

Shifting Identity/ies in the Literature of Arab Immigration and Exile: Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Hikayat Zahra (The Story of Zahra)* as a Case Study

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Abstract

In this age of mass migration, refugee crises, and global mobility, it could be argued that the experience of displacement, relocation, migration, and diaspora is no longer the exception but the rule. The tension between the centre and the periphery, the 'homeland' and the 'host land' raises, time and again, familiar issues of belonging, allegiance, affinity, estrangement and alienation. It is on this perspective- following various paths among which the postcolonial theory- that the aim of this paper is to try to shed light, and more precisely on the notion of "shifting identity/ies"/concepts of identity and difference based on Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Hikayat Zahra/The Story of Zahra*. This paper hopes to answer the following question raised in the novel "Does the émigré become abnormal once he has departed his own land?"

Keywords : migration-global- diaspora-postcolonial theory-identity-shifting-alienation

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Introduction

Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Hikayat Zahra/The Story of Zahra* is a novel of multi facets. Our chief concern in this paper is to argue for and tackle one of the most prominent themes/issues, namely that of shifting identity/ies in the literature of "Arab" immigration and exile. Our choice is based on the fact that Beirut was well situated to be the link between East and West, a free space for cultural dialogue, open to the West and its rationalist civilization (Radwa Ashour & Reda-Mekdashy, 2008). Undoubtedly Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Hikayat Zahra/The Story of Zahra* raises many other issues/notions regarding that of war, sexuality, obedience, corruption, politics, marriage, peace, tolerance...and love. Needless to say that Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Hikayat Zahra/The Story of Zahra* invites us to listen to the stories of women who are silenced, marginalized, excluded and rejected by their own communities, notably in the Arab world. The novel also advocates the issue of identity as the protagonist's identity -Zahra – itself is put into question throughout the novel. Before embarking on this rich book and discuss the elements mentioned before, let us first picture the general scheme of the novel. *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan Al-Shaykh is organized as follows. The first book is entitled "The Scars of Peace". We find the central female character, Zahra- a Woman who is directionless- is silently victimized by the patriarchal system through its variously ugly manifestations and atrocities. The second book is subtitled "The Torrents of War". At this point we find a completely different character that is ready to do anything to stop the war, even at the expense of her own life as she falls into a relationship with a sniper who stands for the symbol of patriarchal war. This affair ends in her tragic death and open up deep questions. She believes that the jet of blood coming from her body may be due to a miscarriage or so or that her sniper/lover has shot her, which leaves her with endless agony . No matter what the cause is, a miscarriage or a bullet, she lies in the street, blood draining from her body.

Hanan Al-Shaykh was born in Lebanon in 1945 and brought up in Ras al-Naba, a conservative and unfashionable sector of the town. Her mother, Kamila, was illiterate and married off at an early age. Rebellious and strong willed, she eventually left her family to live with her lover, Muhammad. A few years after they married, Muhammad died in a car accident. Al-Shaykh father, who worked long days at a jointly owned textile shop, was a devout Shia Muslim. By the age of 16, Al-Shaykh had already published essays in the leading newspaper ¹*Al-Nahar*. Between the years 1963 and 1966 she studied at the American College for Girls in Cairo. Al-Shaykh first attended Alamillah traditional Muslim girls' primary school and then the more sophisticated Ahliyyah School for Girls. She started to write, as she once said, to release her anger and frustration towards her father and brother, because they were able to restrict her freedom. While in Cairo, Al-Shaykh had a love affair with a well-known and married Egyptian novelist, twice of her age. Back in Beirut she worked in television and as a journalist for *Al-Hasna'*, a women's magazine, and then for *Al-Nahar* from 1968 to 1975. During the four

¹ *Al-Nahar* a leading [Arabic-language](#) daily newspaper published in Lebanon. Journalist Charles Glass argues that *An-Nahar* is Lebanon's equivalent of *The New York Times*. It was launched on 4 August 1933 as a four-page, hand-set paper. The paper, whose staff numbered five, including its founder [Gebran Tueni](#), was started with a capital of 50 gold pieces raised from friends, and a circulation of a mere 500 copies.

