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The Representation of Identity in Yassmine Zahran's A Beggar at Damascus Gate

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Abstract
This essay is an attempt to provide a critical analysis to the concept of identity as it is represented in Yasmine Zahran's novella, *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*. The author addresses this contentious issue through the eyes of her protagonist Rayya, a Palestinian exile, whose relationship with Alex, an American 'lover', is shrouded in ambivalence. Through her characters, Zahran contests the orthodox view of identity as a unique essence and upholds the postmodernist claim that it is the embodiment of a new synthesis. Inspired by the postmodernist theory, this research calls into question totalities, universals and absolutes. It is a simple academic endeavor to disclose the binary extremes of colonialism, Zionism and Arabism and sap their reductive ethos. These machines of representation adopt a condescending discourse which is caught in the monad of the ego cogito; the aim behind this essay is to lay bare their semantic and conceptual slipperiness.
Keywords: Identity- Pan Arabism- essentialism- discourse- discursive practices- imagined communities.

Introduction:
From the early moments of the narrative, the narrator's voice betrays a typical colonial discourse the reader has been familiar with in literary works whose subject matter revolves around East and West, 'the core' and 'periphery' and the 'civilized' versus 'backward' societies. The pattern of asymmetric binary oppositions constitutes one of the diverse features of the literary work under study. When Foster is allowed the opportunity to speak on behalf of Rayya, we are given the impression that this female voice is excluded, muted and assigned a subservient role in the game of power structures. His depiction of her notebooks, papers and diaries in derogatory terms as disordered and in a state of mess, and his allusion to Alex's "elegantly bound leather journal"(16) entrenches Edward Said's concept of Orientalism as " cultural strength" and evokes the idea of hegemony which maintains that 'certain cultural forms predominate over others and certain ideas are more influential than others'. This epistemic duality, alongside a gamut of tropes and figures of speech, has long pervaded those writings and forms of expression that target Orient versus Occident. For instance in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, whose tale is not devoid of ambivalence, often establishes himself in the position of a savior whose mission is to 'wean those millions from their horrid ways'. Similarly in Rude Yard Kipling's poem "Overland Mail", the Indian servant of the British Empire is coerced into walking through a murky perilous landscape but when he reaches the British exiles, the wind comes to a halt, the sun is ablaze and darkness dissipates. Unfortunately, Zahran's story cannot altogether dispense with the working of such dualities and structure of attitudes and references that might have been ascribed to some inferiority complex which has so long been ingrained in the deep recesses of Arabs' psyche. Be that as it may, confining the text to one single voice is tantamount to regarding the narrative as a monolithic, univocal entity rather than a polyvalent and multi-layered conglomerate wherein myriad voices come into play. GreenBlatt (1980, p.3) is partially pertinent to argue in his introduction to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* that 'the written word is self-consciously embedded in specific communities, life situations, and structures of power'. But Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, which hinges upon 'double-voicedness' (Brannigan, 1998, p.194), is a more relevant reaction. He is more concerned with the incorporation of different social discourses that pave the ground for the birth of a hybrid text. The aim I have set for this humble analytic appreciation is to go beyond the capricious stereotypical whims embedded in colonial discourse and delve into the representation of identity as a thorny issue in a narrative wherein a cacophony of voices continue to reverberate all through the novella.

I- The Representation of National Identity.

1-1 The impact of nationalism on the relation between two Lovers.

