inhabitants of the land had to be expunged in order to succeed in their plan of establishing a Jewish state. Thus, he entered the 1948 war with the intention of expelling the Palestinians. In his war diary he wrote, "During the assault we must be ready to strike a decisive blow; that is, either to destroy the town or expel its inhabitants so our people can replace them¹⁴." The year of nakba witnessed several massacres, which were

¹¹ Ibid, 19.

¹² Ibid, 24.

¹³ Ibid, 107

¹⁴ Aruri, Naseer, ed. Palestinian Refugees: The Right of Return. Sterling, Va. Pluto Press, 2001. P, 43.

mainly committed to terrorize the Palestinians and cause them to flee their homes. Arieh Yitzhak, the Israeli military historian believes that between 1948 and 1949 the Zionist movement had committed about ten major massacres and about 100 smaller massacres¹⁵. Deir Yassin is one of the most notorious massacres and it is still engraved in the memory of the Palestinians. Over 250 unarmed villagers mostly elderly people, women and children were murdered and many were raped¹⁶. Public knowledge of this massacre was a major cause for Palestinian flight. Its atrocity and the exaggerated rumors that accompanied it precipitated the Palestinian Diaspora. After 1948 and after the establishment of the state of Israel, as many as 750,000 Palestinians became homeless, scattered all over the world, most of them deprived of basic human rights¹⁷. With the end of the 1948 war, the Palestinians who fled their homes were deprived of going back and all of their properties and lands were confiscated and given to the new inhabitants. Thus, the year of nakba witnessed the birth of the problem of the Palestinian refugees.

In the 1967 war or the so-called “six day war”, Palestinians were once again forced to flee their homes. As Israel occupied Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, 325,000 Palestinians, sought refuge in neighboring Arab states¹⁸. Some of these refugees had already been displaced in 1948. This dispersion of the Palestinians was generated by the destruction of several villages, threats, mass detention of male civilians and many other policies. Thus, this was the second exodus of the Palestinians but not the last. The Palestinian displacement continued during the 1970’s, 1980’s and 1990’s. An average of 21,000 Palestinians per year are forced out

¹⁵ Ibid. P, 46.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. P, 228.

¹⁸ Exchange, Global. "The Palestinian Diaspora: A History of Dispossession". San Francisco, CA, October 2005.
<<http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/mideast/palestine/refugeeFacts.html>>.

of Israeli-controlled areas¹⁹. Despite the fact that in 1948 Israel's admission to the UN was conditioned upon an Israeli commitment to carry out UN resolution 194, which calls on Israel to recognize the right of the refugees to return to their homes, Israel has failed to comply with this resolution. The resolution states that, "Refugees who wish to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practical date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return²⁰". Today, the Palestinians are considered the largest refugee population in the world; estimated at about 5 million²¹. This only includes those registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Palestinian refugees consist of two major categories, those displaced in 1948 from what is now Israel, and those displaced in 1967 from what is now the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinian refugees tend to identify themselves as either the '48 lot or the '67 lot. The return of the '48 lot to Israel constitutes a major stumbling block in Peace negotiations and a "demographic" problem for Israel.

Only Palestine is Real

In A Beggar at Damascus Gate, Zahran brings Palestine to the forefront for an audience that is rarely exposed to it. She defies the world by replanting Palestine in the memory of the West after it had faded away. She furnishes her novel with the Palestinian Diaspora and the subsequent struggle. Edward Said stated that "There is no getting away from the fact that, as an idea, a memory, and as an often buried or invisible reality, Palestine and its people have simply

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

not disappeared²²”. In her novel, Zahran confronts the Western reader with this reality that Palestinians and Palestine still exist. Zahran tries to revive the Western conscience toward the Palestinian problem through the characters in the novel. In fact, she begins the novel with the statement, “All characters in this book are fictitious, only Palestine is real²³”. Zaharan exposes her reader to her experience of social and political disorder and her resistance and search for a new social order. Her novel addresses not only the Palestinian problem but also the problem of human nature with life and death, love and hate being at the center of the story.