years Al-Shaykh lived in Egypt. She made her debut as a writer with *Intihar rajul mayyit/ Suicide of a Dead Man*, which was published in 1970. It has nothing in common with a typical first novel – instead of being autobiographical it is narrated by a middle-aged man. Through the narrator's obsessive desire for a young girl, Al-Shaykh examines power relations between the sexes and patriarchal control. Against the wishes of his father, Al-Shaykh married a Christian man, and moved to Saudi Arabia, where her husband worked as a construction engineer.

In 1976 al-Shaykh left Lebanon for London because of the civil war. Her home street in Beirut had been turned into a no-man's-land. Until 1982, she lived in Saudi Arabia and then settled permanently in London. She has frequently visited Lebanon and spent summers at Antibes in the south of France.

In a nut shell, Al-Shaykh life keeps shifting from place to place. She has been to different parts of the world, and experienced various ways of life, traditions, customs, mentalities, cultures...We can say that her identity is pluralistic since she took bits from here and there, and this is felt in her literary works and the Story of Zahra is a good example.

The story operates on many different levels and uses many voices, and this polyphony is done purposefully. In the center of all this is a bewildered and directionless young woman, Zahra, who finds in the Lebanese Civil War ¹ an opportunity to escape oppression and a suffocating patriarchal system. Zahra's family sends her to Africa to recover from two abortions and a nervous breakdown. She stays with her lecherous uncle, once active in Lebanese politics who keeps pestering her and hinting at gaining sexual advances from Zahra:

I wanted. As I soon discovered, what he really wanted was to attract my full attention. His behavior troubled me to painful extremes, especially one evening in the movies. As the film began, I was aware of something which my mind at once rejected. I couldn't somehow make it out or explain it. He had put an arm round my shoulders and was hugging me. I was left breathless, incredulous, motionless as his hand squeezed my shoulder. I shifted and drew away, losing track of the film on the screen. I couldn't follow anything at all." (Al-Shaykh ,1995, p.21)

To avoid this, she marries one of his associates. The marriage is loveless and she returns to devastated Beirut – as torn as herself. Chaos transforms her and she falls in love for the first time. But her lover is a sniper who shoots innocent passers-by, and the pregnant Zahra, who carries his own child, becomes one of his targets :

He kills me. He kills me with the bullets that lay at his elbow as he made love to me. He kills me, and the white sheets which covered me a little while ago are still crumpled from my presence. Does he kill me because I'm pregnant? Or is it because I asked him whether he was a sniper? It's as if someone tugs at my limbs. Should I call out one more time, "Please help!" (Al-Shaykh ,1995, p.214)

The story of Zahra made Hanan Al-Shaykh one of the notorious Arab female writers. Her emblematic family background where she was brought up, especially that of the conservative traditions of the Middle East where sex and religion were practically taboo (Larson, 1991,p. 14) shaped Al-Shaykh personality. She was brought up in Beirut before going to Cairo to receive her education. Upon her return to Beirut, she pursued a successful career in journalism, working for the prestigious daily *Al Nahar* until moving first to the Arabian Gulf, then to London, where she now lives. From a very early stage in her journalistic career, Hanan Al-Shaykh started writing short stories and novels. Her second novel, *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, was first published in the United States in 1992 by Anchor Books. Her writing challenges the patriarchal attitudes entrenched in Middle Eastern societies in an attempt to dismantle all religious and sexual taboos. The Story of Zahra tackles these taboos among which is sex. The following passage sheds light more on this :

Oh, sniper, let me cry out in pleasure so that my father hears me and comes to find me sprawled out so (*here she is breaking the siege of the patriarchal system*) ². I am one with the dust in this building of death. Let my father see my legs spread wide in submission. (*again speaking of patriarchy that muzzled women's voice from voicing out their inner feelings and restraints. Zahra is rebellious of all that has been institutionalized by the patriarchal society*) Let every part of me submit, from the dark sex between my thighs, to my breasts with their still dormant nipples, my hands able only to tremble. (Al-Shaykh ,1995, p.161.)

