



Arab Women as Voiceless Entities in Arab Women Literature: A Study of Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*

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Abstract

*This paper aims to shed light on the miserableness, ill-being, and sufferings of the Arab women in the Arab man-dominated communities as represented in Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*. It aims to expose the Arab men's view of the Arab women who are perceived not as equal partners but as objects of physical pleasure created to fulfill their sexual desires. The main argument in this paper is meant to unveil the gruesome face of the Arab's view about their women. It argues that for the Arab women to lead a normal life full of love, peace, respect, and tolerance like their counterparts all over the world, they have to get rid of their inner chains and some social man-made taboos have to be questioned and challenged. This is the basic assumption of this paper. For women be seen as independent and visible entities, their needs must be met and their voices must be heard and both women and men should collaborate to achieve a reformed nationalism free of male dominance. Instead of being viewed as passive victims of male-dominated societies, Arab women must be treated as unique persons with all of their complexities. Besides, the author criticizes the Arab society for the meaning and practice of social discrimination and inequality against women not only in the whole community but also within the same family (male and female).*

1. INTRODUCTION

Hanan Al Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* is regarded as her first foray into international fame. It was originally published in Arabic language in Lebanon in 1986 before being translated into English in 1995. In the first section "The Scars of Peace," Al-Shaykh reflects Zahra's wretched life as a woman in a patriarchal culture. "The Torrents of War" is the subtitle for the second section of the book in which Zahra matures into a woman willing to die in order to put an end to the war.

To start with, it is necessary to have a glance at the synopsis of the narrative which tells the story of a Lebanese young girl (Zahra) who is physically and emotionally mistreated by her family and patriarchal culture. We, as readers, meet her for the first time in Beirut just before the breakout of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. Zahra's life is full of inconsistencies: she lives in the city but holds on to rural values. She is expected to follow her conservative upbringing whilst she watches her mother having an affair with another man. She despises her mother for her deception of her father but does her best to save her whenever her father beats both of them.

After being sexually raped by her brother's friend, she had two abortions and eventually undergone a nervous breakdown. Zahra incessantly scrapes her pimples, retreats to the

bathroom for comfort, and walks around in silence. She leaves her family and joins her uncle in Africa, where she marries his buddy Majed, in an attempt to escape the oppression of her uncle. The marriage is doomed from the start. With the belief that she is going to save the lives of innocent people, she intends to contact a sniper who rapes her in their first meeting. However, she finds it pleasurable and falls in love with him and finally she is killed by him.

Through the life of Zahra, Hanan Al-Shaykh narrates the bitter day-to-day life of the Arab girls as they encounter the challenges of life. She exposes the private world of Arab young women who ultimately share the same hopes and dreams as their counterparts in other parts of the world. Zahra's gradual fragmentation at the hands of her father, mother, uncle, lover, husband ...etc. leads to the complete shattering of her sense of selfhood. Thus, this paper aims to expose the torture of the Arab women in the Arab man-dominated society and to persuade women to resist the oppressive patriarchal culture. While Zahra, in the first section of the book, is represented as an oppressed and persecuted character, in the second section, she is portrayed as a character who is willing to sacrifice her life so as to stop the war, even if it meant having a relation with a sniper, a symbol of "patriarchal war" (Shihada, 2008, p. 177). Indeed, in a conversation with Slaman Rushdie entitled "In Search of the Sensual," (2007) when asked about the motives beyond writing the book, the author replies that she wants to "show how society treated unfortunate women." She adds "Our society, our ideas, and our ideals— everything has to be questioned." She wants to know "how the old traditions dealt with womanhood, how they dealt with men who were very prominent and very free. On the surface, it was a very open society, but deep down there were many, many issues: issues of religion, of virginity, and so on..."

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender equality is a basic human right and a necessary foundation for a world that is peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable. Women have been oppressed in various communities throughout history. Every Arab woman must have a male guardian, usually her father or her husband, but occasionally her brother or even her son, who has the authority to make a variety of important decisions on her behalf. Women are effectively treated as permanent legal minors in the Arab States. Despite the considerable efforts to address women's marginalization, it still exists.

