

# A War of Their Own:

## Three Novels about the Lebanese Civil War Written by Women

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Women have historically been excluded from war literature. Recently, however, women, including those in the Middle East, have begun to recount the stories of war and create alternatives to time-honoured masculinized war narratives. Their articulation of their experiences is having a dramatic impact on perceptions of conflict, sexuality, and society.

Three novels written about the Lebanese civil war – Ghada al-Samman's *Beirut '75*, Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*, and Hoda Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter* – are linked by their critiques of gender-specific behavioural expectations, of nationalism, of individual and communal identity and violence, as well as the connection between sexuality and violence.

All three authors belong to what Miriam Cooke (1988) calls “the Beirut Decentrists,” whom she defines as “A group of women writers who have shared Beirut as their home and the war as their experience” (p. 3). As she goes on to say, these women “have been decentered in a double sense: physically, they were scattered all over a self-destructing city; intellectually, they moved in separate spheres” (p. 3). Numbering over forty women, prominent Decentrists include Ghada al-Samman, Hanan al-Shaykh, Etel Adnan, Layla Osseiran, Emily Nasrallah, and Hoda Barakat. “Regardless of confession and political persuasion” (Cooke, 1988, p. 3), these women captured the routine and dailiness of war, the mundane, the unheroic. War was not a cause to glorify, rather its unjustifiable horror was to be recorded so as not to be forgotten. As the violence continued day after day, year after year, the social system that had always prioritised men was crumbling away. The traditional dichotomies of home/front, ally/enemy, and dominant/subordinate no longer existed: the war was everywhere, affecting everyone at all times, and the enemy was within, and constantly changing. So completely disrupting was the war to Lebanese society that women found themselves able to emerge from the margins, and “a disproportionately large number of [them] seemed to enter into the literary arena” (Salem, 2003, p. 115). They challenged social customs that allocated submissive roles to women and dominant, violent roles to men, and successfully undermined and formed counter-narratives and counter-histories to the patriarchal stories of Lebanon.

Ghada al-Samman's writing concentrates on oppression in Arab society and tradition, on female liberation, on internalized sexism, and individual emancipation. She sees men as being as much in need of liberation as women. All those themes are evident in her short novel *Beirut '75*, which was completed and published only a few months before the civil war began. Because it highlights several of the reasons for the outbreak of hostilities, it is often seen as a prediction of the war. Through her characters, al-Samman comments on a

sick society which oppresses and exploits the poor and, in particular, women.

One of the characters of *Beirut '75* is Yasmeena, who leaves Damascus to realize her dreams of freedom and being published. Once in Beirut, she seems to find everything she'd lacked in Damascus. She falls in love with a rich and powerful man called Nimr, with whom she loses her virginity and discovers her potent sexual drive. Yasmeena describes her sexual liberation as speaking for that of "the passionate desires of all the Arab women who had been held prisoners for more than a thousand years" (al-Samman, 1995, p. 41), and feels "grateful to him because he transformed me [her] from an icy tundra into a minefield" (al-Samman, 1995, p. 39). Yet she cannot escape the deeply entrenched traditions governing sexuality. Her imprisonment is repeatedly symbolized through her pet turtle, which cannot cast off its shell.

For Nimr, Yasmeena was simply a sex object. His perception of her as a sexual commodity can be seen when he passes her over to his wealthy friend Nishan once he becomes bored with her. Nishan, who is uninterested in, and, indeed, scornful of all women, likewise treats Yasmeena as merchandise. The men's depravity, which is indicative of the immorality and hypocrisy of the Lebanese patriarchal system, is exemplified by a comment Nimr makes to Yasmeena: "You're crazy if you'd think I'd marry a woman who gave herself to me out of wedlock" (al-Samman, 1995, p. 55). Nimr ultimately leaves Yasmeena to marry the daughter of his father's political rival, revealing he's not even interested in finding a partner he loves – all that matters is increasing his wealth and influence.

