

Women's Social Roles in Time of Peace and War in Hanan Al Sheikh's Novel "*The Story of Zahra*"

Afrah Abdul jabber¹, Raghad Shakir Deair², ^{1,2}University of Misan/ College of Education /English Department, Email:¹Afrahaljabar15@gmail.com
²raghad_shakir2000@yahoo.com,

This paper investigates the role of woman in Hanan Al – Sheikh's *Zahra* . It discusses woman's place in the Arab society in peace and war-time. In this novel, a woman is presented as a victim of all tragedies, from cruel parenthood to wars and violent tensions afflicting nations and people. Zahra tries to move beyond the limitations forced by society, but she fails to completely transcend them.

Keywords: *War; patriarchy; oppression; Arab women*

Introduction:

The modern Arab novel renews narrative methods, employs new subjects and themes, and proposes different forms of writing and expression. The question of the self is considered one of the most important components and elements that Arab novel celebrated. Hanan Al-Sheikh is considered one of the most important Arab writers who have made self-question an essential component of their creative questions. This appears through a set of novels that have occupied a central place within the achievement of the Arab narrative, and made it one of its symbols most present in the modern Arab literary scene.

Hanan Al Sheikh is a journalist, novelist and playwright, who has won several awards, and is one of the most famous contemporary writers in the Arab world. She was born and raised in a conservative area in Beirut called Ras El Nabeh, where she attended a traditional Islamic primary school for girls before moving to Cairo to complete her high school studies at the American College. She was a successful journalist in Beirut, and then lived in Saudi Arabia before moving to London in 1982. Her short stories and novels include women in the first place in the face of conservative religious traditions that were placed against the backdrop of political tensions and instability in the Lebanese civil war .They study gender relations, power struggles, and parental control.

Al-Sheikh is the daughter of southern Lebanon who wanted to reconcile with the past, her past with her mother, who left her suffering orphans, loss of security and affection, otherwise the writer lived hating her mother and she considers her the only responsible for her suffering. She deprived her of care and kindness. Through these crises, the novelist highlights the importance of the human being in exile and how to build human relations with the other, or the relationships that contribute to one's survival in the country of emigration..

The novelist Hanan Al-Sheikh tried to make the Lebanese girl a model for the crisis of the Arab girl who suffers the tyranny of customs, traditions and the vicious outlook by the man. This man knows nothing of the woman except the extent of her sexual and physical pleasure presented to him. Man sees the chastity of a woman and her dignity in her virginity, as if this delicate membrane is the title of the virgin woman.

Al Sheikh's *Zahra* is the story of a woman in the world of men, during the time of war and peace. Zahra does not seek to survive through narration, but separates from shock through silence and isolation. Zahra is an eyewitness to the betrayal of the mother, using her daughter as a companion to her treacherous dates under various pretexts, including a doctor's visit, or a visit to the grandmother and other frequent visits, so the mother tells her thirst of men in front of her daughter Zahra. Men brutally chase her in the corridors to have sex with her. In a patriarchal society, Flax argues: "[the daughter] is expected to be like the mother, both as a person and in terms of her adult roles, there is less need for her to differentiate" (1978,pp.175-176). Her mother also leads her to believe that her existence is intolerable for the entire household:"Isn't it enough that I have sold my gold bracelets to buy you your calcium injections? Don't you see how bow-legged you are?" (Al Sheikh, 1995,p. 4). Her physical shortcomings and the negative image she makes of herself foreshadow her sexual relationship with many men.

The extreme poverty of Zahra and her youthful face with acne declares that she is emotionally injured because of the escalating and continuing struggle in society, that is, the battle between men and women over the control and control of the female body. Ann Adams asserts:"Zahra's abject and acne-filled face not only makes visible the emotional scars this upbringing has had on the sensitive young girl, but also literalizes the ever increasing gender conflict carried on in society – the 'battle' between men and women for the control and regulation of female bodies." (Al Sheikh ,1995,p.201).

The story appears through the scars or acne that cover the face of Zahra, which is like a curse in the eyes of her father who mistreats her ,believing that the acne on her face prevents her from marrying ,and therefore; he sees her as a heavy burden on him.She often was unconsciously peeling off her face, which makes this cruel father sweeping anger at his daughter, who is marked with ugliness in his eyes: 'The father is a tyrannical figure who terrorizes the household with his violent temper and leather belt.'(Abudi, 2011: 286). Zahra has no hope of marriage because of this rude patriarchal perspective that links her inevitable destiny to spinsterhood to isolation and self-convergence with the depth of her sense of

rejection by others in a society ruled by patriarchal domination. For Zahra , the closest people become the source of pain and oppression.