In her thesis "Power, Resistance, and Change," Toby (2014) examines the efficacy of women's resistance to man's unjust rules. She is of the view that for the oppressed women to lessen their marginalization, they have to challenge their oppressors. Their resistance should be directed at the base or causes of oppression and marginalization and it should not remain in the realm of fruitless reaction. Toby claims that the issue is more complicated, particularly for non-western women and other oppressed groups who live in complex communities and see prevailing truths as part of their culture and identity. She also holds the notion that questioning the dominant behaviors and man-accepted facts about women is a must. Zahra and her alike fight back but their resistance is fruitless for they are dependent and illiterate women. Therefore, their resistance has to be combined with the work of feminist writers to expose the ugly face of the man-dominated communities.

Handayani (2017) in her article "Gender Ideology" criticizes the idea that women sexuality is always seen through the lens of her physical beauty and as a source for male sexual pleasure. Further, she stands against the belief that virginity is the measure to differentiate between good and bad women. She believes that women should be able to choose to be independent rather than being forced to conform to patriarchal social structures. Indeed, one of

her paper's objectives is to enhance women's resistance, to encourage them to be independent and not to be mere subordinates to the patriarchal social construction.

Shbib (2005) in her thesis "Female Identity and Conflict," argues that for Al-Shaykh, gender conflict is the most conspicuous and limiting in terms of the constraints that it imposes on the woman's behavior. As a result, encountering male suppression is the first stage of resistance. Zahra's character evolves from a state of passivity into direct challenge of the social unequitable laws. Shbib points out that Al-Shaykh utilizes asexuality to mirror women's rejection of the male domination. The submissive Zahra refuses to become an obedient, passive wife and mother by suppressing her sexual needs to the point that she is no longer capable of feeling pleasure. Her new free-will identity is the result of years of suffering, deprivation, abasement, and tawdriness.

Moreover, Atiyat (2018) in her "Hanan Al-Shaykh's *the Story of Zahra: A Post-Modern Feminist Literary Criticism*," elucidates the concept of emancipation via insanity. She emphasizes the disparity or gender inequality between men and women. In her study, she used a thematic approach and the story itself so as to enhance her argument about the link between insanity and emancipation, between madness and liberation. The fundamental point of Atiyat's paper is that insanity is used as a means to unleash or liberate women from male control and despotism. Therefore, the term "Madness" in *The Story of Zahra* has to be replaced with 'mental rebellion against male control and tyranny.'

3. ZAHRA AS AN INVISIBLE ENTITY

Throughout the years, in the Arab world, men have established their superiority and have the potential to demote women to the status of inferiority. Women are not treated as individuals but as something owned by men. In her interview with Paula W. Sunderman (1992), the author asserts that:

Arab men are not curious about Arab women, because they think that women are not individuals. They think of them as mothers, sisters, wives, windows, always part of the family, not as an individual on their own. This is because they are responsible for women in every aspect, especially financially. This makes them feel somehow they own women. (Sunderman, 1992, p. 634)

In the novel under scrutiny, the author represents women as victims of patriarchy who suffer from all kinds of persecutions at the hands of their men. From initiation to termination, Zahra/ representative of Arab women is marginalized by all the characters surrounding her i.e. her father, uncle, boyfriend, husband, and lover and even by her mother. The following section discusses her relation, sufferings and persecutions at the hand of each of the aforementioned characters.

Before all, it is crucial to start with her relation with her father who is the milestone in shaping her fragmented, invisible, muted, and voiceless character. In the text, Zahra's father is represented as a patriarchal dictator to all his women relatives: his wife (Fatme) and daughter (Zahra) who is always scared of him. To her, he is but a merciless beast and a Hitler-like dictator: "My father was always brutal. His appearance seemed to express his character, a frowning face, a Hitler-like moustache above thick full lips, a heavy body..." (Al Shaykh, 1995, p. 24). She is afraid of him to a great extent that she "felt sure he would kill [her] should he ever find out" that she breaks the strict moral code of a Muslim girl (Al Shaykh, 1995, p. 30-31). Zahra feels lonely, unloved, and oppressed; and her "father's cruel behavior succeeds only in intensifying [her] sense of isolation in a patriarchal society in which she feels discriminated against, unwanted, and unloved by the people closest to her"(Shihada, 2008, p. 178).

The patriarchy's male values and the intensity of its grip on community are reflected in the male-female discrimination. The parents' treatment of Zahra's younger brother Ahmad is different. Though he is aware of the fact that Ahmad can hardly read or write and that Zahra is smarter than him, the father's dream is "to save money to send [him] to the United States to study electrical engineering" (Al Shaykh, 1995, p. 25).

