Negotiating War and Patriarchy: The Praxis of Death and Violence in *The Story of Zahra*

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**Abstract**

The horrific scenes of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), which left the country in ruins, had a traumatic effect on the entire nation particularly the Lebanese author, Hanan al-Shaykh who was haunted by the nightmarish war memories until she managed to overcome them by reliving the whole experience through the events of her remarkable novel *The Story of Zahra*. Disillusioned by the political scene during the war and exasperated with the traditional artistic themes advocated by previous generations of war writers, al-Shaykh rejected the linear development of character, the sense of order and progression integral to the war literature in the Arab world. Instead, she captures the atrocities of war by creating a unique novel, giving the Lebanese tragedy mythic proportions and turning it into more than a historical event. In light of this background and within the context of contemporary war fiction studies, the paper critically examines al-Shaykh’s novel in order to explore the deadly impact of war, which uproots the foundations of a civilized country turning it into a wasteland. The paper argues that the author creates a multi-layered narrative, which reflects the collapse of the moral and political structure of a patriarchal society paralyzed by coercive masculinity and devastated by sectarian violence. Navigating the protagonist’s journey of suffering and pain during the brutal civil conflict, the paper uncovers the underpinnings of war interpreting the novel as a gendered reflection of a divided country. The paper also emphasizes that the author presents a counter-narrative exposing the ugly side of war and revealing how war catastrophically damages the social fabric of the nation.

**Keywords:** Hanan al-Shayk, war, Lebanon, patriarchy
INTRODUCTION

Joseph Waldmeir in *American Novels of the Second World War* divides the war novel tradition into three categories: Those novels, which are primarily concerned with “a realistic portrayal of combat”, those which are “primarily studies of the effect of war upon an individual psyche”, and those which are “above all else ideological” (Waldmeir 1969: 10). In a similar context, Charles Eisinger divides war novels along ideological patterns. According to him, “the war novel has a kind of split personality. On the one hand, it is driven to savage attacks because the perceived reality falls short of the democratic and humane ideal and on the other, it feels compelled to praise the democratic virtues of the United States” (Eisinger 1963: 22). Further, John Frederick divides the war novelists into three categories as follows: “those attempting to present the total experience of a major phase of war, those dealing with experience in single branch of service over an extended area of time and action” in addition to “those limited in focus to brief time and relatively few characters” (Frederick 1956: 197).

In the same vein, Malcolm Cowley emphasizes the value of the war novels in “the great collaborative history they provide of all aspects of war - taken together, they cover a wide range of human experience “(Cowley 1955: 25). Moreover, Wayne Charles Miller’s comments on the war novels are insightful and more comprehensive. Firstly, he refers to a division of fictional works, which incorporate war “almost exclusively as a location for adventure”. In addition to the preceding division, Miller argues that the war novel branches into three general categories whose lines of demarcation occasionally overlap and frequently blur. These categories include novels, which are integral to the conventional war tradition, the novels that present warfare as a brutal but normal human experience, and the novels that while much less doctrinaire than their forerunners of previous wars, offer specific criticism of aspects of the societies engaged in war” (Miller 1970: 134).

In a related context, the war motif has been a central concern to Arab writers since antiquity. There is no doubt that since the pre-Islamic era, war played a vital role when life was a matter of survival for Arab tribes fighting fiercely over domination of pastures and sources of water in the vast Arabian desert. The war motif, in pre-Islamic communities, in the Arab world, was simultaneously conflated with masculinity, toughness and the potential to take revenge against enemies and restore the honor of defeated tribes. Such attitude toward warfare was reflected in Arabic literature particularly poetry. Several pre-Islamic poetry anthologies included panegyric narratives embellishing warfare and the use of violence against external/foreign invaders and local enemies-rival Muslim tribes. Subsequently, ancient tribal conflicts, in pre-Islamic Arabia, with their brutal images of homicide and carnage were woven into the fabric of Bedouin Arab culture.
On the cultural and literary paradigms, Arab writers were undoubtedly inspired by the war heritage deeply rooted in local culture and history. War narratives in Arabic oral tradition and folklore have unconsciously or consciously played a vital role in shaping the warfare and violence discourses embedded in Arabic literature. Inevitably, contemporary Arab novelists have embarked on composing literary pieces glorifying war and its warriors, particularly with regard to the Arab struggle against western colonial powers. In different narratives, the protagonists, who bring victory to their people, are unrealistically portrayed in their dedication, resolution, and courage in the battlefield. Most of the Arab novelists and writers, dealing with the war issue, were striving for effect rather than for truth, consequently their representation of war was totally distorted.