After her abandonment, Yasmeena is left with two unappealing choices: either to move in with Nishan, or to become a prostitute. Dejected, she visits her brother, who had been ignoring her affair with Nimr in return for the cash she delivered. Upon realizing she has come empty-handed, he flies into a rage and violently murders and beheads Yasmeena. To admiring police officers, he confesses his crime as an "honour" killing. Nimr arrives to blackmail the brother into removing his name from the report, and displays absolutely no sorrow for Yasmeena's murder. Al-Samman exposes men, the "purveyors of tradition" (al-Samman, 1995, p. 42), as sickeningly hypocritical and morally corrupt. Violence and suppression of female sexuality are integral tools in sustaining this patriarchal order.

Men, however, are also sometimes victims of tradition, gender, and class-specific roles. Ta'an is a simple pharmacist trying to escape becoming the victim of a revenge killing. His sensitive and peaceful nature is sadly lost on a culture whose "tribal mentality would fuel vengeance" (Salem, 2003, p. 91). His paranoid fear of being murdered prompts him to shoot an innocent man, exposing the futility of outdated traditions and cultural practices. Ta'an is not the only male to suffer. Abu Mustafa is a desperately poor fisherman whose livelihood depends upon powerful men like Nimr, and represents the exploited, voiceless sectors of society. He has spent his whole life fantasizing about finding a genie's lamp in his fishing nets, but ultimately blows himself up with dynamite. In the smoky remnants, his son Mustafa glimpses the vestiges of an old lamp and realizes, "But *you're* the one who never learned how to come out of the bottle! What you were looking for wasn't in the depths of the sea, but deep inside you!" (al-Samman, 1995, p. 87). Abu Mustafa had been trapped in the role that society had allocated him, powerless to challenge his position. Al-Samman seems to be advocating revolutionary action by indicating that the power for change is present within the marginalized.

Farah, another character in *Beirut '75*, also suffers. When he meets his famous relative Nishan, he is told he will be helped to find fame if he agrees to the "price": "obedience - absolute obedience to me" (al-Samman, 1995, p. 45). Dazzled by the thought of

success and escape from poverty, Farah accepts. Nishan soon shows sexual interest in him, and Farah is forced into sexual activity with him. Consequently, Farah begins to rapidly lose his mind. At first, he lost his libido, which he acknowledged was because he “was no longer the master of my [his] own soul. I [he] had sold it once and for all - to the devil!” (al-Samman, 1995, p. 69). Ironically, Nishan has marketed Farah as the “Singer of Manliness” (al-Samman, 1995, p. 67), and women fell head over heels for him. Meanwhile, Farah is “haunted by feelings of delicacy, fragility, and fear” (al-Samman, 1995, p. 68), indicating that he is not suited to playing the role of a macho, socially desirable man. Eventually Farah becomes totally out of touch with reality, and the novel ends with his admittance to and escape from a mental hospital.

Farah's experience shows Beirut as a place ill with debauchery, twisted social traditions, and apathy. During his escape in the closing lines of the novel, Farah switches around the signs for Beirut and the mental hospital, a potent ending highlighting the many problems plaguing Lebanese society. Powerful men control the destiny of the majority, forcing women into subservient and submissive roles, and ‘weaker’ men into destructive behaviour as they attempt to conform to social expectations. The marginalized have no voice in a society where arbitrary gender and social divisions exist only to maintain the status quo. *Beirut '75* diagnoses many of the causes for the civil war and clearly argues that feminist concerns are irrefutably tied in with political concerns. The marginalized are here given a voice to speak of the dramatic changes needed in the Lebanese political, economic, and social systems - problems which are eroding the conscience of the nation and that will ultimately contribute to the civil war.

Al-Shaykh similarly insinuates that the patriarchal social system is to blame for the conflict in her novel *The Story of Zahra*, which can be considered a masterpiece of modern Arabic literature. The book has been criticised and banned in many Arab countries because of its “explicit sexual descriptions, its exploration of taboo subjects, such as family cruelty and women's sexuality, especially in relation to war” (Accad, 1990, p. 43).