Like most Palestinians who live in exile, deprived of their homeland, Zahran’s novel is homeless, deprived of a location. The story begins in Petra, Jordan but its events take place in over twenty countries until it finally reaches its final destination, Palestine. The story is about a relationship between a Palestinian woman writer in exile, Rayya and a British Archeologist, Alex. It depicts the interaction between the Orient and the Occident and the mistrust that exists between them. It begins in Petra, Jordan, in 1980 with the narrator, Mr. Foster, an American Archeologist born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon. In his hotel room, Mr. Foster finds the journals of the two protagonists, Rayya and Alex. The narrator reads their Journals, which begin at their meeting in London in 1969. The story of Rayya and Alex depicts the conflict between their personal relationship on one hand and their national identities and political allegiances on the other. Rayya is a Palestinian refugee who is affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Alex is apparently a spy for an unknown foreign agency. The story is told from both of their perspectives, which at times differ in their perceptions of reality. It is akin to a split screen film where the viewer is able to see both points of view simultaneously. They have an intimate relationship and yet they mistrust one another. The story depicts a kind of Cold War

²² Said, Edward. "Palestine Has Not Disappeared." *Le Monde Diplomatique* May 1998.

²³ Zahran, Yasmin. *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*. Sausalito, California: The Post-Apollo Press, 1995. P, i.

between the two lovers, full of espionage on both the personal and national levels. The narrator attempts to unite both perspectives of the story and states, “My task was to join the two versions which were as different as the two faces of the moon, conflicting and contradictory and yet the two sides of one reality²⁴”. Both are aware that the other may not be what they seem. For example, at one point in the story, Rayya discovers that Alex reads Arabic after she finds him looking at her journal. Alex suspects that Rayya works for the PLO. We know very little about Alex because he only wrote about his life with Rayya, whereas Rayya wrote about her life with and beyond Alex. They lived separately and met during their travels. Their relationship ends when Alex mysteriously dies in Petra as if murdered by a spy agency. In her attempt to escape without being interrogated by the police, Rayya hides the manuscripts, which are later found by Mr. Foster, our narrator. The remainder of the story consists of Mr. Foster searching for Rayya to get her permission to publish the journals. After nine years he finds her in Jerusalem where she is a beggar at Damascus Gate, working with the Palestinian resistance during the first Palestinian Intifada.

Rayya and Alex: The East and the West

Yasmin Zahran limits her novel to two main characters, Rayya and Alex, highlighting the relationship between the West and the Arab world. By using their journals, Zahran provides an opportunity for each character to describe the relationship and how they perceive one another. In addition, Zahran presents a third point of view, that of the narrator, which comments on the relationship between Alex and Rayya. Therefore, the reader hears the story from three different

²⁴ Ibid. P, 25.

perspectives, emphasizing the fact that there are always more than one perspective to a story or even to a historical account.

Long before meeting Rayya, Alex had heard tales about her. She was described as “an institution” and an “unchanneled, rushing river whose direction could not be known²⁵”. The friend who introduced them described her as a “phenomenon²⁶”. From their first meeting, Alex became obsessed with conquering Rayya with all her mystery, “My obsession grew as did my love. I wanted to possess her past, her present and her future²⁷”. This resembles Western obsession with conquering the Arab world beginning with the crusades, passing through World War I and ending with more recent conquests. In London, in 1969, Alex encountered this ‘phenomenon’ and shortly afterward, he fell a victim of this ‘rushing river’. In his journal, Alex described his first meeting with Rayya, “She was sitting in a corner of our common friend’s flat in Grosvenor street in a red pleated silk dress²⁸”. Rayya spoke with a mysterious accent. Alex later found out that Rayya was able to speak English and French like a native but she intentionally kept her accent to “mark her foreignness, her rootlessness and her exile²⁹”. This depicts Rayya’s desire to declare her identity as a Palestinian. Having lost her homeland Rayya appears to compensate by holding on to trivial things, such as her accent.

Alex and Rayya fell in love with each other despite having separate lives full of turmoil and flux. Their journals revealed their multifaceted relationship full of love, passion, fear and mistrust. Alex described Rayya as an “Artist hiding behind many veils, following a thousand roads...³⁰”. Likewise, Rayya described Alex as elusive, ephemeral and that she never felt on

²⁵ Ibid. P, 29.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. p, 34.

²⁸ Ibid. P, 29.

²⁹ Ibid. P, 30.

