

SUBVERSIVE DISCOURSES IN HANAN AL-SHAYKH:*

PUSHING OUT THE BOUNDARIES OF ARAB FEMINISM
IN THE NOVEL

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Surveying women's literature over the past two centuries, gynocriticism¹ has found, perhaps to our surprise, that one of the recurrent themes in the writings of both Third World and Western women has been madness. Time and again, women authors from different periods and literary traditions, with diverse cultural, ideological and epistemic affiliations and commitments, bring out this theme to demonstrate emphatically and unequivocally how the symptoms of psychological disfunctionality, together with definitions of madness, are culture-produced and bound, the products of a virulently hierarchical and patriarchal symbolic order. Despite cultural and periodic differences, as well as disparate value-systems and mental tools, common concerns are indeed

foregrounded and articulated by the hitherto silenced women around the world. If not consistently, then very frequently, women writers speak, not "in a different voice" (Gilligan 1982), but in one resonating with the self-same themes and anxieties. As women, this literature, then, is our own, the space in which are deployed all of our contestatory attempts to de-pedestalize the Marys of masculinist culture and imagination, and redeem the Eve-figures long maligned and feared. Notwithstanding its limited capacity to bring about actual change, this discourse is one crucial site of resistance, where stereotypes and myths are demystified and debunked, a necessary step on the road to a meaningful "feminization" of culture.²

Caught between the pedestal and the pit of patriarchy, heroines "crack up" as is witnessed by the many examples with which fiction is fraught.³ "Mad women in the attic" (Gilbert and Gubar), females trapped under a bell jar (Plath), and protagonists exhibiting different forms and degrees of pathological behavior (e.g. Charlotte Perkins Gillman, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Buchi Emecheta, Toni Morrison and Toni Cade Bambara) forcefully throw into relief the theme of madness as elaborated by women. This paper will deal with Hanan Al-Shaykh's creative adaptation of this theme in *The Story of Zahra*, one of the boldest novels ever penned by an Arab woman.

Granted, this theme is equally present in men's literature, but it usually has an existential, purely "theoretical" dimension often undermined in women's work. In other words, when a male figure "goes mad" in literature, he does so to the degree that he partakes of the "human condition." Conversely, when a woman breaks down, it is largely due,

not only or exclusively to angst, but to gender discrimination which brings forth the kind of social pressures from which men do not suffer, and with which they are unfamiliar. In the masculinist tradition, women and men's experiences are presented as interchangeable, when this is sadly not the case.⁴ Female readers are called upon and thought able to identify with the male perspective on alienation, though this perspective can only be one facet of woman's experience of reality (Gilligan 1982). When women write, however, they specifically shed light on those institutions, values and traditions weighing down on a heroine and stunting her intellectual and emotional growth.⁵ To the extent that it is committed to extra-referentiality, at a time when our century was lauding and promoting autotelic fiction and "art for art's sake," this literature is engaged with questions regarding morality

"Beata Beatrix", 1863, Canvas, Dante Gabriel Rossetti



and ethics, right and wrong, justice and lack thereof.⁶ Hence its value.⁷

With this "difference"⁸ in mind, then, we proceed to probe how Hanan Al-Shaykh unravels the theme of Zahra's mental impairment and breakdown in the first part of the novel, only to affirm the protagonist's infinite capacity for self-healing and revitalization in the second. Imagery, symbolism, characterization and events come together to underscore the need for more "room" for women, who, if and when given a space in which to maneuver, can be agents of civilization and peace. What makes **The Story of Zahra** worthy of our attention here is its thought-provoking treatment of topics at once intense and complex: sexuality and desire, sex and power, sanity and madness, war and peace. All these constitute the background against which the "Othered" Woman is depicted. Thus, in this novel, the Lebanese author contributes to a tradition in women's writing in which the theme of mental impairment undertakes a critique of hegemonic patriarchy, deemed the root cause of the heroine's psychological disintegration as well as social dissolution. The author then takes it upon herself to hail women's great potential and resources, which, once tapped, can effect positive social change. Unfortunately, however, Zahra's attempts at self-liberation and her symbolic efforts to assuage the wounds of her city remain without horizon, as the bullets of patriarchy penetrate her body and fetus, killing any chances for peace.