For centuries, they have ignored issues such as the military’s threat to freedom and brutalities committed during armed struggles. Apparently, Arab war writers and poets seemed to accept the common view, presented in the early historical epics, that victories in the battlefield provided an opportunity for attaining glory. Therefore, images of flashing trumpets, wheeling columns of troops waving swords and blaring of martial music suffuse their works. Ignoring the realistic side of war, its atrocities and barbarities, their war narratives often become a setting for the famous Arabic tales of adventures such as the love story between Antara, the black warrior of Arabia and Abila1, the beautiful tribal idol. The Arabic war narratives also incorporate the epic and folkloric history of Abu Zaid Al-Helali Salama, the black warrior of Southern Arabia who conquered North Africa.

The entanglements of warfare, love and adventures in Arabic war narratives in addition to the impact of the ideology of patriotism and honor originated during the euphoria of the early Islamic conquests undermined the attempts of modern writers including novelists to deal with war realistically. Particularly fictions that delineate Arab-Arab wars. In the aftermath of the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, the Arab world was overwhelmed by a series of internal conflicts and was torn apart by Arab-Arab civil conflicts. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Arab world witnessed more socio-political setbacks and domestic conflicts including the Iraqi-Iranian war (1979-1989) and the Lebanese civil war erupting in 1975 paving the way for the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Successive Arab failures on different paradigms, besides the “intensifying process of fragmentation” characterizing modern Arab history forced novelists to use new narrative forms alien to the Arabic novel tradition (Abu-Deeb1988: 160). Therefore, modern Arab novelists such as Hanan Al-Shaykh depended on sophisticated western prose forms because the novel genre was not entrenched in Arab culture.

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1 The narrative is an integral part of Arabic popular culture and it is similar - in some aspects - to the love story between Othello and Desdemona in Shakespeare’s tragedy.
Since Arabic literature lacks innovative prose forms compatible to their European counterparts, modern Arab novelists imported many narrative techniques from the West. Obviously, the relationship between the Arab world and the west “had provided one of the principal themes of early attempts at narrative writing in Arabic” (Allen 1995: 88).

Consequently, modern Arab writers—unlike their predecessors—have responded to the war issue from different perspectives manipulating several aesthetic strategies appropriated to fulfill their visions of war. Operating in different contexts, modern Arab novelists have attempted to reflect the complex reality of war using various techniques ranging from social realism to postmodern radical forms, which explode the entire fiction making process. Moreover, the catastrophic impact of the Lebanese civil war changed the attitude of Arab writers toward the issue of war. Due to domestic and regional geopolitical reasons, the Lebanese civil war erupted in the mid 1970’s and ended in the nineties after it became chaotically absurd and meaningless. The war resulted into violence, death, disbelief, doubt, chaos, paranoia, tension, fear, shattered reality, disintegrated society and schizophrenic individuals.

The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990)\(^2\) was one of the most destructive armed conflicts that broke out in the twentieth century and lasted for more than a decade. In the pre-war era, Lebanon was called the Switzerland of the East, and the capital city—Beirut—was the most famous hub of art, culture, thought and philosophy in the Middle East. Beirut was a commercial, cultural and tourist center and the picturesque nature of the city captured the hearts of millions of people. The ugly sectarian war, violence and destruction dragged Lebanon backward to the Stone Era. The bloody fighting led to the fragmentation of Lebanon into provinces and areas controlled by rival militias. There are several reasons for war including that Lebanon embraces dozens of sects of Sunnis, Shiites, Maronite Christians, Orthodox, Catholics, Armenians, and Druze in addition to the existence of huge Palestinian refugee communities with different ideological and political orientations. Each of these sects wanted a Lebanon of its own according to its Sharia, laws, and principles, in addition to the numerous formations of Lebanese parties, each of which had its own militia. This was one of the reasons for the war.