³⁰ Ibid. P, 48-49.

solid ground with him, “a subterranean creature, a dweller of the half-shadows...³¹”. Thus, they were both elusive and they feared and mistrusted each other. The thorn that is ever present in this already unsteady relationship is the complex that is based on their national origins and all of its implications. Mr. Arthur James Balfour was omnipresent between Rayya and Alex. Balfour was the wall that separated the two lovers. This is clear from Rayya’s journal in which she wrote: “I cannot say to you- your people shall be my people, your gods shall be my own... Your people sold my people. Your people gave away my land, my earth, my blood. Your kin bartered my heritage, my future...³²”. Alex behaved much like the British government, which promised Palestine to the Arabs and the Zionists at the same time. Alex was engaged in an intimate relationship with Rayya while spying on her. Rayya on the other hand, was unlike the Arabs who had trusted the British back then. She was mistrustful of Westerners and the West, like most Palestinians who heard one thing from the West and saw another. Palestinian mistrust of the West was also pointed out by the narrator, Mr. Foster who said about his encounter with the Palestinian cook at the hotel, “What amazed me though was not his anglophobia, for it is rare to find a Palestinian who is not³³”. Rayya grew more suspicious of Alex when she caught him reading her journal and discovered that he reads Arabic. Their relationship was full of manipulation. Rayya started manipulating Alex by inserting false information about the PLO in her journal and intentionally making it available for him to read. Likewise, Alex used Rayya to gain information about the PLO, to have her introduce him to her Arab friends, and to travel with her to the Arab world where he took pictures of “forbidden sites and targets³⁴”. By creating a relationship based on manipulation and mistrust, the author symbolizes the larger relationship

³¹ Ibid. P, 32.

³² Ibid. P, 72.

³³ Ibid. P, 15.

³⁴ Ibid. P, 121.

between the West and the Arab world. Alex's and Rayya's relationship is a microcosm of the relationship between the West and the Arab world in general and the West and Palestine in particular. In his journal, Alex described his relationship with Rayya as follows, "Both running on divergent orbits to reach-where? Both racing to outwit and outpass each other. Both living under a cloud of duplicity. Who is cheating whom?³⁵". This quotation can also describe the relationship between the West and the Arab world. Rayya and Alex's relationship resembles a relationship between two countries, two enemies and not between two lovers. Likewise, duplicity has plagued the relationship between the West and the Arab world for centuries. The duplicity was present during the time of Henry McMahon (1915) who promised the Arabs their independence while signing the Sykes Picot agreement with France, in which they decided to conquer and divide the region. Western duplicity with respect to the Arabs and to the Palestinians in particular is with us to this day. During Israel's recent war on Lebanon, the United States spoke about peace while shipping smart bombs to Israel. There is also duplicity in the enforcement of international agreements. The West, especially the United States and United Kingdom, tend to strictly enforce UN resolutions passed against Arab countries and ignore resolutions against Israel. Recent examples of this include UNSC resolution 1559, which demanded Syrian withdrawal from occupied Lebanese territory and UNSC resolutions 465 and 476 which demanded Israeli withdrawal from all Arab occupied territories. In the case of 1559, the United States and Britain threatened Syria with military force if it did not comply. Conversely, the United States continues to turn a blind eye to Israeli occupation of Arab lands and the building of settlements on these lands while sending billions of dollars in aid to Israel. These stark examples practically define the duplicitous relationship of the West with the Arabs beginning with Sykes Picot and continuing until today.

³⁵ Ibid. P, 49.

The Struggle for National Survival

Despite their passion for each other, both Rayya and Alex failed to be compassionate or understanding toward one another. This lack of compassion and understanding is evident in their journals, where Alex said, “Rayya was beyond certain limits of my comprehension...What do I know of this glittering creature, for wherever I turn, only the top of the iceberg is revealed³⁶”. Likewise, Rayya wrote, “There is nothing simple about him...³⁷ Is he a man? A force? What is he?³⁸” Alex did not only fail to be compassionate and understanding towards Rayya and her cause but he also tried to define her. Rayya, like most refugees, unable to return to her homeland and lacking a connection with her nation, compensated for this void by holding onto various ephemeral characteristics that she associated with her identity. These are sometimes trivial behaviors or attachments like deliberately speaking with an accent. Rayya goes to great lengths, grasping at straws to attach herself to this identity. Despite this grasping attachment to Rayya’s disappearing nation and nationality, Alex is unable to simply empathize with her. He presumes to define her and is unable to accept her definition of herself. To him she does not have a natural right to define who she is. He says, “tell me modern and westernized as you are, what do you have in common with an Omani Arab, or a Mauritanian Arab?³⁹” and “For she was living in France and whether she liked it or not was very Parisian⁴⁰”. Throughout the book Alex’s treatment of Rayya carries an agenda. He does not seem to care for a true knowledge of who she is. He appears to be on a “campaign of self affirmation.” It is as if Rayya’s identity as a

³⁶ Ibid. P, 19.

³⁷ Ibid. p, 65.

³⁸ Ibid. P, 10.

³⁹ Ibid. P, 39.

⁴⁰ Ibid. P, 90.

Palestinian Arab creates too much cognitive dissonance in his mind that he prefers to define her in a more palatable way.