The narrator, as a cultural translator and mediator, takes it upon himself to disclose the intricacies of the emotional bond that ties Alex and Rayya. The two lovers are presented as peripatetic travelers who give the impression that their invincible need for each other is what confers meaning on their existence. However, the early description of Rayya as "feline" and "cat-like" and Alex as 'a frail pale bird' foreshadows the difficulties they are liable to face as the plot unfolds. The tropes deftly employed by the author at the outset such as the desolate setting of Petra and the freezing cold atmosphere serve as the prism through which we can see two forlorn lovers decidedly in quest of some warmth and meaning. The author's allusion to space at the beginning of the story is probably meant to bring to the fore the fact that identity is neither constant nor perennial as Rayya

initially believes. The cultural translation of space is intended to point out that identity is a process of interrogation and that it is both polyphonic and polymorphic. The narrator-translator cogently states as the inmate of the Rest House in Petra:

> I do not know how long I walked amidst the rock-cut tombs examining the exquisitely carved doors and entering the large chambers. Once the abode of the dead, they, now and after centuries, provide shelter for the living, mainly for members of Bedouin tribe, the Beddouls, who have installed themselves in and around Petra. (4)

The identity of space, like that of a people, is perpetually shifting and therefore universals, unities and totalities are strongly questioned. The graveyard that has always been associated with the dead can be home to the living. The narrator's recurrent trips through space make us look to the latter as a cultural palimpsest layered with traces and echoes of cultures that no longer exist.

The way space is interpreted in this quote evokes V.S. Naipaul's narrator in *The Enigma of Arrival* as he creates a spatial pattern through his continuous walking tours. The intricate web of paths generated by dint of his movements in the same landscape epitomizes the physical and cultural passages that are conducive to the perpetual interpretation of the self. While Naipaul's novel is fragmented in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish its parts, Zahran's tale represents a site where a lot of voices are in dialogue with each other. The artistic climate generated by the discursive events that occur within the precincts of Zahran's novella offers little or no room for the essentialist discourse intermittently adopted by Rayya in her relationship with Alex, in her account of the Palestinian Liberation Army and in her allusion to the big project of Pan Arabism. A close reading of the text is likely to expose blind spots and aporias which subvert its claim to self-identity. Derrida, who contends that meaning cannot be pinned down, interrogates fixity inherent in the binary logic. The variegated nature of the text makes it resistant to the injunctions of one single law or 'semantic regime'. (Derrida cited in Cohen, 2001 p.5)

In her endeavor to elucidate how Pan-Arabism operates, Rayya maintains that 'this ambitious enterprise is built on geography, history, culture and language and is more embracing than Zionism, which is built on religion alone'. She adds 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 depends upon it' (38). The national spirit plays havoc with Rayya's perception and exerts a pernicious impact on her powers of reasoning. Alex, who is alert to her slipshod mode of thinking, excoriates her exclusionary discourse in the following terms: 'what about the racial and religious minorities? … What about the Christian sects- the Shiite, the Druze, the Kurds and the Berbers?' (38-9). The order national Arabism is intent on imparting to the Arab world , its view of this vast geographical area as a homogenous cultural background to the exclusion of other 'minorities' evokes Anderson's *Imagined Communities* in which he compares nationalism to a psychological trouble that desperately needs potent treatment:

> ' Nationalism' is the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as ' neurosis' in the individual , with much the same essential ambiguity attaching to it, a similar built-in capacity for descent into dementia, rooted in the dilemmas of helplessness thrust upon most of the world (the equivalent of infantilism for societies) and largely Incurable (1985, p.5).

Anderson's diagnosis of nationalism as a disease comparable to neurosis whose complications can develop into a serious mental derangement does not augur well for Rayya. Like a mentally troubled person, she constantly vacillates between well and ill mental health; her decisions are not well defined and her love for Alex is unreliable because it is imbued with deep gut fears, the outcome of her fanatic attachment to the ideology of Arabism. The seeds of hate and skepticism have been planted in her depths in such a way that she shows short-sighted allegiance to anybody or anything Arab. Even if we are informed of Alex's hyphenated and hybrid identity as he has been raised in Beirut and he can speak Arabic, Rayya merely relegates him to the margins of Otherness. He is not somebody to trust simply because the Western blood runs in his veins. Her extreme essentialist stand at different moments of the narrative portends that she is teetering on the verge of paranoia as this extract suggests:

> They killed him [a Fida'i], 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 I ever I get old, horribly old, it will be a Zionist plot against me!" (84).