Girls' persecution in the Arab world is not restricted to be at the hands of men only as represented in most of the Arab writings. Mothers are also a part of the equation. Though they were unhappy with such kind of ill-treatment as young girls, when they become mothers, they practice the same unjust rules against their daughters. While evaluating the mother-daughter's relation, Malek Chebel sorts out that in the Arab world, "mothers force their daughters to adhere to social norms and fear the gaze of others (Cited in Rebeiz, 2017, p.124).

From the very start of the novel, Zahra is physically and emotionally abandoned and muted by her mother. Zahra's first memory is about her mother's infidelity. The text opens with a scene that exposes the mother's attempt to mute Zahra's voice and to make her voiceless entity. Both of them are hiding behind the door because Zahra's father has discovered his wife's affairs with another man. Describing their fear of her father, Zahra says: "We stood trembling behind the door" (Al Shaykh, 1995, p.3). Zahra adds that her mother puts "her hand tightly cupping my [Zahra's] mouth" (Al Shaykh, 1995, p. 3). This demonstrates that the mother's goal is to keep her daughter's voice under control. It is as if the daughter was being subjected to be an invisible entity. This horrific beginning scene foreshadows Zahra's voiceless existence. However, Zahra stays more connected to her mother comparing their relation as that of "an orange and its navel" (Al Shaykh, 1995, p. 8). Zahra's inability to become an autonomous individual is due to this toxic emotional link, which is the first step toward her eventual disintegration. Regardless of her intentions, it is certain that the mother sees her daughter as inferior and instills in her the belief that women are men's 'Other'. This forms in Zahra the sense of "gender inequality and negative self-image. She is made to feel as the inferior-Other" (Beauvoir, 1974, p. xxii).

Another form of discrimination against Zahra/women is depicted through the mother's preference of her son Ahmad. Early in the novel, Zahra calls attention to this unfair-treatment and inequality:

I dared not reach for the chicken pieces since I had been given dinner earlier, my meal also consisting of *melokhia*, but without any chicken meat. Every evening it was the same. My mother would never give me a single morsel of meat. She always reserved for Ahmad, sometimes for my father. (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.11)

The mother's love for her son is unlimited that she would do anything to protect him. She would even tell lies for his sake: "If Ahmad was late arriving home, my mother would rumple his bed and push a pillow down under the bedclothes. If my father asked, she would mumble, 'Ahmad is sleeping'" (Al Shaykh, 1995, p. 25).

In her representation of the mother-daughter's relation, Flax (1978) makes it explicit that the mothers not only prefer the sons but also they may wish their daughters could have been born males. She writes that "it is not only that the mother might value a son more, reflecting the higher social esteem enjoyed by men; but the mother, knowing the difficulties of being female in a man's world, might also wish that for the daughter's own sake, she could have been born male"(Flax, 1978, p.175). Flax extends the argument further to include the mother's background. Zahra's mother was brought up in a similar racist environment, therefore, she treats her daughter the same way she was treated: "...because the mother identifies so strongly with a girl child, she also wants the child to be just like her" (Flax, 1978, p.175).

Moreover, Zahra's parents also criticize her facial appearance and lament the fact that she does not conform to social norms of feminine beauty. Zahra is not loved by her parents for she had acne, a "symbol of her inner scars" (Shihada, 2008, p. 178). Purposely, acne in Zahra's face is utilized to show how the community deals with the unfortunate unsightly girls:

Zahra's abject and acne-filled face not only makes visible the emotional scars this upbringing has had on the sensitive young girl, but also literalizes the ever increasing gender conflict carried on in society – the 'battle' between men and women for the control and regulation of female bodies. (Adams, 2001, p. 201)

Zahra's father is afraid that this skin disease would turn her into a spinster with no possibilities for marriage. Rather than treating her acne as a medical problem, both parents ridicule it: "That will be the day, when Zahra marries. What a day of joy for her and her pock-marked face!" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 25). Indeed, like all other people, Fatme is a brutal mother who "shows her daughter no appreciation at all, not a single spark of tenderness. She often insults Zahra about her ugliness and taunts her for never attracting any suitors" (Sakkut, 2001, p. 64).