Zahra, a young Shiite woman, has endured years of abuse and oppression from nearly all the men she has known and, indeed, her own mother. Her misery begins at home, where she learns to associate betrayal, violence, and brutality with men. Her descriptions of her tyrannical father are terrifying; he “was always brutal. His appearance seemed to express his character: a frowning face, a Hitler-like moustache above thick full lips, a heavy body. Do I misjudge him? He had a stubborn personality. He saw all life in terms of black or white” (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 19). That last line reveals her father's, and by extension, Lebanese patriarchy's rigid dichotomous ideology.

From an early age Zahra becomes aware of the preferential treatment given to her lazy brother Ahmad, simply because of his gender. Her father saved money to send Ahmad to America to study engineering, ignoring the fact that, unlike his sister, “Ahmad could barely read and write. He was always being thrown out of school” (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 20). Zahra's misfortune seems endless: one night whilst visiting her grandfather, her cousin Kasem molests her as she sleeps. Zahra internalizes her lack of control over her body which only makes the suffering worse. She constantly picks at the spots that mark her unremarkable face, which only scars her and angers her father more. Her relationship with a family friend, Malek, is similarly masochistic, as their sexual activities seem more like habitual rape. Indeed, their relationship ultimately leads to Zahra's breakdown.

Throughout Zahra's life, everyone she encounters seems less concerned with understanding her than they are in exploiting her for their own interests. An important motif in the novel is introduced on the first page, when Zahra hides behind a door with

her unfaithful mother, who has placed her hand over Zahra's mouth to stifle any noise she might make. That symbolism of Zahra as a woman without a voice, who is unable to articulate herself because of the suppressing hand of tradition, is key to understanding Zahra's life story. Zahra has been silenced by a society that does not allow women to control their own lives. As a result, Zahra retreats into herself and is deemed mad by the very society that is responsible for her condition.

Like Yasmeeena in *Beirut '75*, Zahra is trapped in a lose-all situation, abused by and yet dependent on men for survival. In a bid to escape Beirut's domineering and hostile men and the possibility of an arranged marriage which would result in her sexual history being exposed, Zahra travels to Africa to live with her uncle Hashem. Hashem had sought exile in Africa after his political party, the Popular Syrian Party (PPS), failed a coup d'état in Beirut. The party emblem of a swastika contained within a circle, as Semia Herbawi (2007) notes, recalls the image of Zahra's father, with his "Hitler-like moustache." This suggests similarities between "two totalitarian, monologic apparatuses predicated on women's oppression: patriarchy ... and nationalism" (Herbawi, 2007), as represented by her father and uncle respectively, and therefore indicates how Zahra will again fall prey to male dominance.

Zahra attempts to take control of her life by accepting the marriage proposal of Hashem's friend, Majed. However, Majed has his own reasons for marrying her. He has been victimized by a patriarchal system that benefits men or the more advantaged social classes. As Suad Joseph observes, "Government and non-government spheres in most societies ... are arenas of operation not for 'men', but for ... men of privileged classes. The majority of men (working class) are excluded from [these] ... spheres, despite their imagined identification with maleness" (cited in Ghandour, 2002, p. 243). Majed is from a working class family and accordingly is excluded from that privileged discourse of masculinity and nationalism. Majed is hurt and surprised at being excluded from the rich Lebanese community in Africa, and becomes preoccupied with making money in order to gain a sense of self-worth and self-importance – "only money... makes you strong ... gives a choice of friendship and achieves equality" (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 64). Zahra can help Majed to achieve his goal of climbing the socio-economic ladder, so he married her "and so fulfilled the dream I've [he] had of marrying the daughter of an illustrious family" (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 69). Indeed, Zahra is nothing more to Majed than that, for he sees her as a sexual possession: "Here I was, married at last, the owner of a woman's body that I could make love to whenever I wished" (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 69). As Sabah Ghandour (2002) remarks, his "obsession with appropriating Zahra's body is an extension of his dream to be inscribed into the socioeconomic formal history of Lebanon" (p. 243). Majed, like Nimr in *Beirut '75*, is unable to see women as anything more than a source of sexual or psychological fulfilment. This exposes Lebanese men's own sexual repression and socialization in a system that does not allow for healthy relations between the sexes.