The writer explained the Lebanese human crisis in this unfortunate case at Zahra. She suffers from her mother while she is practicing the relationship with other than her father, and she suffers from her father in light of his practical circumstances and his home nature. She contemplates:"All I knew was that I was afraid of my father, as afraid of the blows he dealt her as I was of those he dealt me" (Al Sheikh ,1995,p .15) She suffers from spoiling her life when she had sex with someone who had no emotion or appreciation. She became the prey of the man / wolf who broke her virginity twice and was pregnant twice, and aborted twice, but she was able to treat virginity only once. Zahra, who took the image of the Arab girl, is also Lebanon, as the two were raped by the other / dominant, who has a lot to get. Zahra who left Lebanon, is Lebanon that no longer knows her people in the war, and her people no longer know her for what they are doing. With him who killed, sniped and destroyed, everyone became alien to the other. Zahra is fragmented between Lebanon, the country of birth and origin, and Africa, the country of alienation, immigration and marriage. She is split between the bitter reality and what every girl dreamed of, between the beauty that Lebanon sees in its girls and the pimples that were scattered over her face. Al-Sheikh slightly shifts to take us into the world of the symbols. She presents Zahra who digs her face with her nails so that she damages it, as if by this act she rejects the stereotypical image of beautiful women imposed by her society. She decides at last to be free from the male domination over her, and she wants to fight the battle of these ferocious wars in her own way, and only here she finds her human identity away from the fixed molds. She discovers the strengths in herself that she never imagines she has.

Hanan Al-Sheikh has made her heroine rebel against the stereotypes that make women a tool for sexual pleasure only and reduce them to the issue of sex, which is what the Arab imagination has built on throughout the ages until it has become a recurrent intellectual legacy and forced upon women who accept it silently..From this silence, the resistance of Zahra is born, who chooses to leave her city, Beirut, where she sees nothing but humiliation and hegemony. She travels to "Africa", where the story continues in other vocabulary. The scene is bot much different from what is there in Beirut.Zahra's body becomes a commodity to all men . Henri Lefebvre asserts that Zahra's body "is at once symbolic and concrete: concrete as a result of the aggression to which the body is subject; symbolic, on account of fragmentation of the body's living unity. This is especially true of the female body as transformed into exchange value, into a sign of the commodity, and indeed into a commodity per se" (Lefebvre 310). Zahra decides to be more powerful to protect herself from the male gaze. In this context Zahra desires to live for herself and she wanted her body to be her. She wants the air surrounding her to be for her alone and not for anyone else. The patriarchal oppression dominate her even after her marriage, which did not satisfy her thirst for love, especially after her husband refused to recognize her as an individual who has his own personal needs and she was another image that carries the values of the domineering parenthood.

But the war changed Zahra and caused a coup in her story. After she became depressed, distorted, and folded on herself to Beirut again, she starts to feel differently: "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." (Al Sheikh, 1995, p. 161) The writer criticizes the misuse of weapons, the role and multiplicity of parties, and the desire of people to escape, emigrate or stay in the shadow and tranquility. This war which the writer portrayed is as a snake that eats and devours what it sees in front of it. It is the war, destruction, death, sadness and killing the smile that was depicted on the lips of children. Here, the crisis comes clear in reading the reality of the war and how to get rid of it, as the author visualized this crisis in the words of Zahra, who no longer endured life under these conditions. The war ugliness and the destruction which inflicts individuals and societies, represents Zahra revolution and rebellion against patriarchal domination. In this regard, Zahra believes that men and women should work together towards patriotism that is devoid of male chauvinism, war and violence. She hates herself because she is silent but not mute. She is awake but dreaming of living. Her silence is her illness. Her dream is to hear one sentence from her first rapist regretting her lost innocence. Every time a rape breaks out, war breaks out inside her, from her brain to her toes, she is raped and aborted over and over again and she is carelessly messed about.

Zahra married a friend of her maternal uncle "Majid" who believed at the end of the matter that seeing blood and virginity is a reactionary thing. Fatima Mernissi argues: "Virginity is a matter between men, in which women play the role of silent intermediaries. Like honor, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self-confidence" (Mernissi, 1982, p. 183). Majid acted during the marriage as a madman who is indifferent to anything and is not responsible for something. But she cannot live with him for a long time. She is divorced. Her only wish was to return to her mother's womb..

