



# **Alienation and Trauma in the novel “*The Story of Zahra*” by Hanan Al-Shaykh**

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## **Abstract:**

The novel “The Story of Zahra” by Hanan al-Shaykh, which Peter Ford translated into English for Quartet in 1986, is the subject of this study's stylistic critique. The tale of Zahra, a lady whose conflicts with her family and nation ultimately result in her misery and death, is told in this novel, which is set in Beirut both before and during the Lebanese Civil War. Verbs are the main topic of a lexical analysis of The Story of Zahra. The analysis reveals how the author mimicked the actual image of the war-torn society and the tragic existence of a little girl named Zahra through the use of particular verbs.

**Keywords:** Zahra, Civil War, Tragedy, Novel, Arabian Peninsula

## **Introduction:**

In the English-speaking world, Hanan al-Sheikh is a well-known Arabic author. She was born in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1945. She was up in Ras al-Naba, a devout Shi'a Muslim neighborhood in the capital of Lebanon. Al-Sheikh relocated to Cairo, Egypt, in 1963, where she studied for three years at the American College for Women. She met renowned novelist Ihsan Abdul Qadoos while she was living in Cairo, and he inspired her to write her first book, *Suicide of a Dead Man*, which was released in 1967. She started working as a journalist full-time after returning to Beirut, first for the women's magazine "d-Hasna" and then for the Lebanese daily "An-Nahar." Al Shaykh has written several plays and a number of short tales in addition to her six novels. The main topic of her novel is how women fit into society during times of war. The terrible setting she experienced during the first two years of the civil war is reflected in her third book, *The Story of Zahra*, which she wrote while on the Arabian Peninsula.

**Objectives of the study:**

- To analyze the portrayal of women's identity, psychological trauma, and social oppression in Hanan al-Shaykh's novel *The Story of Zahra* within the context of patriarchal Arab society.
- To observe the thematic and narrative techniques employed by Hanan al-Shaykh to highlight issues of gender inequality, sexuality, and the impact of war on women's lives in *The Story of Zahra*.

**Methodology:**

A qualitative and analytical research methodology based on textual analysis is used in this study. *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan al-Shaykh, which is read in English with references to the original Arabic text when needed, serves as the main source of information. In order to comprehend the representation of women's identity, psychological trauma, and social oppression, the study closely examines the novel's narrative, characters, themes, and language.

**Discussion:**

A Shi'a family in Beirut is the focus of *The Story of Zahra*. Before and after the start of the civil war, the novel examines the interactions between young people in the city and between parents and children. The narrative is multifaceted and employs a variety of perspectives, but at its core is Zahra, a confused young lady who attempts to take charge of her life after finding a way to flee persecution during the Lebanese civil war.

There are two books in *The Story of Zahra*. "The Scars of Peace" is the title of the first book. Hanan al-Sheikh presents Zahra as a physically unattractive woman in it. Zahra, who has acne, picks at her scars all the time. To avoid being used, she hides in the lavatory.

Zahra goes to Africa, where her uncle Hashim has resided since the early 1960s, at his invitation. He participated in an unsuccessful coup d'état and was unable to return to Lebanon for fear of being detained. For her uncle, Zahra has a symbolic meaning that makes him think of Lebanon and the Lebanese. Zahra is reminded of another relative's unhealthy interest in her by Hashim's longing for her. Zahra appears to be at the mercy of those who take advantage of her body for their own wants and desires wherever she goes. To get away from her uncle, Zahra marries the impoverished expatriate Majid. She soon discovers that Majid also takes advantage of her to satisfy his needs.

She returns to Beirut, where a civil war has broken out. Zahra imagines controlling her body and fate for the first time. She attributes her increased sense of control over her life to the war, saying, "It begins to occur to me that the war, with its miseries and destructiveness, has been necessary for me to start to return to being normal and human" (138). Zahra's look improves and she starts to get rid of her unsightly pimples.

Zahra is a victim of abuse. Zahra, her uncle Hashim, and her husband Majid, who are often thrust into unpleasant situations, tell the story of the first half of the book. Zahra witnesses her mother's lustful affair, is hounded by males in her family, and is raped by her peers. Once more, escaping to a nearby toilet and locking the door is her only option in such a situation.