However, this reason was not enough to spark the outbreak of the civil war. Rather, assassinations, bombings, and international foreign interventions exacerbated the disputes over Lebanon’s ownership. All these circumstances led to the collapse of Lebanon. Subsequently, the tall buildings, huge hotels and state

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institutions turned into military barracks occupied by snipers and fighting groups affiliated with political parties or military organizations or warlords or religious sects. The destroyed buildings and walls pierced with bullets are testimonies narrating stories about what happened during the years of war in terms of killing, destruction, and shedding the blood of the Lebanese people. The Lebanese civil war remained a conflict of a special nature, surrounded by many ambiguities and complications. The Lebanese civil war represented a real experience that took place as a result of internal and external conspiracies and intrigues.

**War, Violence and Trauma in The Story of Zahra (1980)**

The events of the novel take place against the background of the course of the Lebanese civil war. The novel splits into two parts: the first part, titled ‘The Scars of Peace’ in which Zahra, the central female character, was victimized by a brutal patriarchal society. The second part bears a subtitle: “The Torrents of war,” in which Zahra becomes a completely different person, ready to take any action in order to stop the war, even if it came to establishing a relationship with a sniper, the symbol of the patriarchal war, and ended with her tragic death.

The novel’s female protagonist, Zahra, a woman in her thirties, has been subjected since childhood to all kinds of oppression and discrimination in her family’s sphere. Zahra suffered from the exploitation of her mother who used her as a cover to conceal a sexual affair with her lover. In fact, Zahra was tortured by the painful memories of her childhood. Her mother frequently takes her to a flat where she had sex with an unknown lover. In the presence of her father, Zahra’s mother pretends that she takes the child to “the hospital of Dr. Shawky”. Zahra realized that her mother does not say the truth: “I knew quite well by now that we had not gone to Dr Shawky’s as my mother had said, and as she had assured me, and as I had continued to believe” (2). Later Zahra discovered the sexual affair between her mother and the stranger:

I saw my mother rise from the sheets and the man turn his face and body away from me as he pulled on his trousers. I was suddenly surprised to see the man and my mother in the same bed. Was it because I had grown a little and could understand certain things better? Or was it because I knew that my mother and father always slept in separate beds? (4)

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3 The novel pursues the harrowing story of a young girl named Zahra, who tries to escape patriarchal oppression and the horrors of war. The novel was banned in many Arab countries due to political reasons. The explicit sexual discourse of the novel was condemned by the religious institutions in the Arab world.

In the pre-war years, Zahra was treated badly by her mother who favored her brother - Ahmad - and considered him superior to Zahra due to gender differences: “Meat continued to be for Ahmad. Eggs were for Ahmad. Fresh tomatoes were for Ahmad. So were the fattest olives. If Ahmad was late arriving home, my mother would rumple his bed and push a pillow down under the bedclothes” (20). Likewise, Zahra was oppressed by her father, an oppressive patriarchal figure: “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. Do I misjudge him? He had a stubborn personality. He saw all life in terms of black or white” (19).

Moreover, Zahra was subjected to sexual exploitation in her youth during the pre-war period. She was repeatedly raped by Malik, her brother’s friend. She disobeyed her father who wanted her to marry Samir, Ahmad’s friend. Instead, she became involved in an affair with a married man-Malik- who took advantage of her innocence and lack of experience. The sexual meetings in the garage resulted into the loss of Zahra’s virginity, which is a taboo in the Arab world: When he first suggested the room in the garage, I tried to object. He soon convinced me. The idea of the garage was because he wished to safeguard my reputation. At our third meeting, he spoke of love, of Khalil Gibran and platonic affection. He said how much he liked my face with its pimples, how the disfigurations actually excited him, even as he lay on top of me, penetrating my virginity (24). Malik lied at her and gave her false promises of marriage: “When, afterwards, I saw the blood, the proof of my virginity, on my thighs and on the yellow coverlet, I said to him,” Swear before Good that we are married” (26).