Ultimately, Zahra's years of exploitation and commodification explode in her third and most severe psychological fit. In *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel*, Barbara Hill Regney examines how madness in female characters can be analysed as a political reaction to the collective madness of a society which suppresses women and socializes them to internalize their inferiority. Zahra goes crazy because she lives in "a patriarchal political and social system, a universe dominated by masculine energy, which, in itself, manifests a kind of collusive madness in the form of war or sexual oppression and is thereby seen as threatening to feminine psychological survival" (Regney, 1978, p. 7). As seen in *Beirut '75*, men can also be alienated in such a hierarchically power-structured system – Farah similarly suffers from Zahra's psychosis as a response to life in an unliveable, mad society. Their lunacy serves as discursive manifestations of protest

against such systems.

The second part of the novel tracks Zahra's homecoming to Lebanon, a country self-destructing in civil war. In many ways, the war is an extension and reflection of her pre-war suffering, and seems to be a natural consequence of a frustrated and sick society that had played out its degeneration on Zahra. Violent chaos has engulfed Beirut. Even Ahmad and his grandfather, the only non-violent men in the novel, joined a militia group. It is apparent that he has done so without any real ideological convictions, as his excuse for fighting constantly changes. The real motive, however, is because he sees fighting as a way of asserting his masculine identity, and a rejection of feminine behaviour. He states, "If I ask myself what I have accomplished, I answer that ... I have not stayed at home with the women" (al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 143). Any prospect of peace frightens Ahmad, for it will return him to his previous useless, mediocre status. The war has given him a sense of importance, demonstrating how violent masculinity in war is seen as proof of manhood and creates a sense of empowerment.

Ironically, when Zahra instigates a sexual relationship for the first time in her life, it is with the local sniper, the ultimate symbol of the war and of violent masculinity, the very construction responsible for the suffering of Zahra and, therefore, Lebanon. Possibly because of her sense of independence, Zahra has her first orgasm, but her feelings of control are soon extinguished when she discovers that she is four months pregnant. Zahra's suggestion that they marry threatens the sniper's sense of power and domination, and in order to impose the old patriarchal authoritarianism, he kills her.

It is fruitful to look briefly at the structure of *The Story of Zahra*, which is original and unusual. Zahra narrates three chapters, and two are told by Majed and Hashem, which on one level may indicate a patriarchal attempt to suppress Zahra's voice, but on another, provides valuable information. The male narratives highlight some of the inconsistencies of the patriarchal system that has fashioned their behaviour. As Joseph Zeidan says, including the men's histories within the novel "demonstrates the complexity of the relationships among war, sexuality, feminism, and nationalism that holds society at large accountable for the construction of oppressive values" (Zeidan, 1995, p. 207). While Zahra may be passive, silent, and powerless in the face of male domination, by narrating her own story, one that is normally repressed, she subverts the dominant patriarchal discourse, undermines the authority of Lebanon's master narrative, and presents chilling criticism of its male-dominated society. The novel ends with Zahra narrating her own murder, indicating that although she may be destroyed, her story will remain long after her death to challenge the official patriarchal Lebanese male discourse.

*The Stone of Laughter*, by Hoda Barakat, also challenges that discourse. It is generally considered to be the first modern Arabic novel with a gay protagonist, Khalil, who does not fit into the two available categories of masculinity:

The first group ... have broken down the door of conventional masculinity and entered manhood by the wide door of history ... The second group ... is made up of men ... who have got a grip on the important things in life, and who, holding the tools of understanding, awareness and close attention to theory have laid down plans to fasten their hold on the upper echelons ... in politics, in leadership, in the press ... both kinds of manhood were closed to Khalil and so he remained ... in a stagnant, feminine state of submission to a purely vegetable life, just within reach of two very attractive versions of masculinity. (Barakat, 1994, p. 14)

His reluctance to become involved in the violence, “his strong inclination to peace, to safety” (Barakat, 1994, p. 14), and rejection of the construction of war-time masculinity manifest themselves through his adoption of feminine traits. Khalil is “thereby refusing the dualism of traditional patriarchal society which divides people into strong males versus weak females” (Yared, 2001, pp. 226-227), and subverting the dominant gender role binarisms. Barakat’s perception of what is feminine, however, is exaggerated and just as stereotypical as many of the images her male contemporaries might employ. It is also the polar opposite of valorised masculinity. For example, Khalil escapes into passive activities such as waiting, cleaning, cooking, and doting on his loved ones.

