

## Hanan Al-Shaykh



*The Story of Zahra* by Hanan al-Shaykh, has recently been published in English.\* In the following article which appeared in the Middle East May 1986, she spoke to Editor Sarah Graham-Brown about her book and her views of the status of Arab women today.

Writing novels gives Hanan al-Shaykh a feeling of security. "It's reassuring. Each day you enter a world and see where it leads you, even if it leads you into nightmares."

Hanan's quiet manner belies the dark world of her novels and short stories, which explore with bold candour some of the most controversial social issues in the Middle East today.

She comes from a southern Lebanese family and wrote her first novel, *Suicide of a Dead Man*, while she was a student in Cairo. Her third novel, *The Story of Zahra*, has just appeared in English translation.

When she and her husband came to London in 1976 after living through a year of civil war in Beirut, she had no plans to write a novel. But one day, she says, "The first sentence in the book came to me."

Later she met an acquaintance who asked her what she was doing. "I lied," she recalls. "I said I was writing a novel and would finish it by such-and-such a date. Afterwards I went to my husband's office, shut myself in a room and started writing."

Later her husband's business took him to Saudi Arabia, where she lived for several years, using the

experience as the basis for a novel which is soon to be published in Beirut.

The principal character in *The Story of Zahra* is a young Lebanese woman, a southerner like Hanan, whose experiences as a child and an adolescent growing up in Beirut leave her emotionally scarred.

She resists social pressures to accept the conventional roles of daughter and wife by withdrawing in to silence and passivity.

Her family, and the man to whom she is briefly married, regard her with a mixture of anger and bewilderment. She is emotionally disturbed and confused by witnessing, as a child, her mother's clandestine love affair. Later she experiences as loveless but obsessive affair of her own with a married man.

She tries to escape by going to visit her uncle, who is living in exile in West Africa in a Lebanese community which, as Hanan puts it, is "cut off with its fading memories."

But her uncle's unwelcome physical attentions drive her to accept marriage to a man with whom she finds herself unable to communicate. Her feelings of isolation become intense, and she retreats into almost catatonic passivity.

"By now I liked waiting," relates Zahra. "I would have been happy to wait on my own for ever. The rain streamed down and the heat saturated my head as I wondered, "Why is it that I am always finding myself in a hurtful situation? Even doing no more than lying in bed back in Beirut,

\* Published by Quartet, London: April 1986, £ .8.95.

there would always be something that troubled me. Is a person born with this uneasiness, even as a person might be born with eyes of a certain shape, hair of a certain colour? Ever since I can remember I have felt uneasy, I have never felt anything else."

Hanan says the character of Zahra is a combination of two women she knew, though the chapter on Zahra's childhood contains some autobiographical elements. Zahra's only moments of unguarded pleasure seem to be those she spends in the southern Lebanese village with her grandfather.

According to Hanan, "There are many Zahras in the Arab world." Perhaps they do not live lives of such unrelieved bleakness, but like Zahra are trapped by society's demand that they conform to certain roles as daughters, wives and mothers. These are norms, which, Hanan implies, are often breached, but in secret, bringing guilt and trauma in their wake.

Zahra resists these demands by her obstinate silence and passivity. But this cuts her off from family, neighbours and friends. Because she does not behave like others, she is labelled strange, or crazy.

"People are interested in your life as long as you conform. If not, it's easy to become isolated," Hanan says. She does not portray the other characters in the book as evil or malicious. Locked into their own views of the world, **they oppress Zahra** through a lack of understanding.

Zahra's exiled uncle, for example, imposes an unwelcome physical affection which stems from his loneliness and longing for his family. Her husband, eager to better himself socially and economically, is furious when he discovers that Zahra is not a virgin and bewildered by her refusal to play the role expected of her as a wife.

Zahra's mother, despite her own clandestine love affair, cannot understand Zahra's sexual and emotional problems, while her father is portrayed as rigid and unimaginative in his relationship with both women.

Zahra's brother Ahmad is kind to her, but lives in a world of his own. Once the civil war breaks out, he joins a militia. At first he is idealistic but gradually the power of wielding a gun and fighting goes to his head, and his main interest becomes the

loot he can accumulate.

But, for Zahra, the civil war and the trauma of her society offer her the freedom to emerge from her protective shell. Social taboos break down. She goes with her family to their village in the south, but cannot bear to be away from Beirut and returns to live in the family home alone – something unthinkable before the war.

Watching the war from her apartment, she gradually becomes obsessed with the sniper said to be operating from a nearby rooftop – hooded, all-seeing, an emblem of death.

Hanan says she found herself fascinated by the idea of the sniper while living in Beirut during the first year of the war. How could an ordinary man become such a symbol of power and destruction?

Zahra is fascinated and afraid. She finally encounters the man she believes is the sniper and begins an affair with him, in a series of dreamlike meetings each afternoon on the rooftop from which she suspects he picks people off in the street below.

Gradually, she begins to see him not as a killer but as an ordinary human being. When she becomes pregnant, he offers to marry her. This creates a vision of happiness and normality amid the aberrations of war.

But as she returns home from a meeting with her lover, she collapses in the street in great pain, probably caused by a miscarriage. Her last thought before losing consciousness is that "her sniper" has shot her.

The outspokenness of *The Story of Zahra* in dealing with sexual and personal issues has caused the book to be banned in a number of Arab countries. But in Lebanon, Hanan says, it was well received by the critics, because, she thinks, it tries to portray people's lives outside the framework of sectarian politics.

Although the audience for novels in Lebanon is small, she found that readers identified with the story, partly because it is written in southern dialect, which gave it a flavour of authenticity, and "because it's about things that do happen."

Through the tormented character of Zahra, Hanan al-Shaykh's book makes her readers more aware of the destructive effects of social pressures on women's lives.