

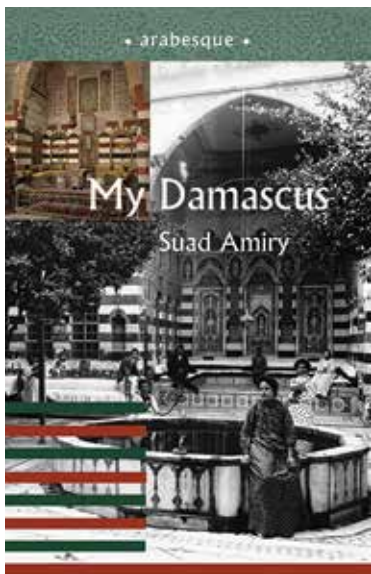
Book
OF THE MONTH

My Damascus

By Suad Amiry

Women Unlimited – New Delhi, 2016, 203 pages, \$25.00

Reviewed by Mahmoud Muna, The Educational Bookshop - Jerusalem



In her new book, writer and architect Suad Amiry, the daughter of a Palestinian father from Jaffa and a Syrian mother, writes about her birthplace, the city of belonging, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, and the shrine of Arab intellectualism and trade: the city of Damascus.

The book is divided into six parts and spans three generations, starting in 1926 with the story of the grandmother returning to visit her ill mother in Arrabeh, a Palestinian village near Nablus – a vivid description of a road journey that is impossible to duplicate in the modern Middle East. As the story progresses, Amiry takes the reader back in time during her mother's marriage and describes the social and cultural traditions in the late nineteenth century.

The second chapter covers the few years before the *Nakba*, in Jerusalem, where Samia (Amiry's mother) moved to live with her husband. Life in Palestine was about to change forever, and Amiry generously describes those Jerusalem

days with major historical and political events as the backdrop.

The journey then takes the reader back to Damascus, a dive into the personalities of the grandfather, the mother, the aunts, and everyone around them. It is as if fiction overlays history, leaving us wondering about the details. This is precisely why Amiry wrote in her endnote: "To construct a 'true story' based on the realities or imaginations ... one cannot but produce a literary genre: non-fictional-fiction or fictional-non-fiction."

To many readers, old Damascus is often artificially constructed through the imagination of an orientalist, whereas modern Damascus is a city of war, burning, and destruction. In *My Damascus*, Amiry succeeds in telling the true story of a magnificent city through the lives of its visitors and inhabitants, with all the charm and hardship, the love and the betrayal. The stories hold rich historical and cultural anecdotes, producing an invaluable source of socio-economic dynamics in Palestine and Syria at the time.

Amiry, the exceptional storyteller, takes readers to the hidden alleys and *souqs* of Damascus, showing them the beautiful mansions and introducing them to the complicated and personal stories of those who lived there. Her unique writing style uses the most simple of personal stories to reflect the tragedy of a nation, weaving in fragments of a memory and the loss of beautiful times.

Several family secrets are revealed through the often personal and intimate stories. Amiry has managed to reconstruct the lives of those individuals who once played an important role in Greater Syria during the Ottoman Empire. She nourishes our imaginations with the lives of those who once lived in splendid houses with charming courtyards.