Zahra is a victim of both patriarchy and war, and that it is futile to destroy the idea of war by isolating patriarchy. Zahra's father is described as despotic father with his wife and his daughter who are always terrified of him. Zahra recounts how her psyche is affected as a result of her societies and her family's domination causing her internal wounds. In this context, Ann She is subjected to domestic violence by her domineering father who beats and abuses her without mercy every time he sees her peeling off her face with her fingers. He used to scold her harshly as he sees her digging the seeds of her face. This brutal treatment increases the gap between Zahra and her father and it deepens Zahra's sense of loneliness in a patriarchal society. She feels unwanted by the closest people to her. To combat these patriarchal ideas, Zahra begins a process of self-mutilation as a symbolic expression of her rejection of her society and its convictions. With her nails, her face is deliberately distorted, so that blood is oozing from her blisters. She becomes revolutionary. In this context, the face of Zahra is no longer part of her, but rather a metaphor for society. This is because by attacking her skin, she is practically denying the unrealistic stereotypes that women are forced

to submit to. Zahra, by her silent resistance, rejects all the criteria that value women only as sexual themes.

Hanan Al-Sheikh depicts how Zahra continues to resist the compulsive patriarchal system by resorting to a silent place like the bathroom where she spends most of her time. It is the only place that becomes her only safe shelter from the oppressive and patriarchal society in which she lives. Zahra chooses to lock herself in the bathroom, whether in Beirut or in Africa, whenever she faces emotional and psychological pressures, forced on her by the despotic father, her uncle, and her husband. She hates herself because she is silent. Ghandour argues that: "the discourses by which Zahra's immediate and extended family construct her, along with the social discourses [...] are basically discourses that constrain and contradict her as an evolving human being. These discourses construct her, instead, as a speechless entity." (Ghandour 239).

When she travels to Africa, her uncle there finds that Zahra is the direct link that he misses in Lebanon. He starts flirting with her and seducing her. She wishes to tell him to stop it, but, instead of expressing her anger at her uncle, she withdraws into silence in the bathroom. She thinks: "What is there outside this house except for anxiety, worry and sorrow? Here I am totally relaxed" (Al Sheikh, 1995, p. 124).

The war has suspended her father's persecution, the paternal role, which had fallen back. He leaves Beirut back with his wife to the ancestral village, which clearly indicates his dissatisfaction with the war. And they left Zahra in Beirut, which would not have been allowed previously to live alone without suppressing patriarchal custom. The war disrupts traditional institutions. This disruption of the established moral system provides some breathing room for Zahra. "When I heard that the battles raged fiercely and every front was an inferno, I felt calm. It meant that my perimeters were fixed by these walls, that nothing which my mother hoped for me could find a place inside them" (Al Sheikh, 1995, p. 125). She moves to her own residence, and she is able to get back her energy in order to survive. In the context of this new field created by the war, Zahra masters the enormous energies she has in emphasizing a new set of human values, which enables her to resist the law of the jungle represented by her father, brother, and all men. Miriam Cooke comments that the war gives Zahra a purpose as she begins to mix into its dynamics. (p.57)

When Zahra first meets the sniper her intention is to stop the war, even as she uses the language of rape. For Zahra, if she is unable to stop war and death, she is able, at least, to delay it by creating new values of love, coexistence and tolerance. "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." (Al Sheikh, 1995, p. 161)

Zahra does not believe that being admitted into the male space is not allowed. Therefore, by going to the sniper's position, as Accad clarifies, death mixed with war and sex are all connected with Zahra's steps toward the sniper. (2007, p.54) She defies the bullets and intends to show her strength: "It began with me climbing the stairs to find him and feeling life start to

revive in me" (Al Sheikh ,1995,p 146). Bare-breasted Zahra walks in front of the sniper as an attempt to divert him from his deadly mission. This is an ethical mission .She wants to establish a sexual and oral relationship with sniper, hoping that her sexual relationship with the sniper will alleviate the horrors of war and cure the injuries of her devastated country. Zahra 's method to humanize the killer is through the language of her body.

Zahra realizes that she has triumphed over her fear of her tyrannical father, almost wishing that he would see her in the sniper's arms as an act of rebellion against him and her community: "Oh, sniper, let me cry out in pleasure so that my father hears me and comes to find me sprawled out so. [...] Let my father see my legs spread wide in submission" (Al Sheikh ,1995,p 161)She asks herself what makes the sniper a sniper? Who inspires him, or who issues the order for him to snip the unknown passers-by? The body of Zahra, which is destroyed by the painful past, is used in a creative way for a meaningful purpose. She is experiencing, for the first time, sexual pleasure, which is something she missed in her previous traditional relationships with Malik and her husband Majid .She thinks of marrying a sniper because he is the only man who accepted her as equal to him.