Discrimination against women is also mirrored through the interpretation of the relation between the skin/ physical attractiveness and the social norms which differs from man to woman. Brownmiller (1984, p. 132) indicates that in the Arab world, "for boys, acne works as a rite of passage from puberty to manhood, whereas there is less tolerance to girls' skin troubles ... If anything, a girl's acne reflects her inability to conform to those higher standards of female beauty that privilege perfectly smooth and lighter skin". The feeling of being inferior, ugly, and not loved by her parents lead Zahra to have an illegal sexual relation with Malek thinking that she is challenging the social norms which leads to her psychological breakdown.

Djebar (1992) has no qualms about blaming mothers for their daughters' mental health issues. She clearly identifies moms as the roots of the daughters' mental problems.

Hatred! [...] We suckle it with the milk of our exploited mothers! They've understood nothing: it is not only colonialism that's at the root of our psychological problems, but it's the belly of our frustrated women! When we're just fetuses, we're already damned! (Djebar, 1992, p. 21)

Zahra's mother exemplifies the features of Arab mothers. She is both the oppressed and the oppressor, the victim and the guardian of the male dominance, which worsens her daughter's psychological development. Mother plays a major role in shaping the daughter's voiceless entity since the daughter connects with her mother. Therefore, Flax (1978, p. 175–176) expresses that "the female infant is expected to be like the mother, both as a person and in terms of her adult roles". This remark clearly has to do with Zahra, who is unable to live without her mother. In other words, Zahra's mother is not a mere victim of the patriarchal system since she opposes and confronts it by having a love affair despite all the restrictions imposed on her as a woman. However, she does not want her daughter to follow her footsteps. Instead, she instills in her the patriarchal notions of gender inequality as discussed above. Thus, it can be said that although women are subjugated to despotism, in some periods of their lives, they become the instrument of their own tyranny.

Zahra is oppressed not only by her parents but also by all the family members. In response to her oppressive home environment in Beirut, Zahra chooses to leave her parents in Lebanon and join her uncle Hashem in Africa: "Now I am in Africa because I want to be far from Beirut" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 29). However, she is unhappy with the treatment of her uncle Hashem whose affection is ambiguous. From her perspective, she is sexually abused by him. Upon her arrival in Africa's airport, "he came nearer and greeted me with a kiss on the cheek. I quickly kissed him back, then he embraced me with all his strength, both arms around me. I felt

uncomfortable” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.19). At home, he would get into her room, “sit on [her] bed and touch [her] face” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 20). Besides, at the cinema, he puts an arm around her shoulders and then holds her hands. Expressing her discomfort, Zahra narrates: “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” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 21). Zahra is vexatious, and his actions bring back all of her bad memories from the past (sexual experiences with her boyfriend Malek and her cousin Kasem). She remembers her visit to the village where she meets her grandfather, aunt, and her cousin Kasem:

As I was sleeping on the floor next to my grandfather, [...] it seemed as if a cold hand furtively moved in my panties. I woke and jumped up in a fright, and the hand suddenly disappeared. But the fear and the coldness had gripped me and shaken me. Even in that total darkness that could absorb no more darkness, I thought, for an instant, I saw the glint of Kasem's spectacles. (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 22)

Thus, almost all the family male relatives see Zahra as nothing but a sexual object. All these experiences lower her feeling of self-respect and enhance her feeling of inferiority and self-hatred. She wishes to have the courage to say to her uncle: “Please don't ruin my visit. You're upsetting me” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 23). The days pass, but she could not forget her uncle's hands and his behavior toward her like “a man to a woman” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 23). This mirrors Zahra's frustrated inner self and her despondent search for her own identity. Instead of declaring her fury at her uncle, Zahra goes silently to the bathroom: “I went into the bathroom and heard myself thinking ‘There is no parting from you, bathroom. You are the only thing I have loved in Africa...’” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 27). Her voice is muted and buried inside her for she is surrounded by man-made rules that deprive her of expressing her pain and sufferings. This enhances her inner scars and sufferings and leads her to take unreasonable and impetuous decisions such as her assentation to marry Majed.