National identities inveterately draw on the rhetoric of communities as culturally homogenous units. They are established with less concern for geographical proximity and more focus on shared language, cultural and religious codes. The narrator, as a cultural mediator and translator, brings to light Rayya's essentialist account of facts upon which she erroneously confers a certain order categorizing a whole set of individual identities under one single rubric. All Israelis, irrespective of their political affiliations and personal tendencies, represent Zionism and they are to bear the brunt of the whole Arab plight and the deficiency of their rotten political and social systems. All the future generations confined within the world of Arab nationalism will repeat the Fidai's poems, regardless of their ideologies, individual differences, ethnic and racial backgrounds. In their adherence to the unchanging categories of knowledge, the regimes of truth tend to conceive of things as following a certain order and gaining their significance within the framework of continuity. As Foucault (1971, p. xx) appropriately states in his book *The Order of Things:*

> Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.

Rayya, a representative of a modern Arab woman, is seemingly haunted by the politics of Pan Arabism and the mythologized prospect of liberating Palestine from the yoke of Israeli occupation. As the events continue to unfold, Rayya occasionally interrogates her position as an inveterate zealot who is seized by the spell and power of nationalism. She starts questioning her affiliation to it and the degree to which it extends beyond the plane of myth. Her cultural contacts with Alex, who is often represented as a kind of mentor constantly throwing into question her assumptions, have a noticeable impact on her identity. When she berates the leaders of Pan Arabism for taking interest only in their personal needs, she evokes Scarborough's perception of myth as a telos employed by the dominator to subjugate the dominated and eschew any potential popular uprising. He notes that

> It is precisely the function of myth to depoliticize the uses of meaning by naturalizing them- that is turning them into eternal essences beyond question. Naturalization disguises the fact that myth is chosen, somewhat arbitrarily, by history from among a variety of options that were available. Myth then is a tool by which the bourgeoisie keeps at bay the Revolution. The bourgeoisie wish to maintain a status quo in which their power is secured (1994, p.64).

But are we to take Rayya's self-criticism at face value or shall we put it into question? The following part of this essay is intended to dissect her language and see if she manages to shake off her essentialist mode of thinking or instead she succumbs to her nationalist whims with little or no regard for identity as a process of movement and mediation. To put differently, can Rayya's self reflections and interrogations be construed as a sign of positive change, as a recovery from the fits of paranoia, or still worse as a descent towards a schizophrenic personality given her erratic demeanor and the contradictory nature of her responses and reactions?

1-2 Rayya and the process of interrogating the Self.

One of the former lovers of Rayya, a dead poet, defines her as 'an institution' and an ' unchanneled rushing river, whose direction could not be known'. She is also alluded to as 'a phenomenon' (29). The poet's depiction of Rayya's personality testifies to the idea that her identity is multivalent; she is not someone who is cloistered in a well-defined world. Rayya, on the basis of the poet's testimony, is capricious as she assumes a different personality each time. Hers is not a static identity that is determined by a certain essence or defined according to a set of clear-cut superimposing parameters and discursive practices. She is a character who has a propensity for a break, rupture, discontinuity and seemingly renounces unity and continuity. She is represented like a chameleon whose color is erratic and unpredictable. Such a description can be better understood within the remit of existentialist philosophy which attaches a tremendous importance to human freedom. In this regard Scarborough (ibid, p.57) contends that "existentialists view essentialism as stifling and oppressive. The axiom 'existence precedes essence' insists that human beings are free, that they are not stuck at birth with a nature that limits them, constrains them, a nature about which they had no opinion or choice".

According to Sartre we are "condemned to be free" but we can, of course, fail to exercise our freedom. We can blindly abide by the rules prescribed by the crowd and thus eradicate our humanity. To succumb to the dictates of the herd or to blame one's genes or the environment is to live inauthentically, to have "bad faith" (ibid, p.58).