Zahra physical exchange with the sniper makes her believe again in peace and human values. Her powerful tool to end the war is through giving her body and soul to the killer. She wants to live in a society that is more humane and peaceful, not a society that is barbaric and authoritarian patriarchal which destroy any hope for a better future for women. Zahra thinks about the sniper's meeting to discuss their future marriage whenever the war is over. At the end of the novel, Zahra is reported to be pregnant from the sniper. It is evident that she is unable to permanently delay having sex after marriage. The first one she thinks of is her father: "I don't want my father to find out I am pregnant, even though his anger can change nothing. In these times, shouting and screaming and even sadness have lost their meanings. But I do not wish to hear my father say, even in mutterings to himself, 'Like mother, like daughter'"(Al Sheikh ,1995,p 210). The sniper changes his position regarding marrying her. She feels intense pain, and finds herself falling in the street and blood bleeding from her body. She starts getting used to the terrible pain as she used to darkness. He has killed her with the bullets that were next to him.The tragic death of Zahra may be seen, at the end of the novel, as evidence that the war did not clean up the traditional patriarchal forces that legitimately permitted everything that persecuted women. She wonders: "Does he kill me because I'm pregnant. Or is it because I asked him whether he was a sniper?"(Al Sheikh ,1995,p 214). The relationship between Zahra and the sniper cannot last for long. This indicates the futility and uselessness of this relationship, and it is destined to kill any hope of a new life realizing that her transgressions could only lead to this ultimate act of punishment: "I close my eyes that perhaps were never truly opened" (Al Sheikh ,1995,p 215)

In conclusion, Zahra falling in front of the patriarchal skeletal structures themselves, is now represented in the shape of a sniper, which caused her pain in her youth. And Zahra is mistaken in believing that she can transform the ugliness of war into peace and harmony: "Zahra dies at the end when she had dared to speak. During her relationship with the sniper,

Zahra kept being both the 'unspeakable' and a woman who cannot speak her mind." (Ghandour 2002,p. 240)The story of Zahra records the woman's rejection of the rhetoric of war and of the patriarchs she gives birth to. Zahra, as a persecuted woman who has been silenced, rejects these restrictions and stresses her right to express her opposition to the authoritarian patriarchy.

Hence, any attempt to stop war, without destroying the heinous patriarchy, will be a weak and feeble effort . Finally, Zahra's works in the name of humanity and the dying values symbolize a humanistic statement in defense of peace, love and tolerance. Adams points out that " Zahra is no mere symbol for a masculinely defined nation is seen in the explicit fact that Lebanon is never at 'peace' in this text, at least not for women" (Adams 204)

The final fate of Zahra is not unexpected. Abudi observers: "She drifts from one man to another, from Malek to Majed to the sniper, all of whom exploit her sexually and push her closer to the brink of self-annihilation."(Abudi, 2011: 286) Her fatal conclusion indicates her total submission to the patriarchal patterns which she only resists only temporarily:"It is the end of the temporal series – how things eventually turned out – that determines which event began it: we know it was a beginning because of the end" (Martin 74). Regardless, the sniper's bullet brings the beginning, the middle and the end of Zahra's story together in a fatal but inevitable conclusion that emphasizes the total. The ultimate meaning of Zahra's story, which she consistently embodies, is permanently inscribed on her body as she fails to rescue it from the exploitive, controlling and always violent male gaze.

Conclusion

This paper examines that Zahra in Al Sheik's novel is woman who defies the domestic violence she subjected to by her tyrannical father and the patriarchal. She resists all the roles that her mother, her father, husband and society cast her in. She works to re-conceptualize her sexuality and sense of gender through continuous personal struggles. While war supports women and grants them more mobility, any freedom but this freedom is only is temporal.

References

- Abudi, D.(2011). *Mothers and daughters in Arab women's literature: The Family frontier*. Boston: Brill.
- Accad, E.(2007). "Gender and violence in Lebanese war novels." *From patriarchy to empowerment: Women's participation, movements, and rights in the middle east, North Africa and South Asia*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Adams, A. M. (2001)."Writing self, writing nation: Imagined geographies in the fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh." *Tulsa studies in women's literature* 20.2
- Al-Shaykh, H.(1995).*The Story of Zahra*. Trans. Peter Ford. New York: Anchor Books.
- Cooke, M.(1982). "Beirut...Theatre of the Absurd...Theatre of Dreams...: The Lebanese Civil War in the Writings of Contemporary Arab Women." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 13 (1982)
- Flax, J.(1978). "The Conflict between nurturance and autonomy in mother-daughter relationships and within feminism." *Feminist studies* 4.2 (1978):
- Ghandour, S.(2002). "Hanan al-Shaykh's *hikayat Zahra*: A Counter-narrative and a counter-History." *Intersections: Gender, nation and community in Arab women's novels*. Eds. Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman and Therese Saliba. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Lefebvre, H.(1998). *The production of space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Martin, W.(1986). *Recent Theories of Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mernissi, F.(1982). "Virginty and Patriarchy." *Women and Islam*. Ed. Azizah al-Hibri. Oxford: Pergamon Press,1982. 183