On the other side, Hashem provides completely different explanations of the same events which make us to put Zahra's credibility into question. For him, Zahra represents a direct link with his family and nation which “he misses the most, and from the outset he clings to it with all his being” (Allen, 1995, p. 245). After their first long awaited meeting at the airport, he says, “for the first time I have a feeling of being back home” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.19). Indeed, Zahra grants Hashem “the mental escape into the comfort of his memories that [he] is looking for” (Hughes, 2011, p. 23). At the cinema, he is shocked to know that she misunderstands his behavior. “I am you, you are your mother, your mother is daughter to my mother. Let me hold you in my arms. [...] You are the only witness to my destiny” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 71).

It is not easy to tell whether Zahra is hallucinating her uncle's advances. Some writers are of the view that “she might be psychologically disturbed” (Hamdar, 2014, p. 20). Regardless of her psychological condition, Hashem does not see Zahra as an individual but as a nation: “Lebanon, which he could not change, control, or take possession of when he was in Lebanon has arrived now in Africa in the figure of Zahra” (Ghandour, 2002, p. 243).

In the Arab world, women's persecution is not restricted to be at the hands of their male relatives; the men of their communities play a major role in such process. Another form of Arab women's oppression is reflected through the relationship of Malek and Zahra. Malek, the friend of Zahra's brother, is married with a child. He has helped Zahra to get a job in the same factory where he works. At the beginning of their relation, he talks with her about love and adoration. Then it develops into a sexual exploitation or a one-sided sexual relation. Their relation is a type of sexual outlet that is focused on selfish desires. Despite the fact that Zahra claims she

feels unwell when she is around Malek, she does not have the courage to reject him: "I felt sick but followed nevertheless. It was as if he had a magnetic attraction which I could not resist" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 31). Here the author aims to assert that their sexual practices become a means of enforcing male dominance over females. In fact, he treats her body as if it were his personal property. Zahra sees their relationship as a dream in which she is a passive participant. In reference to her passivity, she vocalizes: "He began kissing me; as I remained passive... He wasn't at all vexed by my passivity while he was kissing me or as he made love to me" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 33). When Malek "crosses the line" for the first time and slips her virginity away, Zahra also remains passive (Al-Sanae, 2007, p. 32).

Nevertheless, Zahra keeps going to the garage and gets abortion twice. One may wonder about the causes of her going despite the fact that she does not enjoy the relation. In my view, such kind of relation between a young girl and a married man is meant to reflect the idea that women are being exploited by men. On the other side, Zahra/women representative continues in this uncomfortable relation so as to express her resistance to the patriarchal oppression and social conventions that have been placed on her. To say it differently, this kind of illegal relation proves that while Zahra is used by the writer as a symbol of escaping the traditional norms of society, Malek is used to symbolize men's betrayal. Malek's betrayal here is not meant to refer to the betrayal of his beloved only but also it refers to his betrayal of his wife and child.

In the Arab world, women's exploitation and treatment as sexual object to satisfy men's selfish desires is not restricted to the men of their communities, such an awful treatment may be also at the hands of their husbands. An instance of such naughty treatment in the book is reflected through the relation of Zahra and her husband Majed. Zahra's sufferings while living with her uncle enforce her to accept Majed's proposal for marriage with the hope of having a better life. Zahra believes that marrying Majed will enable her to escape from her uncle, but her plan backfires as she finds that can't stand Majed. She herself declares: "I never loved him. I could not stand him" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 114). The failure and sufferings that she has undergone because of her sexual relation with Malek and her sexual abuse by Kasem as well as her uncle Hashem lead Zahra to develop a sense of aggressive attitude toward any physical relation with any man:

The things that I feel whenever Majed comes close to me! Cold winds, cold, crowding me close with thousands of snails crawling closer, crawling across the mud as the winds blow ever more strongly, carrying the snails' foul odor which soaks into every pore. (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 93)

However, Majed's marriage is a multi-purpose. First, it is sexually centered for he marries so as to have sex whenever he wants: "I was so happy on my wedding night that I couldn't describe my joy. Here I was, married at last, the owner of a woman's body that I could make love to whenever I wished. From now on, surely my feelings of deprivation must dwindle" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 83). Second, Majed sees Zahra as a Lebanese "ready-made bride" in Africa who will save him the expenses of finding a wife in Lebanon (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.73). Third, she is also his chance to become a "real human being" which he believes entails having a wife, a home, and kids. He says: "I needed to marry and beget children and to live in a house like everyone else if I was to become a real human being" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 74-75). The fourth purpose is to have a social status as Zahra belongs to a high class family while he belongs to a low class family. To him this marriage is the fulfillment of his dream: "I have married Hashem's niece and so fulfilled the dream I've had ever since being in the South ... of marrying the daughter of an illustrious family" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 83). This marriage is not a "proposal to share a life or even have a satisfying intimate relationship, but rather a financial transaction, a means of achieving social prestige and strengthening social ties between individuals and

families” (Mahmood, 2018, p. 33-34). Therefore, it is apparent that Al-Shaykh here intends to criticize the notion of social discrimination in the Arab world.