Suffice to say that Hanan Al-Shaykh's The Story of Zahra has turned down all that is believed to be stereotypical about the Eastern Arab woman and made a break-through inside a solid and resistant system which is that of the patriarchal society. The image of her father that once was unbreakable falls apart :

At that point my father's image came into my mind, shrunken, lacking the Hitler-like moustache and with no watch in his trouser pocket. By now his heavy frame had lost all sign of the brute

¹ The Lebanese Civil War was a multifaceted civil war in Lebanon, lasting from 1975 to 1990 and resulting in an estimated 120,000 fatalities. As of 2012, approximately 76,000 people remain displaced within Lebanon There was also an exodus of almost one million people from Lebanon as a result of the war.

(Source : https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebanese_Civil_War)

² - The italicized words are our own interpretation

strength with which he had beaten my mother. His voice no longer carried a threat of thunder.”
(Al-Shaykh ,1995, p.152)

She takes the initiative of retelling her story from a female point of view. It is her who cherish those moments of love making and does not feel ashamed or even fear of telling that. This woman, this bird flies far from the squadron be it that of norms, traditions, morality, religion, patriarchy...just to let know that Zahra has a voice and her voice must be heard.

There is no doubt that tackling such issues/taboo in a third world and remarkably in a Muslim country is not an easy job. Though Al-Shaykh various works were written in Arabic , yet many of her novels have been translated into more than twelve languages including English, French, Dutch, German, Danish, Italian, Korean, Spanish, and Polish. She has become one of the most highly influential female Arab novelists.

The Story of Zahra engage with aspects of the main protagonist Zahra’s personality that are emphasised by the war and the extent to which she manipulates or makes use of the situation of war:

The war, which makes one expect the worst at any moment, has led me into accepting this new element in my life. Let it happen, let us witness it, let us open ourselves to accept the unknown, no matter what it may bring, disasters or surprises. The war has been essential. It has swept away the hollowness concealed by routines. It has made me evermore alive, ever more tranquil (Al-Shaykh ,1995, p.162).

The novel tells the story of Zahra, a woman in her thirties whose life vacillates between day-today experiences and memories. A series of failed relationships and a miserable family environment that includes a demanding father and a self-centred mother constitute her experience of love and relationships. Her affair with a married man in Beirut and her ultimate marriage to a man whom she neither loves nor chooses define her inability to fulfil some unknown desire that she seeks. The outbreak of the war sees her back in Beirut (after a sojourn in Africa), where she begins a sexual affair with a sniper. This relationship seems to offer her the possibility of a fulfilling encounter. It is, however, cut short by an unintended pregnancy. The sniper kills her (or as it can be deduced) and Zahra dies questioning his reasons (Valassopoulos , 2007)

1. The Notion of “Shifting Identity” in Hanan Al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra*

Central to the question that the novel raises -Does the émigré become abnormal once he has departed his own land? The protagonist - Zahra herself tries throughout the course of the novel to show that once you depart your country you are no longer who you are since your identity happens to be shaken. As Layla Al Maleh points out that although exilic and diasporic writings both involve a “rhetoric of displacement” which displays the “struggle to assert identity out of place” (Israel , 200) they can be differentiated. Exile -as AL Maleh maintains- associated with early-twentieth-century literary modernism, presupposes a coherent subject and well-defined realities of ‘here’ and ‘now’ (country of current residence) vs. ‘there’ and ‘then’ (original homeland); diaspora – connected to postcolonial, poststructuralist, and postmodernist theories – accounts for hybridity and performativity which complicate notions of nation, location, and identity in an age of globalization (Al Maleh,2009).Quoting Muhsin Jassim Al-Musawi (2003) words, these exiles offered literature of great potency for postcolonial discourse.As a dominant scriptory stance in postcolonial writing, exile, as theme, “assumes some powerful presence, not only against the colonizer, but also, at a later stage, against the arbitrary nature of the post-independence state”¹