Two sections of the novel are in a voice other than Zahra's: the third chapter is narrated by Hashem, the protagonist's uncle, a political activist in the Popular Syrian Party (PPS) who had to flee Lebanon in the aftermath of the failed coup which took place on New Year's Eve of 1961-1962, while the fourth one is in Zahra's husband's voice, offering a rather limited and jaundiced perspective on their failed relationship. Al-Shaykh's work is thus predominantly and significantly a first-person narrative. That this mode of narration is chosen to shed more light on the quality of the protagonist's voice and her vision of the world, both of which are important if the reader seeks to understand why she "cracks up" then self-heals, is patent. The novel is structured along bipartite lines: the first segment deals with Zahra on the eve of the war, the second with her attempts to negotiate a relationship with the forces of darkness unleashed by that war in a now eviscerated city.

In the first chapters, we get glimpses of Zahra's torturous relationships with her father and mother from the time she was a small child with severe calcium deficiency through adolescence. Zahra remembers in her first-person narrative how, as a child, she yearned in vain for maternal love and affection, having lost all hope in her belt-wielding father, a harsh man whose only dream was to save enough money to send his son, not daughter, to America to study and become an electrical engineer (p. 20). In her early childhood, her mother was single-mindedly preoccupied with finding ways to escape her husband's yoke, including having an affair, sleeping in a different bed and aborting a set of twins briefly kept in a porcelain soup dish.

In her efforts to critique the Lebanese socio-political order and describe a society in crisis about to explode on the eve of the civil war and during its early stages, Al-Shaykh weaves into the fabric of her novel several leitmotifs and images. Flowers, fruits and trees come to have special significance. Zahra is first of all a "flower"⁹ struggling to thrive in an inhospitable environment that defines "sanity" as the degree to which a woman can accommodate herself with, accept and even champion oppressive patriarchal forces. References to figs also recur in the first part of the work: Zahra will not touch figs, a traditional symbol of women's sexuality, because she says: "I am afraid of eye infections, so will not eat figs or even go near a fig tree since I have been told that figs make the eyes go sore" (p. 4, see also p. 28). This rejection of figs encapsulates cultural misgivings regarding feminine desire which, from Zahra's experience of her mother's transgressive sexuality, is dangerous and incurs masculine wrath. She has also assimilated her culture's negative view of women's sexual impulses at once feared and degraded, a traditional misogynistic attitude evoked by the very etymology of the word "hysteria", where hystera, as is commonly known, means uterus. Thus madness and women are intertwined in the patriarchal imagination.

A walnut tree becomes the site of adultery when, rebelling against her brutal husband, Zahra's mother takes on a lover (pp. 6, 28). There the protagonist's first glimpses of mature sexuality, compounded by dread of her father, cause her deadly anguish: she recalls how "I wanted to disappear into the hem of her [mother] dress and become even closer to her than the navel is to the orange," another reference to a fruit (p. 6).¹⁰ While women are likened to plant life, suggesting that their assigned role is to vegetate without inner purpose or future, animal imagery is used in Al-Shaykh to represent male characters. Early references to Ahmad, Zahra's brother, associate him with meat, ie. animals, in the context of the mother's preferential treatment: "every evening it was the same. My mother would not give me a single morsel of meat [with the melokhia, or mallow soup]. This she always reserved for Ahmad, sometimes for my father. Her ways never changed. Maybe she never ate chicken or meat herself" (pp. 7-8). These lines are followed by a description of the doting mother "searching carefully for the best piece of meat... here they go into Ahmad's dish. There they rest in Ahmad's belly" (p. 8).¹¹

In the "The Scars of Peace," Zahra recounts how her own face and, more important, her inner psyche become scarred as society was preparing to descend into the inferno of war. On the threshold of adulthood, the father, a "nazi" type (p. 19), rejects Zahra merely because she has acne, a problem that he thinks might make of her a spinster with no marriage prospects. This drives him to beat and abuse her mercilessly every time he sees her fingering her pimples. But this succeeds only in intensifying Zahra's sense of isolation in a world where she feels unwanted and unloved, and to the same degree reinforces the socially constructed notions of beauty and "perfect femininity".