Due to her relation and illicit sexual affairs with Malik, she had two abortions. The betrayal of Malik and his refusal to marry Zahra after she lost her virginity destroyed her psychologically and she was treated from psychic trauma in a mental hospital: My own voice only returned momentarily after they had run their electric current through every cell in my body, every bone, every drop of blood (31). Afterwards, she escaped to Africa to stay with her uncle - Hashem - a political refugee who escaped from Lebanon. Unfortunately, Hashim raped his niece and later arranged her marriage to Majed, a friend and a Lebanese living in exile. In the wedding night, Majed discovered that Zahra was not a virgin. According to Cheryl Rubenberg, familial patriarchy, with its discourse of honor and shame, its relations of domination and subordination, and its myriad punishments, controls women’s bodies, minds and behaviors and their entire lives.

In the same context, Evelyne Accad observes that “(one of the codes of Arab tribes is sharaf (honor), which also means the preservation of girls’ virginity to

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ensure that the women are kept exclusively for the men of their tribe.” (Accad 1990: 29). Explicitly, chastity is essential for women where family and community honor is associated with female virtue, which, inevitably, leads the patriarchal society to resort to different means from gossip to honor killing to enforce the honor code to avoid the collective communal and national shame. According to Nawal El Saadawi, woman was considered by the Arabs as “a menace to man and society, and the only way to avoid the harm she could do was to isolate her in the home, where she could have no contact with either one or the other” (El Saadawi 1980:136).

In this regard, Fatima Mernissi argues that the preoccupation with female virginity and chastity becomes a major obsession for men who do not hesitate to subject women to violence and abuse in an attempt to keep them in their place. “Like honor, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: Self-confidence. The concept of honor and virginity locates the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman” (Mernissi 1992: 183). In the wedding night, Majed informs the readers the following about Zahra: “It was her wedding night, and here I was penetrating her. As she still avoided meeting my eyes, I heard no cry of pain. Here I was 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. Abruptly thrust her aside as she still avoided my eyes. I did not ask for a sea of blood, I would have settled for one drop, but could only cry out, as if in a trance,” Cursed woman Daughter of a cursed woman!” (69). The failed woman ended up in a failed marriage with a man –Majed- she did not choose and had no feelings for him. Subsequently she was divorced and book one of the novel ended with Zahra returning to her country: “He threw me down on the couch as I went on ceaselessly screaming and moaning. I shouted,” Divorce me! Divorce me!». Majed drove her to the airport dismissing her out of Africa: “As soon as he realized I was fully dressed, he dragged me out of the house and opened the door of the truck. I climbed in with difficulty, still shaking with tears and trying to hide my terror” (92).

The second book of the novel–The torrents of war- opened with Zahra coming back to Lebanon, a country on the eve of the eruption of the civil war: “I had never believed that the quiet streets I knew so well could ever change into a battlefield. But now those formerly neutral streets were suddenly filled with a spirit of revenge and tension. I could never understand how the fighters themselves, whatever side they were on, could take aim and fire in those streets. Were they all drugged, like

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6 Ibid.
Ahmad and his friends?" (121). Gradually, Zahra was engaged in war: “I could do nothing except volunteer myself at the hospital. Our neighbor’s daughter and I had to walk close to the walls for fear of the sniper, hidden away on the rooftop of the near-by building” (115). This part of the novel presents the facts of Zahra's life in the midst of the civil war, where the outbreak of the armed conflict allows her to be freed from many prohibitions and a degree of freedom from social control: “When I heard that the battles raged fiercely and every front was an inferno, I felt calm. It meant that my perimeters were fixed by these walls, that nothing, which my mother hoped for me could find a place inside them. The idea of my marrying again was buried deep by the thunder and lightning of the rockets” (107).