Upon reading *The Story of Zahra* one can decipher Al-Shaykh’s shifting identity. This identity is mingled with issues related directly or indirect to the author’s private peripatetic life – we can track this “shifting identity” by the different stations/countries Al-Shaykh herself has been to, starting from her homeland Beirut/Lebanon to Damascus/Syria, Cairo/Egypt, Saudi Arabia, London/UK. More, this “shifting identity” does exist in her various works, be it fiction or autobiography. Speaking of identity in Hanan Al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra*, various questions raise about home and homeland, about nationalism, patriotism and exile. In this sense we recall Mayy Ziyada as she defines nationalism as a human concept that went beyond religious identity and social and religious differences and gave everyone his or her due. On the basis of this definition, Ziyada engaged those who disregarded the Arabs’ rights and saw them only as desert-dwellers who are good at nothing “save plundering, theft, and destruction.”² She highlighted the value of Arab civilization and its contributions to the world and discussed the importance of Arabic, seeing in its emergence “a link of goodness and light between the empty ages and the modern centuries.” (Ibid). Larson on the other hand maintains that Al-Shaykh did not live in Lebanon during the civil war. She moved to the Arabian Gulf in 1975. She has lived in London since 1984 with her husband and her two children .Despite her life in London, Al-Shaykh’s fiction remains preoccupied mostly with Lebanon and its civil war as evident in her works *Beirut Blues* (1992) and *The Story of Zahra* (1980). Unlike the three novels, which were written in English in various locations outside of Lebanon and dealt mainly with a protagonist’s engagement with a foreign country, *The Story of Zahra* is a story of a Lebanese woman whose travels to and from Africa prior to the Lebanese civil war and in isolation from any valorised

¹- On this arbitrary nature, see Michael Gilsean, *Recognizing Islam* (New York:Pantheon, 1982), p. 255

² - Mayy Ziyada, *Al-Mu'allafat al-kamila/ Kitab al-madd wa-l-jazr*, collected and edited by Salmaal-Haffar al-Kuzbari (Beirut: Nawfal Foundation, 1982), vol. 1 (*Kitab al-musawah*), p. 404.

relationship with Lebanon either as a home or homeland. Setting the location of exile in Africa is also a divergence from the other three novels' more affluent locations in the West whether in Australia, Canada or the United Kingdom. Although these three novels differ in their representations of home, *The Story of Zahra* maintains a variant image upheld both by Al-Shaykh's different circumstances as a writer who was writing during the ongoing civil war and by the circumstances surrounding the travel of the novel's relationship to protagonist which were not directly related to the war (Naguib, 2011).¹

In its first part, *The Story of Zahra* allows more room for the main protagonist's narration. Zahra's uncle and her husband's narrations of the meaning of Watan/Homeland and their Lebanon, following Zahra's move to Africa, represent episodes where Zahra's voice is silenced as she figures only as a symbol of the national homeland for her uncle and, as an imagined dream of triumphant reclamation of Lebanon for her husband. Ironically, while both male accounts are filled with nostalgia, homesickness and idealization of Lebanon as a haven and a refuge, Zahra's presence in Africa was a situation brought about by her need to escape Lebanon and the threat of her family's response to her secret affairs and successive abortions. In this way, Al-Shaykh presented us successfully with two simultaneous attributes of nations: as oppressive entities and as idealized havens – with the latter cast in doubt.