Despite his efforts, Khalil cannot isolate himself from the war: he has internalized the violence outside, which he plays out psychologically. The small room in which Khalil lives is occasionally invaded by the outside, by the war. Described as an “abyss” (Barakat, 1994, p. 29), Khalil sometimes feels as though it had “an evil air ... as if another room had eaten the first” (Barakat, 1994, p. 49). Furthermore, his window is repeatedly smashed by street bombs, bringing home the violence and foreshadowing his ultimate immersion in it. Moreover, the contempt other men direct at Khalil obviously affects him: “A young armed man came out ... and looked scornfully at pale Khalil and his bag, which looked like a housewife’s shopping bag. Khalil held onto the bag and kept walking, trying to take firm strides ... and he did not forget to pass by the cleaners ...” (Barakat, 1994, p. 37). The armed man’s disdain for Khalil’s ‘feminine’ behaviour exemplifies the civil war as a situation in which “gender identity is rigidly over-determined, where participation in the community is the basic touchstone of masculine identity” (Fayad, 2002, p. 163).

Khalil’s neutrality therefore leads him into a hermit lifestyle, with an increasingly consuming self-hatred which almost kills him. He is unable to mourn the death of the second man he loves, Youssef, and stops eating properly, subsequently growing very thin and throwing up blood. The turning point in the novel is when Khalil is hospitalized and operated on for a stomach ulcer. During the operation he almost dies. When he wakes up, he has a new *joie de vivre* and, determined to live, thinks to himself, “I didn’t know how much I loved you ... He who hates himself doesn’t love life, Khalil my lovely” (Barakat, 1994, p. 191). Khalil rapidly changes, however. He meets a powerful militia man, known as “The Brother,” and becomes more hostile to women. The Brother can offer him the security and income he lacks. In a surreal internal battle, Khalil makes his ultimate decision: “Khalil’s self put her hand on his hand. She said in a last, desperate attempt: ... there is no choice: for you to love yourself means to hate others” (Barakat, 1994, p. 221). He is thereupon transformed into the embodiment of his society’s golden image of masculinity. Khalil enters the Brother’s world of drug and weapon smuggling and, accordingly, “moves from a marginal position to one of dominance in which he assumes power over and marginalizes others” (Fayad, 2002, p. 177).

The fact that even loving, sensitive Khalil succumbs to the clutches of violent masculinity is more indicative of the power of war and socialization than a failing on Barakat’s part. As was the case with Zahra, who thought she could escape the social structures that govern Lebanese gender identities, Khalil finds that war in fact reinforces those conventions. Having spent the course of the novel trying to negotiate between his nationalist obligations and gendered expectations, he finally decides on survival, no matter at what cost. Because he has been forced to conform to masculine stereotypes, Khalil has become a victim of the violence, just like everyone else. As Barakat explains to Brian Whitaker in an interview: “The social pressure made him search for his manhood by raping a neighbour” (Whitaker, 2006, p. 99).

If the Lebanese construction of masculinity played a role in the outbreak of war, and someone like Khalil has had no choice but to adopt that construction, then it is inevitable that the circle of violence will continue indefinitely, because it is precisely violence and war which created this masculinity in the first place. Khalil's sexual identity crisis proves Evelyne Accad's (2007) assertion that "sexuality is much more central to social and political problems than previously thought, and that unless a sexual revolution is incorporated into political revolution, there will be no real transformation of social relations" (¶ 7).