Unable to measure up to this and other such ideals, Zahra

embarks on a process of self-injury, reminiscent of the acts of self-mutilation in Toni Morrison's novels¹², all of which are ways of brandishing the female character's rejection of society and its norms; with her nails she intentionally disfigures her face until the blood starts to ooze from her pimples, so much so that the latters became her "only reason for waking each morning. I would hurry to the mirror to inspect in the calm light of day the ravages of the latest onslaught" (p. 19).¹³ Thus objectified, her face is no longer part of her but is metonymic of society; in aggressing her skin she is, in effect, indirectly repudiating all the unrealistic and procrustean molds in which commodified women are forced to fit. Put differently, investing her action with signification, she is rejecting the criteria by means of which women's worth and "value" are assessed. Later on in the novel she expressly laments the fact that her relatives "cared only about my appearance, and mine had gone to the dogs," for which reason she categorically refuses any interaction with them (p. 109). Zahra's body, then, comes to bear the marks of patriarchy now inscribed on it. Its own wounds are meant to adumbrate those of the city in Part II.

Wherever she finds herself, the bathroom, a crucial leitmotif in the first part of the novel, is her only haven of refuge from society. Indeed, she portrays herself as a prisoner in a succession of bathrooms where she locks herself up in moments of crisis and mental disintegration. Consistently the locus of breakdown, the bathroom expands spatially heralding the mental hospital where "fits" are "controlled" and "health" is "restored" in Beirut and "Africa" (pp. 28-32).

The site of psychosexual release for men, not women, Africa, this amorphous geographic entity, this "other" that has been Lebanised, tamed and conquered (if only by a few "successful" businessmen), becomes after Beirut Zahra's second prison. There too she incarcerates herself in her uncle's then her husband's bathroom, as she used to do in Beirut to escape her father's brutality (p. 19). There she recalls Malek, whose name in Arabic means "possessor", her married colleague in the government tobacco factory with whom she had her first sexual encounter, an ungratifying experience that culminated in two abortions. Memories engender madness and a first bout of fits. Then, when faced with Majed's marriage proposal, she again breaks down, unable to face her husband-to-be with her "condition" as a non-virgin. As she had expected, Majed ("glorious" in Arabic), rebuffs her if only psychologically, and she, feeling betrayed by her uncle, husband and Africa, registers her rejection of matrimony and her African "trap" by "cracking up" again. For, Africa may be a political haven for Hashem and other dissidents, and may represent economic opportunities for youths like Majed, but it is no refuge for women trying to escape their families and injurious past. To women, this Africa without Africans is only a slightly "defamiliarized" Lebanon, since all those patriarchal values whose sole *raison-d'être* is to oppress the female have been transported there intact. Men, by contrast, set out to dismantle and transcend restrictive racial and sexual taboos,

with miscegenation being their most blatant expression of transgressive sexuality.

Turning now to the second part of the novel, entitled "The Torrents of War" we find, perhaps to our amazement, that once back in Beirut, Zahra ceases to experience fits, as if the war had a therapeutic effect on her. Instead she initially falls into severe depression detected in her withdrawal symptoms and over-eating;¹⁴ she also wears her housecoat for two months on end without making any effort to look after her personal needs. In short, she lets herself fall into a state of "dis-ease" or "disrepair," itself a sickness as she admits (p. 109). She spends whole days in bed, refusing to receive visitors whom she accuses of coming "'to see my madness ... and laugh at the state I'm in'" (p. 109). Her mother exhorts her to "'have pity on [herself], on [her] youthfulness'" (p. 109). Yet, she is oblivious to all these pleas and remains imprisoned in a cocoon of her own making.