In this context, another issue that the author criticizes is the concept of female virginity, which in the Arabs view, is the measure to distinguish between good and bad women. Majed expects Zahra to lose her virginity and to be in anguish or pain on their wedding night. On the contrary, he is shocked to know that he is not Zahra’s first sexual partner. He recounts his astonishment on their wedding night:

It was her wedding night, and here was I, penetrating her. But, as she still avoided meeting my eyes, I heard no cry of pain. Here was I, making love to her, me the husband, she the wife. And there was no sense of a barrier to my penetration. I saw nothing; the sheets remained white. Not even one drop of blood. (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 83-84)

Like any other Arab man, for Majed the issue is a matter of honor and dignity for which an unvirgin girl might get killed. Zahra loses all of her significance in his eyes and becomes a mere “cursed woman! Daughter of a cursed woman!” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 84). In Arab communities,

a woman is considered as a good woman if she can protect her virginity for her husband. ... It also happens to the concept of virginity that is always used to differentiate between good and bad woman. People in Lebanon believe that their family dignity is determined by their daughters’ dripping virginity blood of the first wedding night. (Handayani, 2017, p. 25)

Sexually Majed objects Zahra and regards her as nothing more than a body with which to have sex, regardless of her desires or free-will. He could not care about her “feelings or about her creating a true exchange of love and tenderness” (Accad, 1992, p. 48). He treats her not as a human being but as sex object: “Treating persons as sex objects involves treating persons as less than the moral equals of other persons” (LeMoncheck, 1985, p. 2).

Although Majed’s honor is hurt, he is fortunate that such incidents and mess take place not in Lebanon. He is pleased that his family has no idea about such shameful thing:

I thanked God that my mother was far away, far from this mess, and couldn't ask to see these stained sheets so that she might display them to Zahra’s mother, to the neighbors and relatives. I thanked God for my mother’s absence, and with it her stinging tongue. (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 86)

The above words indicate that some Arabs may be open-minded to some extent if they were not in their Arab communities. However, when in their communities, they become very conservative and cannot accept such deed from a woman. In the narrative, Majed states:

After several days, the intensity of these issues seemed to fade, as if such formidable questions become insignificant here in Africa, where there is no culture, no environment, no family to blow them up out of all proportion; for here every man stands on his own like a lone tree, like someone without a past who only has himself. Perhaps it is because there are no parents here, or because those who happen to be here have integrated into Africa and lack any culture to relate to. Traditions surface from time to time, but remain transplanted and so lose their former authority. (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 88)

The above lines manifest the author’s view that men are also victims of social unreal rules. They are “sometimes victims of society as well” (Sunderman, 1992, p. 629).

Truly speaking, Majed and Zahra’s marriage is portrayed as a dramatic event that ends in failure. None of them are successful in accomplishing their objectives. Majed does not exploit

Zahra neither socially nor sexually, and she does not escape persecution; instead, she goes deep into it. Put differently, Zahra's attempt to escape her world i.e. her marriage to Majed, goes horribly wrong. Majed, who was raised to be misogynistic, sees Zahra not only as a vital rung in the expatriate Lebanese community's socioeconomic ladder, but also as a sexual object to whom he, as her husband, has unrestricted access. On the other side, Zahra's brutish-treatment by him and her previous sexual experiences worsen her hatred of Majed that she despises him and cannot bear him touching her.

As to Adams (2001, p. 201) Majed "fails to acknowledge Zahra as an individual with her own personal needs". Zahra, on the other hand, is an individual who asserts her own identity and freedom: "I wanted to live for myself. I wanted my body to be mine alone. I wanted the place on which I stood and the air surrounding me to be mine alone and no one else's" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 93). The author asserts the fact that Zahra has to be loved and respected as an independent identity. Women have to be dealt with not as voiceless entities but as independent and effective identities.