2. No War: Give Peace a Chance

The second book in Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* entitled "*The Torrents of War*" has paid considerable attention to the concept of war. Fused with other issues, "war" has been approached daringly and ironically. The affair with the sniper foreshadows the possible life/hope that can exist no matter what the circumstances are even that of wartime. Yet to "give peace a chance" at war was not that successful or let us be optimistic and say it was lacking some chance for that dream to come true. For Zahra, war :

has swept everything away, for the rich and for the poor, for the beautiful and for the ugly. It has kneaded everything together into a common dough. My own looks have altered. I am no longer bothered by pimples on my neck, where once I felt that these were an inevitable part of me and that I and they could never part company" (Al-Shaykh ,1995, p.184)

There is a certain "identity shift" at the level of the persona; somehow her way of looking and perceiving things has changed dramatically. She is no longer the person used to be. The traces of war have marked her identity and have made of her

3.Homeland : Illusion or Reality ?

In Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*, the concept of Homeland is fluctuating .Be it in Lebanon or in Africa, Zahra's sense of Home is at one point crystal clear, but at another it is hazy, difficult to be grasped or sensed. Yet homesickness sometimes does strike her heart and mind :

I carry these memories with me as I carry my arm or my body. Perhaps the homeland is present and past together. Perhaps it is routine. One cannot love and grow used to a routine unless it is part of the reality of your homeland. In foreign countries, routine seems to become no more than a way of killing time until you return to your homeland. Everything you experience in your homeland has meaning and value because it is like the experience between son and father. (Al-Shaykh ,1995, p.63)

At this point we can see how the protagonist vision of homeland is shattered and loses its meaning unless you know that the foreign country where you are will not substitute your country of origin by whatever means. We gain our true identity once we are attached to our homeland and even when we are forced to leave it as "Memories grow stronger after one leaves one's homeland"(Ibid, p.61).

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As for her Zahra's uncle , the image homeland is present though with melancholy and nostalgia.

Here, in Africa, he carried in his mind a symbolic image of his homeland, believing this to be the actual homeland, the every-day homeland. Here, among thousands of blacks in Africa, he saw himself as lording it over them and wondered why he couldn't be back in his own country. He thought constantly of his country, its mountains and valleys, the sea there. Again and again his conversation returned to the same point. He remembered his homeland with remarkable vividness (Al-Shaykh ,1995, p.20)

This reminds us of Fawaz Turki's words when he says that he has an ache to be home, except that he doesn't know where home is. Maybe somewhere between dream and nothingness, somewhere in the geography of my soul.² Once more Layla Al Maleh stipulates that the "homing desire" produced by migration leads to

¹ - Assmaa Mohamed Naguib. *Representations of 'Home' from the Setting of 'Exile': Novels by Arab Migrant Writers*. the University of Exeter, a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arab and Islamic Studies in November 2011

²- Fawaz Turki, *Soul in Exile: Lives of a Palestinian Revolutionary* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988): 77.

physical and/or symbolic acts which establish sites promising a certain existential security away from one's "foundation."¹ The concept of diaspora thus "places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, *inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins.*"⁶

Accordingly, Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* has managed in a greater part to approach the issue of exile and nationalism from different angles. The polyphony that the novel embodies shows how the notion of homeland is closer to the idea that says that "homeland" is where your heart and mind belongs to. There is no clear cut between where your "homeland" "is that is reality or how you perceive your "homeland". Does it sound like an illusion or an imagined entity? In this regard, Homi Bhabha asserts that :

Exile and nationalism are conflicting poles of feeling that correspond to more traditional aesthetic conflicts: artistic iconoclasm and communal The national longing for form 61 assent, the unique vision and the collective truth. In fact, many words in the exile family divide themselves between an archaic or literary sense and a modern, political one: for example, banishment vs. deportation; émigré vs. immigrant; wanderer vs. refugee; exodus vs. flight. The division between exile and nationalism, therefore, presents itself as one not only between individual and group, but between loser and winner, between a mood of rejection and a mood of celebration. Literarily, the division is" (Bhabha,1990, p.61)