In addition to Alex's bizarre attempts to rip Rayya from the roots of her Palestinian identity, he tries to create distance between her and other Arabs. He tries to convince her that Arab unity is a failed cause. He tells her, "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 about Palestine⁴¹". The question that arises is why does Alex seem threatened by Arab unity? This following quotation explains his fear:

I wondered if it ever occurred to Rayya that the West had 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 that dream of Arab unity is one day realized, it will become an immediate threat to our way of life and our standard of living. Just remember that raw materials will become expensive and scarce. Strategically we will be at their mercy for they are at the crossroads of a shrinking world... 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 unity⁴².

Firstly, his description of the man with a cane as honorable states his position. Secondly, his statement begins as justification for the West's action, namely to protect their interests. What is alarming about his statement is the extent to which the ends justify the means according to Alex. The "honorable" gentleman imagined by Alex, openly advocates destroying the Palestinians if they have to. The ease with which Alex, in his journal, advocated genocide as a means to a rather mundane end, namely the protection of Western interests, is an example of the banality of evil. Alex's tactics are eerily similar to the tactics used by the British Empire, namely, divide and rule.

⁴¹ Ibid. P, 69

⁴² Ibid.

Rayya rejects Alex's discourse on every level. She vehemently argues with Alex about her identity, "My westernization is fake. It is only a thin veneer... I can accept the term 'westernized' if you mean by that the common heritage the Arab world shares with Europe- which begins with the Phoenicians, the Greeks and the Romans⁴³". The author is effective in portraying the Palestinians' struggle for preserving their national identity which is often contested in the west. Like Alex, who failed to empathize with Rayya, the west fails to feel the Palestinians' agony and refuses to recognize them as people with their own national identity, an identity that is attached to the land of Palestine.

Rayya, Palestine's Banner

"I am the olive tree on the hills of Palestine. I am the spring of water in its valleys. I am the smell of its parched, naked soil⁴⁴". This is how Rayya described herself. After the loss of their homeland and after the world had refused to recognize their country, the Palestinians chose to equate themselves with Palestine. Like Rayya, most Palestinian refugees choose to have Palestine inhabit their life since they are unable to inhabit Palestine, "She [Rayya] had to carry Palestine, whether in her heart or on her shoulders, at all times, and wherever she was, for this was the only way she could endure her exile⁴⁵". Since the truth of human experience is in its memory, Rayya tries to preserve in her memory all of the images of Palestine. It is through memory the Palestinians pass on their collective experience of the land. They compensate for the loss of their homeland, by holding on to their national culture and collective memory. This

⁴³ Ibid. P, 39.

⁴⁴ Ibid. P, 157.

⁴⁵ Ibid. P, 90.

strategy allows Palestinians who were born in exile and never saw Palestine to keep their national identity.

Through Rayya, the author reveals to the reader the impact of exile and uprootedness on every aspect of Palestinian life. Yasmin Zahran shows the reader how Rayya's experience in exile shaped her personality. Like her life, Rayya's journal is chaotic. Rayya lacked any sense of time or direction. Like many Palestinian refugees, Rayya was fixated on two dates, namely 1948 and 1967. The fact that Palestinians to this day refer to themselves as the "'48 lot" or "'67 lot" shows that time has stopped there for them. In his journal, Alex described how Rayya was disoriented, "This creature ...did not have any sense of direction or distance and could never tell North from South; she could even lose her way home⁴⁶". The author uses Rayya's lack of a sense of direction as a symbol of her rootlessness, "I was born without the faculty of direction, something which reduces my defenses against the world⁴⁷".

We travel like other people, but we return to nowhere. As if traveling is the way of the clouds... We have a country of words. Speak speak so I can put my road on the stone of a stone... We have a country of words. Speak speak so we may know the end of this travel⁴⁸.

This poem captures the bereavement of Rayya and all Palestinian refugees. In the novel, Mr. Foster said, "It seemed to me that for Rayya a voyage was an end in itself, a search for things past that was mirrored in the search for her fragmented self⁴⁹". Having nowhere to call home, Rayya's excessive travels are a search for something missing. What is missing is the coalescence in one place of a shared national identity, a sense of belonging, an acceptance by others, and a legitimacy for existence. A pertinent analogy here is a comparison with the homeless. There are

⁴⁶ Ibid. P, 48.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The Palestinian Poet, *Mahmoud Darwish, We Travel Like Other People*
<http://www.shaml.org/A%20country%20of%20words.htm>

⁴⁹ Ibid. P, 49.