What changes her comportment and attitude drastically, however, is the advent of war. After a short period of "indifference," panic overtakes her as she began to follow the news of the war, reading nervously but eagerly between the lines in the newspapers, searching for the truth. Then I would overflow with despair and disbelief. All those figures which listed the numbers killed, could they be possible? Were there truly these kidnappings? Did they actually check your identity card and then, on the basis of your religion, either kill you or set you free? ... Was it true that Rivoli Cinema had been burnt down? Was it true about the fire in the Souk Sursock? And the one in Souk Al-Tawile? Had George, the hairdresser, our neighbour, turned against me? Had I turned against him? (p. 100)

Rather than become shell-shocked amidst the insanity of war, as one might have expected, the thirty-year-old Zahra (p. 132) volunteers, if only for a short time, at a casualty ward, which gives her an insider's look into the gruesome realities of war (p. 115).¹⁵ As she seeks the truth and feels the urge to understand the real reasons behind this widespread carnage, war jolts her back to life and forces her to act, even if this act only entails asking the right questions and seeking the right answers. As a consequence of the war too, she and her parents draw closer together for the first time (p. 110). Clutching one another during successive bouts of street fighting, Zahra and her mother recapture their closeness as "orange and navel" (p. 116) after so many years of acrimony. Finally, when the war puts every fact of life into question and endangers every relationship, the mother is forced to re-evaluate her rapport with her daughter, who in turn feels the change and exclaims, "[my mother] seemed to realize, for the first time, that I was not a spectre" (p. 110). For the first time as well, the father comes across as a human being, who, cutting across confessional lines and deploring divisiveness, hankers after the peace and tranquillity that now elude his country (p. 110).

It is highly revealing that Zahra, whose breakdowns in Part I used to transform her into a muted being, expresses her anxiety, anger and dismay by "howling" and screaming as explosions burst near-by (p. 120). In unison, she and her

mother shout as a newspaper photograph of a whole family killed while playing cards comes back to haunt her. She recalls this moment in these telling words: "I was left completely empty, except for my voice, but even this I could not control any more" (p. 120). Thus, the voice "that could not form a word" (p. 30), that voice that had been silenced by mental breakdown, is restored by war.

To be sure, Al-Shaykh does not mean to depict war in a favorable light, that war that transformed Ahmad from an average, law-abiding middle-class boy whose father wanted to send him to America, into an uncouth, uncivilized militiaman who takes tremendous pleasure in gloating over how his daily activities include raiding people's homes to loot, desecrate and destroy. But what the author succeeds in depicting rather effectively is how the war turns everything topsy turvy, as sectarian, confessional, ethnic and political rifts and fissures inscribe themselves into the social canvas, thereby compromising the very foundations of society. Almost overnight, the father's role at the heart of the family recedes into the background, ceding all its authority to the armed boys-cum-gangsters running amuck on the streets (p. 139). As political hooliganism carries the day, the eclipsed father bows out, disowning this new "wounded" Beirut¹⁶ to return with his wife to their ancestral village apparently still untouched by the war. They leave behind the daughter, who in "normal" circumstances would not have been allowed to live on her own. Discarded is the father's leather belt which, Zahra declares, "no longer holds any fears for me. The war has made it powerless" (p. 147).¹⁷ This, then, is the real reason why she no longer experiences breakdowns: now that her father has been disarmed and rendered impotent by the war¹⁸, and she has a "house of her own", she is able to channel her energy into mere survival. For war rearranges people's lives canceling individual futures and channeling physical and psychological powers into what amounts to the "art" of bottommost survival. Needless to say, Zahra's need for the bathroom at this point disappears.

Al-Shaykh is intent on showing how war disrupts and topples traditional institutions and dislocates not only people but values. The very suspension of the hitherto entrenched moral order affords Zahra as well as other marginalized figures and groups, some breathing space. In this space, the protagonist's formidable energies are released as she resiliently seeks to affirm a new set of humanistic values with which to combat the law of the jungle, represented by a whole generation of Ahmad's likes. This "code of honor" is best exhibited not only in her deep indignation with her brother¹⁹ whose plunder is significantly hidden under the mother's bed, but also in her complex relationship with the sniper. Baffled by the latter, she finds herself using the language of seduction, if not to defeat death then to defer it. She "wondered what could possibly divert the sniper from aiming his rifle and startle him to the point where he might open his mouth instead? Perhaps a troupe of dancers would do it? Or Perhaps a gipsy with a performing monkey? Or perhaps a naked woman, passing across his field of fire? (p. 134)". Walking half naked, then, she decides to titillate this

monster of a man, a feeble attempt to distract him from his fatal pursuits. In so doing, she makes it her moral duty to reach out to him and "communicate" sexually and verbally, as if this form of communication could attenuate some of the horrors of war and cleanse the wounds of this disemboweled city.