4. Identitarian Quests : Sexuality under Cover

Throughout the course of Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*, sexuality constitutes one of the major themes. The narratives begins with that episode where the mother and daughter are hiding from view behind a door in a mysterious house where Fatmé the supposed faithful wife arranged for a tryst with her lover :

We stood trembling behind the door. I was aware that my heartbeats mingled with the pulse in her hand as it stayed firmly pressed to my mouth. Her hand smelled of soap and onions. I wished she would keep it there forever. The hand was plump and warm. We hid in the darkness behind the door slightly ajar. Sounds of footsteps and loud noises drew nearer, before the door fully opened and light streamed into the room. Instinctively we -glued ourselves to the wall behind the door and a current of fear ran through us as if we were wired together. Now, as her fingers squeezed my mouth, I realized that my heartbeats had melted away and her pulse had died down from the extent of our fear. Only as a huge fat head peered into the room, seeing yet not seeing us, only then did I fathom the reason for that fear, and the reason for her hand tightly cupping my mouth (Al-Shaykh ,1995, p. 3).

This scene summarizes to what extent Fatmé, Zahra's mother feels the terror and fear of being caught and accused of betrayal not just vis-à-vis her husband, but also her own daughter. This traumatic experience signals a lot for Zahra as a child and as an adult. What is the point in becoming an adult, a wife when your acts are lavish and treacherous. At a certain point Fatmé is unaware of the fact that the meaning of "motherhood" lost its meaning. That image of the "lovely mother" fades away as Fatmé exploits her daughter for her own sake. She uses her as a shield to cover her deeds "She actually needed my protection. She wanted us to be inseparable, like the "orange and navel." She wanted me to shield her" (Ibid, p. 13)

This libidinal driven desire justifies all means even that of making her daughter Zahra a toy-like object. Yet young Zahra is not idiot enough to be manipulated that way. She engages herself into that desire and felt it too. The writer has succeeded in revealing the psyche of the two : mother and daughter. This so called Electra complex is heightened by the way the two lived this experience. Partly, Fatmé enjoys her sweet hot moments with her lover and is unable to restrain from that. Partly, Zahra does want to be a part of that game, even she does not possess the means as she is young. She admits saying "I would question myself incessantly, yet the nameless feeling persisted. Even today I still ask myself what was the nature of this feeling. Was it jealousy?" (Ibid, p. 9)

During the course of the novel we can witness this identitarian quest run by sexuality. Indeed, Hanaa Al-Shaykh has put finger on serious issues that regard the Eastern Arab woman. How does a female identify herself? This question and more that the novel raises is approached from different angles among which is sexuality. Female identification starts by the title itself of the novel. It is the story of a female character narrated by a female lebanese writer. Deeper than that sexuality has many facets in this novel. It exists to symbolize that the Eastern Arab woman has no shame in bringing into surface what is hidden behind closed doors. It is a quest of self identity. Assuring that the Arab female body is not unique nor pure or does it make an exception. This body , entity has feelings and it can fall into what society has forbidden. This body is full of life, adventure, love, hatred, resistance and thought. It is a mindful body though it is lustful. The bonds of religion, traditions, customs, will not hamper this quest nor will it alter its objective. Hanan Al-Shaykh tries to untie these chains, be it psychological or tangible.

¹ - Layla Al Maleh, Arab Voices in Diaspora, Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam – New York, NY 2009

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to approach issues related to the experience of displacement, relocation, migration, and diaspora based on Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*. During the war, Zahra undergoes an internal rebirth, ridding herself of fear and terror, but the irony is that she is engaged in a sexual relationship with a sniper, the godfather and symbol of the war. This paradox is a condition for Zahra's rebirth and the shattering of the father/authority figure, the symbol of the pre-war era, along with other now obsolete symbols: the treacherous mother, the spoiled brother, and other male figures. Using this paradox, Hanan al-Shaykh articulates a discourse based on an intersection of time: the pre-war and post-war era intersect in Zahra. The question the novel raises: "Does the émigré become abnormal once he has departed his own land?" is not fully answered during the course of the novel.

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