a great many comforts that are taken for granted by most of us who have places to live. Being homeless impacts many aspects of daily life, leading to instability, vulnerability and a feeling of rejection by society. Similarly, a stateless person lacks many of the comforts taken for granted by those who belong. These are less tangible but also destabilizing to the psyche. Palestinian refugees are deprived of having a home to belong to. This was pointed out by Rayya who said, “Everybody has a right to belong, but I am deprived of that right!”⁵⁰ At the end of the novel Mr. Foster said, “She [Rayya] symbolized for me the uprooted, the exiled, the oppressed”⁵¹. In addition, Rayya was the banner of Palestine. The author skillfully chooses the name of her protagonist. In Arabic the word “Rayya” means banner.

Mr. Foster: Fostering Hope

Edward Said, wrote, “Above all we must, as Mandela never tired of saying about his struggle, be aware that Palestine is one of the great moral causes of our time. Therefore, we need to treat it as such. It's not a matter of trade, or bartering negotiations, or making a career. It is a just cause...”⁵². Mr. Foster tried genuinely to understand Rayya and her cause. He did not have a specific agenda. His only agenda was to give Palestinians the right to narrate. True to his name, Mr. Foster nurtured and brought to light the story of Palestine, “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”⁵³. Unlike Alex, Mr. Foster’s interest in Rayya and her cause was authentic. He did not

⁵⁰ Ibid. P, 31.

⁵¹ Ibid. P, 133.

⁵² Said, Edward. "Thinking Ahead". Al-Ahram Weekly. April 2002.
<<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/580/op2.htm>>.

⁵³ Zahran, Yasmin. A Beggar at Damascus Gate. Sausalito, California: The Post-Apollo Press, 1995. P, 24.

impose his own views on Rayya, but was able to empathize with her and her people, “I was seeing things with Rayya’s eyes seeking the light of the Jerusalem hills she had so longed for⁵⁴...”

Some scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Edward Said have argued that ‘nations themselves are narrations.’⁵⁵ This notion illustrates the importance of narrative in building or preserving a nation. Thus, to take from people the right to narrate is to deprive them of their history and a collective memory as a people of cultural heritage. In her novel, Zahran stresses the importance of narrative to a nation by making her two main characters narrate their stories freely, each in their own native languages. Thus, emphasizing the authenticity of each narrative. The author sits aside and let her protagonist Rayya borrow her novel, to narrate her story, the Palestinian story, the story of return and search for legitimacy. Furthermore, by introducing Mr. Foster, the author creates a space for these narratives to live, be heard and shared not just by the Palestinians but most importantly by the “other”, The “other” who is different and similar at the same time. The “other” is who we share our humanity with and narrative is the vehicle through which we experience life with others. Mr. Foster shared Rayya’s experience and felt her pain, trying to acquire legitimacy for her people and a territory of their own. For this reason, unlike Alex, Mr. Foster felt responsible to disclose Rayya’s journal and thus opening the gate of dialogue with the other.

In *In Search for Order*, Voegelin asked the question “how does the listener recognize the story to be true...rather than consider it somebody's private opinion concerning the order of his preference?” His answer came as follows: “[the story] will have no authority of truth unless it speaks with an authority common present in everybody’s consciousness...[unless it] indeed

⁵⁴ Ibid. P, 143.

⁵⁵ To read more about this look at Edward Said’s book *Culture and Imperialism*, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* and Homi Bhabha’s book *Nation and Narration*.

speaks what is common to the order of man's existence as a partner in the comprehending reality⁵⁶". Mr. Foster did not refuse to apperceive reality like the former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir who said, "There are no Palestinians⁵⁷". He saw in Rayya's story something that is common to everybody's consciousness and that is the right to an identity and to narrate the collective memory of your people.

A Beggar at Damascus Gate is, first and foremost, a story that brings the Palestinian narrative to the western audience that has largely forgotten about it and its people in Diaspora. The story is a window into the relationship between East and West, portrayed through two characters, who, also happen to come from Palestine and Britain, a former colony and a former colonizer. It displays their chaotic, mistrustful relationship and the conflicts that exist because they each carry historical baggage that they are unable to shed. Zahran also implicitly reiterates that the relationship between the West and the Arab world can only be rehabilitated by resolving the Palestinian problem. The road to a healthy Western-Arab relationship not only passes through Palestine but most importantly it passes through everybody's consciousness.

⁵⁶ Voegelin, Eric. *Order and History (Volume V): In Search of Order*. University of Missouri, 2000. P. 40.

⁵⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/events/israel_at_50/profiles/81288.stm