Since the outset of the narrative, Rayya has been grappling with bad faith. No more are its symptoms manifest than in her tenacious defense of Pan Arabism, the goal of which is to unite all Arabs under the banner

of the Palestinian cause. What is astonishing, however, is Rayya's constant failure to live up to what she thinks and what the others, like the dead poet, think about her. This extract clearly reveals her inability to put into effect what she says; which makes her a mere vocal phenomenon under the supervision of Alex. 'All my life', she admits, 'I have wanted to meet the just. I was sure that they existed amongst those who were designated the enemies of my people… I was called to a meeting to be addressed by an Israeli lawyer who defends Arab prisoners…' (86).

Rayya's statement is redolent with an anti-essentialist discourse. She gives the impression that she is teetering on the brink of setting herself free from the essentializing ethos of Arab nationalism. More important, at this juncture she reaches into the inner recesses of her mind to reconsider, or rather question, the efficiency of Arabists, herself included. She has the courage to brand the pillars of the PLA (Palestinian Liberation Army) as corrupt big cats. She argues that "they put their personal ambitions before the cause, developing circles within circles and establishing little bands whose loyalty is foremost to themselves… 'But who am I to criticize – I and the others like me who lead sheltered lives …'" (89).

It is worth noting that Rayya's look inside herself is usually motivated by Alex's castigations and remarks. Prior to this self-critical vision, she makes allusion to her lover's central role in shaping her new attitudes to national identity. 'He stammers badly', she maintains, 'but I dare not ask him where he lives because he will tell me you cannot liberate Palestine by eating in chic French restaurants or sleeping at the Ritz.'(p. 87)

A critical study aimed at reading the novella against the grain, would probably adopt a contrapuntal reading in search of the colonial discourse embedded in the interstice of the narrative. Such an approach would view Rayya as a helpless Arab character, who is dominated by Alex, a representative of Western culture. But is Alex purely Western? Doesn't he grow up in an Arab environment where he learns to speak and read Arabic? Doesn't he play a pivotal role in unveiling certain harsh facts about a typical modern Arab woman who embarks upon the illusory project of liberating the expropriated land of Palestine? Isn't Alex to the point when he avers that Rayya's sharp intellect doesn't chime in with her 'magic formulas and incantations?' If the Orientalist discourse essentially brands Arabs as superstitious, isn't this somehow reflective of what happens in Arab societies? After all, Rayya's conviction in superstition reminds us of the situation in pre-literate societies as this quote by Scarborough (ibid, p.38) demonstrates:

> Prior to science, totemestic and animistic views of nature dominated preliterate societies, and more sophisticated versions of animism among the advanced civilizations of the ancient world. Animism…held that the rocks, fields, trees, and streams of nature were inhabited by semiautonomous spirits whose actions could affect the well-being of humankind. Totemism adds that human beings are linked by kinship to these spirits; they are our relatives. In that circumstance the most appropriate behavior towards nature is worship or coercion by magic, not detached scientific examination (38).

How can Arabs challenge Zionism when superstitious beliefs and practices akin to totemism and animism are still endemic in their societies and shape the reasoning of a sheer part of the population? If Rayya, the poet traveler, believes in sorcery, what can be said about the average Arab man and woman?

It seems that Rayya's encounter with Alex, though his language is couched in Western ascendency, is more positive as he supplies her with the incentive to look inside and interrogate the self. Unfortunately, she finds it difficult to rid herself of the contradictions that have wholeheartedly enveloped her faculty of reasoning. She is the product of socio-historical and linguistic forces that go into her making in the environment where she acts and reacts. In *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*, Brannigan (ibid, p.118) states that ' subjectivity is the experience we have as individuals of believing in our capacity for freedom, independence and innovation, while at the same time we are subject, and subjected, to ideological, political, discursive and socio-historical forces , which shape our senses of 'self' identity'.