Though it is beyond our purview to explore the relationship between Zahra and the sniper in any depth, it is crucial to underline that, for the first time in her account, we find her acting on behalf of a clearly formulated and articulated value-system. When she actively seeks out this "monster" with whom she "exchang[es] the language of our bodies" (p. 139), she does so wanting to understand what makes a sniper a sniper, her sense of bewilderment engendering in her the need to ask such questions. This in itself is the meaning she longed to find in her life. An instrument of empowerment, her long aggressed and terrorized body is now deployed creatively in the service of her mind, a first step towards the unification of both mind and body. Effectively, with the unnamed sniper, the heroine experiences the desire and ecstasy that were markedly lacking in her traditional power relationships with "Possessor" and "Glorious".

Walking on deserted streets in the shadow of buildings along treacherous walls, the thunder of artillery reverberating around her, she negotiates a relationship with the forces of danger, evil and barbarism, one in which she sees herself as having the moral upper hand. A new purpose in life is thus forged, at once rejuvenating and meaningful. The trajectory Zahra has defined for herself ultimately restores her peace of mind too, so much so that she, who always takes the initiative in this relationship, contemplates proposing marriage to the sniper (p. 148), the only man who has ever accepted her as she is (p. 138).

To the extent that she seeks to humanize and "re-civilize" the sniper, Zahra is not unlike the prostitute who, at Gilgamesh's prompting, brings Enkidu in touch with civilization for the first time. The sexual act is thus an act of faith in the values of civilization. An advocate of a more humane, less barbaric society, and an emissary of peace, Zahra is momentarily the beautiful, redeeming flower that does not wilt or die. That she is shot at the end is proof enough that war has not made a clean sweep of traditional, patriarchal forces, and that it replicates and legitimates all that oppresses and crushes women. Why else does Al-Shaykh situate the sexual encounters "in the dust of death and ruin" (p. 138) on the stairs of an abandoned building on whose roof the sniper goes about his daily "activities"? That the relationship is destined to remain futureless in this limbo even during the temporary suspension of traditional morality amidst the turbulences of war is corroborated by the annihilation of the unborn baby, the fruit of one woman's act of choice. In this limbo, the logic and discourse of war come to assert the language and practices of patriarchy from which they issue. Zahra herself declares "bullets flew, bombs exploded, smoke rose and bodies bled, but none of it did a thing to touch the decaying regime" (p. 121). Her body

riddled with the sniper's bullets, and her voice discomposed, the dying woman is filled with intense foreboding as she sees rainbows "with their promises only of menace" (p. 184). Sadly, the forces of evil have once again proven themselves invincible.

The tragic outcome of the story is perhaps, inevitable. Ever since Zahra comes to identify with the city whose redemption as well as her own she now eagerly seeks, her fate and that of Beirut become entwined. In a rather telling specular relationship, Zahra's hemorrhage towards the end is a microcosm of the macrocosm, an indirect reference to the bloodletting taking place in the protagonist's city and on her own street (p. 164). Beirut at this point is pictured as a city without future, an altar on which all of the secular ideals of the forties and fifties are dealt a decisive blow.²⁰ Small wonder, then, that Zahra and her unborn child would be vanquished by the same patriarchal order that has assassinated the city, together with the notions of tolerance, openness and civility. Yet, Zahra's act on behalf of civilization, albeit ineffectual, amounts to a statement with a humanistic, almost lyrical, dimension.