"The Torrents of War" is the title of the second book. Zahra is described in the second section of the book as a woman who rebels against patriarchy and starts over. Before the war, Zahra's actions were unimaginable. She offers her services as a volunteer at a hospital that cares for victims of conflict. She no longer concentrates only on herself. Her mother and she have a different relationship. Zahra, who had previously depended only on her mother, is now aware of her dishonesty. She is aware of the repercussions of being made fun of by her mother because she was a quiet witness to her extramarital encounters. Zahra was deprived of her mother's love as a youngster in addition to her mother's failure to love her. However, things alter during the conflict. Zahra, the daughter, is unafraid of anything related to the conflict, but her fearless, self-centered mother is suddenly overcome with fear.

Zahra's self-assurance extends beyond her relationships with others and at home. She enters an area that is typically thought of as belonging to men. It's an armed conflict. Zahra enters the combat zone. She travels to see a sniper because she dares to do something that no woman or even guy would dare to do. She not only stops him from shooting, but she also begins to have a physical connection with him. She gradually transforms his demeanour and the violence in his heart with her kindness and love. Because of her kindness and compassion, she wishes to prevent him from shooting inmates. The sniper gives her some details about his past, but he keeps his political membership a secret.

She gets pregnant as a result of their connection. She then enquires as to his name. The sharpshooter doesn't mention his name, Sami, until Zahra insists. She's hoping for a different identity. She starts to fantasise about getting married to him. She believes that Sami, the sniper, turns into a family man rather than a symbol of the pointless, bloody conflict he is engaged in. Zahra so declines to terminate her pregnancy. He starts the affair out of personal interest, but as time passes and he becomes pregnant, his thoughts shift to the prospect of living a regular life free from the logic of war. He lets Zahra go while feigning compliance with her choice to have the child. However, he shoots her when she goes back to the street.

Zahra says, "He kills me with the bullets that lay at his elbow as he made love to me," as the book comes to a close. The white sheets that covered me a short while ago are still crumpled from my presence after the murders me. Despite my best efforts, I am unable to hear my own speech (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 183). She discloses her demise as her story transitions into the author's. She was slain by a sniper who was her lover. Al-Shaykh reveals the negative aspects of war and its catastrophic effects on society in this book.

When Zahra's life ends, it appears that her empowerment will come to an end. According to the conclusion of her narrative, the Lebanese civil war did not provide favourable circumstances for women's long-term power or healthy survival. Like in many other postwar countries, women in Lebanon have mostly reverted to their pre-war status. However, Zahra's circumstances are different. In order to halt an outstanding shooter, she travels to the battlefield, where her mind transforms him into someone he is not. By resisting a sniper, she briefly obtains personal strength.

Zahra initiates this interaction by entering an area that is exclusive to men more specifically, only men who have been militarized. Her transgression was noteworthy. It produces an alternative narrative to the typical "war story" of the 20th century, which typically centres on the experiences of men and clearly separates the roles of men and women. The majority of historical accounts have excluded women from the battlefield's armed conflict zone, which has long been seen as a man's domain. The Story of Zahra demonstrates the incompleteness of a conventional war narrative and the extent to which it distorts reality when presented in a consistent manner.

The novel's depiction of women's identity struggles in a patriarchal society is among its most striking conclusions. Internalized shame and criticism from others continually threaten Zahra's sense of self. She has ongoing self-doubt and loneliness as a result of her attempts to identify herself outside of male standards.

### **Conclusion:**

The novel's depiction of women's identity struggles in a patriarchal society is among its most striking conclusions. Internalized shame and criticism from others continually threaten Zahra's sense of self. She has ongoing self-doubt and loneliness as a result of her attempts to identify herself outside of male standards. The novel illustrates how patriarchy affects women's lives starting in childhood. Shame about her body and sexuality permeates Zahra's early recollections, which subsequently affects her relationships with other people. In the book, sexuality is dangerous due to violence, social stigma, and coercion.

Hanan Al-Shaykh uses a number of figurative techniques to give the scenes a vivid description. The dialogue between the characters heightens the drama and authenticity of the narrative. She illustrates the complex relationship between the characters with powerful verbs and adjectives. As a result, The Story of Zahra's rhetoric, verbs, and phrase structure precisely present scenes, characters, relationships, and battle situations to our imaginations. Because the novelist uses action verbs as a creative device to convey the story exactly how she wants, The Story of Zahra is the perfect example of language.

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