*The Stone of Laughter* extends its critique of war masculinity by sabotaging the traditional romantic visions of conflict. The narrator, merging in and out of Khalil's perspective, ridicules men's abuse of power and exploitation of war for individual profiteering. The concept of martyrdom is undermined and seen not as a veneration of death, but an industry which promotes the useless perpetuation of violence and upholding of masculine ideals. The dead faces that gaze down from the posters are replaced almost daily by new ones, suggesting that those men are nothing more than products of some sinister war factory that churns out cannon fodder. Those posters are manufactured by the different militias and political organizations, which "used to prepare lists of their martyr's names every season on programmes that were remarkably like the promotional leaflets of tourism companies and hotels" (Barakat, 1994, p. 46). The novel subverts and destabilizes master war narratives by indicating there are no heroes or villains. The men, their principles, and the militias to which they belong remain faceless, suggesting that they are all wrong and bear equal responsibility for the social and moral collapse of their nation.

Throughout the novel, laughter is used as a metaphor to exemplify the ills of a nation which takes its nationalist project too seriously, and becomes associated with social sickness, violence, and war profiteering:

This is the place where people laugh more than anywhere else in the world ... The shopkeeper will laugh because people will be so busy buying so many provisions ... The moneychanger will laugh because the currency conversions will pour in from outside ... A tempestuous festival of laughter. A city thrown onto its back waving its arms and legs like a huge cockroach under a massive joke .... laughter whose blood is blue and turns black from laughter ... dies of laughter. (Barakat, 1994, p. 46)

In referring to laughter, Barakat uses, as Mona Fayad (2002) notes, the words "*yanfajiru duhkan*" (p. 171), which translate as 'explode with laughter'. That choice of words indicates the communal internalization of violence which eventually, combined with the pressure to conform to war-appropriate masculinity, claimed Khalil. Laughter has become an expression of male power, strength, and supremacy: Khalil laughs after he rapes the neighbour he once took care of.

While *The Stone of Laughter* brilliantly depicts the destructive gender roles that lead men like Khalil to contribute to the violence around them, and delivers a trenchant anti-war message, Barakat has proved herself to be as much a victim of gender stereotyping as Khalil. She is clearly caught up in her society's view of masculinity and femininity, depicting femininity as submission and masculinity as either gay or violent. Her gender definitions are as unbalanced, limiting, and damaging as her patriarchal society's definitions. This apparent weakness is, paradoxically, one of the novel's strengths, as it proves just how effective the Lebanese patriarchal structure has been in socializing its citizens, and how desperately needed a revision of that master narrative and history is. As Fadia Faqir (1994) notes in the novel's introduction, "A change in the social construction

of identities and relationships is not possible in this patriarchal tribal system, so the only way out is to repress the feminine in the self" (p. vi). Khalil indeed changed from a gentle soul with "narrow shoulders" (Barakat, 1994, p. 13) to become a frightful, "broad-shouldered" (Barakat, 1994, p. 231) war profiteer. Through his metamorphosis into a "man," Khalil is "swallowed by the discourse, incorporated, losing his identity completely and becoming no more than a representation in a script that has already been written" (Fayad, 2002, p. 177). A feminist narrating voice separates itself from Khalil to mourn his transformation: "You've changed so much since I described you in the first pages. You've come to know more than I do. Alchemy. The stone of laughter. Khalil is gone, he has become a man who laughs. And I remain a woman who writes" (Barakat, 1994, p. 231).

In conclusion, al-Samman, al-Shaykh, and Barakat have shown that women have voices of their own, and incredibly powerful ones at that. None of the novels display anti-male rhetoric but, rather, an acute recognition of the interwoven nature of gender, sexuality, tradition, socialization, violence, subjugation, and oppression. These women have articulated through their novels that the only power they have in a masculine society is to be women who write, using their pens, notepads, and typewriters as weapons to fight injustice, violence, and exploitation. They advocate social transformation in Lebanon by refusing to remain silent to the abuse men and women suffer in a patriarchal society, culture, and war. Though al-Samman, al-Shaykh, and Barakat do not offer prescriptive texts on how to change masculinity and femininity into more harmonious, balanced, and equal constructions, they do subvert Lebanon's master definitions by exposing their double standards, destructiveness, and violence, thereby recognizing the need for change. Ironically, it was war that gave these talented writers the opportunity to push their sex out of obscurity and into the forefront of Lebanese literary culture. Their messages will certainly continue to resonate long after men's guns fall silent.

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