The last instance of women persecution to be discussed in this paper is reflected in the novel through the relationship of Zahra and the sniper. This kind of relationship is complicated for it employs seduction language. In this relation, Zahra attempts to escape the role of passivity. She does her best so as to stop war and keep peace. The author here agrees with Conover and Sapiro who believe that "men are the militarists and perpetrators; women are the pacifists and victims. Men start the wars; women try to stop them. Men are the "just warriors" marching into battle; women are the "beautiful souls" marching for peace" (Conover & Sapiro, 1993, p. 1079). Zahra might not be powerful enough to prevent war and death, but at least she could postpone it by instilling new principles of love, mutual coexistence, and tolerance. She attempts to befriend the sniper in order divert him from killing innocent people. She thinks about the sniper every time and asks: "what could possibly divert the sniper from aiming his rifle and startle him to the point where he might open his mouth instead? (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 157). She suggests many options to divert this monster from killing people such as "a naked woman, passing across his field of fire? (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 157). To put it another way, Zahra considers it her moral obligation to approach the sniper and engage with him sexually and verbally, with the hope of alleviating some of the war's brutal reality and healing the wounds of her shattered and wounded nation. Zahra utilizes her body language to humanize this "monster": "I had given him my body, my chance of life or death" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 152). She uses her body to create a society that is more humane, peaceful, and less cruel than the oppressive patriarchal one that crushes women's hope for a brighter future.

Toward the end of the text, Zahra informs the sniper about her pregnancy, which creates a manly response from him – "My God, Zahra. You must get an abortion!" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 203). And when he realizes that it is too late to get abortion, he assures her that he will marry her. Zahra is pleased to hear this. She believes that she fulfills her objectives of this relation and that the battle is over and it is time to establish a new future and lead a normal life. "It begins to occur to me that the war with its miseries and destructiveness, has been necessary for me to start to return to being normal and human" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 161). However, it appears that her feelings aren't intended to last. She is in tremendous pain and finds herself shot mercilessly in the street:

The pain is terrible, but I grow accustomed to it, and to the darkness. As I close my eyes for an instant, I see the stars of pain.... He kills me. He kills me with bullets that lay at his elbow as he made love to me. He kills me, and the white sheets that covered me a little while ago are still crumpled from my presence. (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 214)

While emitting her last breath, miserable Zahra is wondering about the motives beyond murdering her: “Does he kill me because I'm pregnant? Or is it because I asked him whether he was a sniper? (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 214). The tragic death of Zahra, at the end of the book, can be interpreted as a confirmation that the old patriarchal powers that legitimize all that oppress women have not been driven away by war: “war has swept everything away, for the rich and for the poor, for the beautiful and for the ugly...” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 184).

Indeed, this relation is complex because from its beginning till its end it involves unexpected events. The sniper rapes her on their first encounter, and Zahra unexpectedly experiences her first orgasm: “why had I felt no pleasure before, when I lay on everyday beds? Why had I never clawed at other men’s backs as I did at that of this sniper? [...] Oh, sniper, let me cry out in pleasure so that my father hears me and comes to find me sprawled out so” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 160 -161).

Writers have different interpretations of this complex reaction of Zahra. Guzif Zeidan is of the opinion that it is war that assists Zahra to discover her sexual pleasure “because the war has removed the authority figures from her life and suspended the usual rules for daily living, and this means Zahra’s life and sexual behavior have become more her own than ever before” (Zeidan, 1995, p. 215). Evelyne Accad in her article “Guns and Roses,” (2001) indicates that “Zahra’s reaction to the war and to violence is masochistic. She submits herself to violent sex, thereby trying to forget the outside violence she cannot cope with.” For Cooke (1982), it is the sniper who frees Zahra from oppressed social norms. It is him who “allows the ugly Zahra to partake of excitement and therefore life” (Cooke, 1982, p. 133). In other words, Zahra's sexuality blooms in the most unlikely of places, including war and rape. Traditional patriarchal conventions are suspended by violence, allowing Zahra to freely move throughout the city and discover her body for the first time. However, M. and P. Higonnet (2006) express that the newly obtained independence or freedom of wartime have proved to be just fallacious. Despite using contraceptive medication to regulate her desire, Zahra becomes pregnant by the sniper. This indicates that her body, which has been trained to be obedient to male domination, betrays her. Indeed, “during her last moments, Zahra resigns herself to the reality that she was never really free, that she always was and always will be a subject of male dominance” (Rebeiz, 2017, p. 137). The sniper exploits Zahra's body for sex at the expense of her right to conceive and be pregnant. In fact, “the pregnant body is feared for its reproductive powers” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 77). Again this reflects the male view of woman who is perceived as a mere body to fulfill man’s sexual desires. However, when this physical object becomes the carrier of another unwanted body, it has to be eliminated. After all, it is uncomplicated to understand that from the very first day of her life, Zahra is treated as a second class citizen. Zahra and her alike are victims of both war and patriarchal rules. Her acts in support of humanity and civilized principles are a humanistic declaration of peace, love, and tolerance. Nevertheless, her tragic and pathetic death indicates that without deconstructing patriarchy and its terrible forms, any attempt to halt it will be a pitiful effort carried out within the repressive patriarchy.