In *The Story of Zahra*, the Lebanese author succeeds in pushing back the frontiers of Arab women's feminist discourse by broaching issues long considered taboo, foremost among which is the thorny topic of desire and sexuality. That Al-Shaykh is involved in elaborating an enabling discourse for women, one that is positive and necessary, is clear in Zahra's trajectory from madness, voicelessness and inaction to the determined pursuit of meaningful action and moral engagement, in the name, not of narrow political affiliations, but of basic human decency. In so much as this is the case, this war novel registers women's resolve not to get dragged into this cesspool. It equally brandishes women's rejection of the discourse of war, and that of patriarchy engendering war. Thus, in this work, as in many others written by women, the marginalized female, the woman straight-jacketed by society, casts off her manacles to assert her right to speak out and speak up against the dominant order. Virginia Woolf once defined civilization as "a strip of pavement over the abyss," a fact that Zahra learned all too well...

Notes:

* Lebanese writer who has written short stories and novels notably **The Story of Zahra** and **Women of Sand myrrh**.

1. See Showalter's use of the term (1985, 1991).

2. The term "feminization" is used to point to all the social and "value" changes whereby domains traditionally viewed as "women's" acquire a "universal" dimension. The concepts of the "new man" and modern "parenting" have been seen as examples of social evolution and instances of feminization.

3. In real life too, more females suffer from psychological disturbances than their numbers in the population warrant. See Dineen for recent statistics (e.g. 210, 1996).



"Red Roof", 1996, Acrylic on canvas. Rola Fakhri Jawdat

4. There are, of course, exceptions. One is J.M. Coetzee's **In the Heart of the Country**.
5. To corroborate this point, one only has to compare and contrast Sartre's and de Beauvoire's very different treatments of existentialism in literature.
6. When I first prepared a course on women's literature from around the world (including novelists from Africa, India, Canada, America and the U.K) I never thought that towards the end of that semester, my students and I would discover that not only did these women voice the same concerns, but they even utilized the same images and leitmotifs, irrespective of their cultural background or language. Class discussions helped crystallize my view of this material as a true confluence. Since then, I have had the opportunity to experience this intense literature with my students on successive occasions, and always with the same results.
7. In a recent issue of the French Magazine **Lire**, Helene Cixous was asked about what she considered to be the most important literary "event" in our century. Her outright response was "women!" That their literature has blossomed emphatically and has gained world-wide attention cannot be underestimated. Women are finally able to take part in charting out new directions for literature.
8. I use "difference" opting not to enter into the polemical, and, in our opinion, fruitless, though not uninteresting, debate about "écriture feminine" as proposed by French feminism.
9. Zahra means "flower" in Arabic.
10. The same image is repeated with reference to how, to continue seeing her lover, the mother had to rely on Zahra, an absent/present female child without whom adultery would have been impossible.
11. In Part II, the mother is again shown giving her son, now a war overlord "sporting his combat suit and beard" (111), the lion's share of the meat (118).
12. See for example, **Sula** or **Beloved**.
13. From hereon the pimples become a leitmotif in the novel.
14. Two prominent Lebanese psychiatrists Leyla Farhood and Elie Karam here have shown in their respective research how prevalent such cases of depression were during the war.
15. I take issue with Accad's assessment of this novel as a seamless account of "violence, madness, and destruction" (1990, 58). From the perspective of the ending, Zahra, in Part II, certainly falls victim once again to patriarchy. However, Accad does not see in Zahra's madness then self-healing, instances of resistance to, and subversion of, the discourse of war that this critic very ably depicts. This is, I think, a very crucial and hopeful aspect of this narrative.
16. I owe this appellation to my colleague Mona Amyuni.
17. Later on, she dissects her past, commenting that "[i]t was always my fear of people which put me into a pathetic state, but that fear had evaporated with the war" (158).
18. The text abounds with references to the weakened father, and father-figure. Here is one example: trying to convince his son to abandon his militia, the father "could hardly speak for weakness as his head went on shaking" (118).
19. This is best demonstrated on p. 140 where Ahmad's

unabashed sexual behavior highlights to Zahra the extent to which war has changed people and mores.

20. These are amply described in Chapter III, where Hashem recalls his political involvement in the Popular Syrian Party, a non-sectarian secularist movement.

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