Reading the story of Zahra as a personal history and observing the exploitation that befell her, we read at the same time the story of Zahra as a symbol corresponding to the homeland, Lebanon, which was exploited by its people. Zahra who stands for her home country means “flower” and symbolically, the novel suggests that Lebanon was a flower annihilated by a ferocious war. Here is the complete correspondence between the personality of Zahra and Lebanon, and in particular in the use of the symbolism of Zahra's abused body as equivalent to the body of the exploited homeland. Further, the narrative highlights the unification of the fate of the oppressed female and the homeland in exceptional circumstances represented by the war. Moreover, the rise of the female body in the second part of the novel becomes as a symbol of the attempt of the homeland to liberate itself from the state of chaos created by an ugly war.

Paradoxically, her feelings of fear and awe in the pre-war time disappeared after Zahra’s association and sexual relationship with a sniper who is a symbol of war. This represents the resurgence of Zahra and the fragmentation of worn-out pre-war traditions: “The war goes on. Its upheavals shake up the living and the dead. How is it that death has come to rule over half the street, directing that a child will fall, a man or a woman will fall, each with a bullet in the brain, each one alive and moving, even laughing or crying, at the very moment when they walked into the sniper’s sights (113)?”

In the second part of the narrative, Zahra has a long-term sexual relationship with a young man who turned to be a local sniper, stationed in her area: I could smell the heavy scent of his perspiration He put a hand on my breast and then removed it as I went on peering hard at his features in the half-light. He must have begun to undo his trousers with one hand as he started to knead my shoulder with the other. Then, in one move, he pounced on me and pushed me on to the stairs. He lifted my dress to the waist. He spread out his body on mine without even taking off my knickers. He did not seem to mind that he made my back and side hurt, and though I twisted about with discomfort, he paid no attention. He came quite quickly, shuddering briefly in his spasm of pleasure. Then he stood up, wiped
himself off at his trouser opening and began to do up the buttons. At that point, I got up too, aware of the hurt in my back and side and rubbing my limbs where the bones ached. As I prepared to leave, I heard him say, tomorrow, at this time, I shall come to your apartment. I could feel a wetness on my thigh and at the edge of my knickers and wished the dripping might stop before it betrayed me “(127).

On a symbolic level, there is matching between the fate of the female subaltern and the homeland during wartime. Zahra mistakenly thinks that the only way to put an end to the destruction, which ravages Lebanon, is to be part of the war by having sexual relationship with the sniper. Therefore, sex becomes a kind of drug blinding Zahra to everything around her:

Oh, sniper…. let me cry out in pleasure so that my father hears me and comes to find me sprawled out so. I am one with the dust in this building of death. Let my father see my legs spread wide in submission. 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. Here is this god of death who has scorned the loss of my virginity once, twice, a hundred times, the sniper to whom I am grateful for accepting me despite my plainness, because he realizes that beauty is not everything. I hear, close by, scattered gunshots, yet feel as if they are at a great distance. This war has made beauty, money, terror and convention all equally irrelevant. 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. 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 ever more alive, ever more tranquil (137).

By the end of the novel, the sniper killed Zahra after he discovered that he got her pregnant and he had to marry her according to local customs. Symbolically, the novel presents a world in which the fate of the oppressed female unites with the fate of a society in war. The war leads to the explosion of the structure of society and the explosion of Zahra’s body under torrents of bullets shot by the sniper:

I should cross the street to where the lights from the buildings make the dark less frightening. The evening has descended. The street is empty, except at the barricades. The rain falls. I stumble. I hold on to a telegraph pole to stop some force from dragging me down. My thigh hurts. It’s hurting even more. I reach down to touch the place and feel something wet run down my leg, and on to my foot. Can it be the rain? It’s surely not raining so hard. Am I miscarrying? I can’t even walk but must not stop. I must reach home. The pain is unbearable. I
can’t go on. I fall to the ground. Fear commingles with pain, strikes into panic. I touch the source of the pain with my hand and look at what makes it sticky. In spite of the darkness I can see it is blood. A complete silence descends, for to scream has become an unbearable agony. The pain leaps to my belly and I rake the ground with my fingers. It was the sniper who put this fetus in my belly. Is he the one who now puts in all this pain as well? My vocal cords are chained to my heart’s root. The sniper is killing me. He’s killed me. That’s why he kept me there till darkness fell. Maybe he couldn’t face pulling the trigger and dropping me to the ground in broad daylight. (181)