4. CONCLUSION

The discussion above demonstrates that Zahra's identity is increasingly fractured as she has been a victim of conventional beliefs. She is abused by men, and scared by the war, until she loses something of herself in each stage/experience in her life. Although the war allows her a brief moment of self-reconstruction, this period of freedom does not continue as she is finally assassinated by her boyfriend, the sniper.

All those around her are concerned only about her body. In the text, the author assigns

different meanings and interpretations for Zahra/woman's body (the submissive female body, the sexual body, the representative of a nation, and the reproductive body). Through the book, the writer does not give anything new but translation of the men's views about women. She demonstrates how all of these forcibly assigned meanings of women's body worsen women's state and ultimately lead to their failure in life and Zahra (the book narrator) is a case in point.

Throughout the whole text, it has been apparent that the idea of the inferiority complex is instilled in all the Arab girls by all the family and community members and their mothers are no exception. However, woman/ Zahra never loses hope of becoming a positive member. She has mistakenly believed that, despite its negative aspects, war could be a new beginning, the commencement of a normal and regular life. In the text under scrutiny, the author has created an empowering discourse for women. Zahra's life exemplifies this, from her silence to her steadfast pursuit of real action, independent of any party affiliation, to put an end to this brutal war. The narrative encapsulates or depicts women's rejection of war and patriarchy. Zahra, a repressed and downtrodden woman, does her best to get rid of these shackles and affirms her right to speak out against the patriarchal society.

In my point of view, Zahra has attempted to escape her world five times. Being the oppressed daughter of a Hitler-like father and unfaithful mother, Zahra is disliked by her family for being not beautiful and for having acne in her face. This offensive treatment leads her to have a sexual relation with Malek thinking that she is resisting the social male rules that dehumanize women. This forms her first escape which leads to her sexual exploitation. She has to undergo two abortions and to suffer from mental breakdown. So she attempts her second run away by leaving all the Arab unfair world and joining her uncle Hashem in Africa with the hope to have a better life. However, Hashem sees her not a mere sister's daughter but as a whole nation. His behavior displeases her so she tries her third escape by marrying Majed who sees her as sexual object that he can access anytime and a ladder to have a social status. This relation fails and she is back to Lebanon which forms her fourth escape. In the torrents of war, she spends all her time eating and sleeping. The last escape is represented through her relation with a sniper with the hope of bringing an end the obnoxious war. For the first time, she feels happy and free but it remains not long for she is murdered by her lover. Thus, from the very first day in her life till her death, Zahra's life gives her nothing but oppression, marginalization, persecution, offensiveness and ultimately tragic and painful death. Sooner or later, it should be declared that for Arab women to be seen as independent and visible entities, their needs must be met and their voices must be heard and both women and men should collaborate to achieve a reformed nationalism free of male dominance. Instead of being viewed as passive victims of male-dominated society, Arab women must be treated as unique persons with all of their complexities.

Further studies in the field have to deal with literary works that shed light on woman's rights. The urgent need is to recover memory in many Arab women's writings by analyzing the stories of women who have been silenced, oppressed, and excluded by their own men and communities for the sake of creating the soul of resisting and challenging the manly unjust laws so as to lead a normal life like their counterparts all over the world.

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Arab Women as Voiceless Entities in Arab Women Literature: A Study of Al-Shaykh's The Story of Zahra

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