Rayya's subjectivity can be appropriately accounted for within this context of personal freedom and ideological subjugation. This duality has always characterized her speech in such a way that her identity is shrouded in ambivalence. At times she is critical of the self and its essentialist attachment to the illusion of Pan Arabism as when she seriously questions her contributions to the foolhardy ambitions of this organization; at other times she fervently sees the future of Arabs and Palestine in their unity. A few pages before Zahran brings her tale to a close, she reveals Rayya as someone whose nationalism remains intact. She cannot shake off her mythologized great expectation that when India and China grow into powerful nations, they will breathe a new life in Arabs and give a fresh impetus to their union. 'She believed that when China and India, who are the only powers with no Zionist influence, arrived at a parity with the USA and Europe, they would put their umbrella over the Arab world, and the history of Palestine would change'(139).

Rayya is eventually drawn by her extreme nationalist tendencies to disguise as a beggar at Damascus gate. However, it comes as little surprise that even the nationalism she prides herself on is a sham; it is hollow

and superficial since she is much more concerned with the installation of 'a democratic secular' Palestinian government than fighting the usurpers of the native land. This ideology is formerly unraveled when she makes allusion to the extreme front as the organization's adversary in the political arena. Rayya's unshakable affiliation to Arabism compels the following questions: Is Rayya complicit in the teleological political machines of those she has previously likened to 'fat cats'? Does she also deem Arab nationalism as an instrument to personal end-goals? When shall Arab intellectuals and policymakers suppress their personal motives for the sake of defending a cause? When shall they drop their essentialist exclusive discourse and celebrate difference? Unfortunately, the term 'Arab or Muslim world', which is still widely used in our media today, negates myriads of voices and entities. The term lends support to Foucault's idea that each discourse is imbued with a mark of absence; in fact it is 'a half silent murmur of another discourse'. (28)

Conclusion

Rayya 's immersion in nationalism and her confidence that heterogeneous identities can be united under the umbrella of Pan Arabism is a myth which is intent on serving personal political agendas. Her cultural encounter with Alex, who is himself enmeshed in the tangle of logocentric categories, has enabled her to put her essentialist ideas and assumptions to the test. Alex, who has been employed more as a guide, monitor and critic than a lover intermittently destabilizes her exclusive discourse which provides no space for the other cultures that constitute the so called Arab or Muslim world. In this context, Foucault's definition of culture as "a hierarchical organization of values, accessible to everybody, but at the same time the occasion of a mechanism of selection and exclusion" (2001, p.173) is deeply entrenched.

Unfortunately, Rayya's self-reflections and censure of Arab Nationalism is a passing fad that cannot be taken at face value. It is true that she denudes its deficiencies, flaws and shortcomings but only under the auspices of Alex, who has been endowed with the faculty of critical reasoning. That's why, like a schizophrenic patient, she develops double personality. She is sometimes presented as a staunch defender of Arabism and she is occasionally revealed as somebody who is averse to it. Her position as an Arab intellect who is almost convinced of her ability to manipulate the world around her via superstition betokens that the 'Arab world' has not yet outgrown the era of totemism and animism. Though her lover does not have her artistic flair, he is much more reasonable than she is. (However, he can't extricate himself from the claustrophobic embrace of polarized conceptualization of 'reality'). In this regard, the Arab world cannot move forward if reason comes into abeyance. Descartes, who should be censured for anchoring truth in the monad of consciousness, should equally be lauded for his stipulation that humans are endowed with the "natural light of Reason" which "illuminates" objects as do the "rays" of the "sun". Ignorance is "blindness", and the evil that must be overcome is "darkness" or "obscurity" or "vagueness" (Scarborough, 1994, p.122).

Though a renowned poet, Rayya is in dearth of reason and therefore falls in the trap of supernatural practices and essentialism which amount to the level of paranoia. She would hardly concur with Amin Maalouf (2000, p.129), who argues in the epilogue of his book *On Identity* that 'each of us should be encouraged to accept his own diversity, to see his identity as the sum of all his various affiliations, instead of just one of them raised to the status of the most important, made into an instrument of exclusion and sometimes into a weapon of war'.

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