CHALLENGING WAR AND SUBVERTING PATRIARCHY IN
THE STORY OF ZAHRA

As one of the most impressive works in the history of Arab women's novels, the Story of Zahra chronicles the Lebanese civil war. Al-Shaykh was undisputedly one of the most important Arab women writers who lived through the Lebanese civil war and wrote about it in English, Arabic, and French in non-heroic terms. Her works revolves around “women and war, women and exile and the plight of women facing a massed weight of inhuman traditions and a heritage of male oppression” (Buck 1992: 311). Al-Shaykh’s novel The Story of Zahra splits into two books. The first book is entitled “The Scars of Peace” in which the central female character, Zahra, is silently victimized by the patriarchal structure through its variously ugly manifestations. The second book is subtitled “The Torrents of War”. Here Zahra becomes a completely different character, one who is ready to do anything to stop the war, even by being involved in a relationship with a sniper, a symbol of patriarchal war. Her affair with the sniper leads to her tragic death.

7 Hanan al-Shaykh was born in 1945 in Beirut, Lebanon. Al-Shaykh began writing at a young age and she attended the American College for Girls in Cairo, Egypt from 1963 to 1966. During her time in Cairo, she wrote her first novel, The Suicide of a Dead Man, published in 1971. Like most of her novels, it examined relationships between the sexes, power struggles, and patriarchal control.


9 In 1976, she moved to Saudi Arabia after the eruption of the Lebanese Civil War, which inspired her next novel The Story of Zahra. In 1982, Al-Shaykh moved to London, and in 1989 published her famous novel Women of Sand and Myrrh. Also banned from many Middle Eastern countries, it follows the story of four women (two from an unnamed Arab country, one Lebanese, and one American) coping with life in a patriarchal society. In 1994, Al-Shaykh published a collection of short stories called I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops. The novel was translated into English in 1998. Al-Shaykh has also written two plays, Dark Afternoon Tea in 1995 and Paper Husband in 1997. Though she speaks English fluently, Al-Shaykh continues to write solely in Arabic. She still resides in London.
From the beginning of the narrative, Zahra poses as a victim to an oppressive masculine tradition, which crushes her identity. The cruel behavior of Zahra’s father deepened Zahra’s sense of isolation in a patriarchal society in which she feels discriminated against, unwanted, and unloved by those closest to her. To some degree, patriarchal ideas of beauty and idealized femininity are also fostered by this society. To resist these patriarchal ideas, Zahra began a process of self-mutilation as a symbolic expression of her rejection of her society and its convictions. With her fingernails, she deliberately mutilated her face until the blood was oozing from her face, to the point where it became the only reason for her getting up early every morning. Zahra lives in a society where the males seek to control the female body. The structure of the patriarchal familial culture means the privileging of the assertions of desire by males and female elders and the responsibility of girls to comply accordingly. For Cheryl Rubenberg “women are not encouraged to think independently. Parents rather decide for them what “they will eat, when they will eat, what they will wear, how they can plan” (Rubenberg 2001: 82).

Zahra’s father despises her because of the scars on her face. For him, she has no hope of marriage due to her physical appearance. Marriage for women is the only means of acceptance in Arab societies and if they remain unmarried, “they are, socially viewed, so much wastage. This is why mothers have always eagerly sought to arrange marriages for them” (Beauvoir 1989:427). This is what drives Zahra’s father to beat and abuse her mercilessly every time he sees her peeling pimples on her face with her fingers. In this context and on a metaphorical level, Zahra’s face is no longer a part of her body, but a metaphor for society. This is because by attacking her skin, she rejects, in practice, the forcibly imposed social paradigms to which women were forced to submit. In other words, with her silent resistance, Zahra rejects all standards that underestimated women and consider them only as sexual objects.

The novelist depicts how Zahra continues to resist the oppressive patriarchal system, by taking refuge in the bathroom where she takes refuge in silence. The bathroom became her only safe haven from the stifling society in which she lived. Zahra locks herself in the bathroom, whether in Beirut or in Africa, whenever she faces psychological and mental pressure imposed on her by her tyrannical father, her uncle, and her husband-Majed. In her desperate search for her own privacy and instead of expressing her anger at her intruding uncle, she withdraws into silence in the bathroom. As Zahra locked herself in the bathroom in her uncle’s house in Africa, she recalled her first unsatisfactory sexual experience in the garage with her first lover, Malik, a married co-worker at the state tobacco factory.

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in Beirut. She escaped from Beirut to Africa after she suffered from mental and psychological consequences in the aftermath of her sexual affair, which ended in two abortions. Unfortunately, she faces the harsh reality again when Majid asked her to marry him, which threw her into another psychological breakdown, and the inability to confront her future husband because she is not a virgin. Africa was a political sanctuary for Hashem and other dissidents in exile, and economic opportunities for young men like Majid, but it was not a sanctuary for women—such as Zahra—who tried to escape from their oppressive patriarchal families and painful pasts. Africa has become, for Zahra, another Lebanon due to the existence of the same patriarchal values, which tyrannize and silence women.

In Sexual Politics, Kate Millett establishes that patriarchy is a system where male domination is achieved through ideological means. She argues that it is the patriarchal system characterized by power and dominance that oppresses women. The novel reveals that as long as suppressive patriarchal culture and social mores remain in place, the transformed individual woman will be alienated. The male folks in the novel “fail to acknowledge Zahra as an individual with her own personal needs” (Adams 2001: 201). Therefore, Zahra was not able to build trust in her mother and belief in women’s togetherness where men “seem to matter much more than women. This could be what leads her to madness and death in the end” (Accad 1990: 45). The focus on Zahra’s brother, Ahmad, as a child, reflects the ideals of patriarchy and the power of its hold on society. Zahra remembers her mother’s behavior towards her brother. Her mother filled Zahra’s plate with soup, and she took all her time in search of the best piece of meat for Ahmad. This masculine mentality continues to show its manifestations in the novel in Ahmad’s addiction to hashish, masturbation, and objects stolen from dead bodies.

Apparently, patriarchal attitudes and practices “which privilege men, continue to permeate Arab societies from the level of the family up to the state” (Gordon 2006: 7). In the same vein, Sherifa Zuhur points out that the Arab society clings to “a patriarchal system in which women’s position within and duties towards the family precede their rights as individuals” (Zuhur 2003:17). In this environment, women struggle to survive their alienation in a society, which robs them of their human rights and erases their identity. Zahra narrates that her father ignores her, mistreats her but he wants to send Ahmad—her brother to study in America. Zahra narrates how her face and psyche are deformed by scars as result of her society's

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descent into the abyss of violence against women. It is noted that her father abandoned her in her early years because of the acne on her face, a symbol of her internal wounds. The conflicts within Zahra's house are reflected on her body in the shape of the pimples on her face. Zahra's extreme poverty and her deformed face due to acne vulgaris revealed her emotional wounds, but also literally explained the escalating and continuous conflict in society.

When Zahra returned to Beirut, in the second part of the novel, she suffered from severe depression, manifested in her symptoms of withdrawal and retreat, which developed into a form of complete despair and illness. With the outbreak of the civil war, Zahra's attitude changed drastically as she began to follow the news of the war. The novel reveals that war is a patriarchal invention. Men ignite the spark of a war, which burns women. Ironically, however, war changed Zahra's introverted demeanor. Zahra is no longer confined to the safety of the bathroom. Instead, she finds herself able to inhabit other places and move beyond her mother's cramped lifestyle. While others cowered with fear, Zahra plunged into the turmoil. The war forcefully brought her back to life and forced her to take action. She volunteered for a short period in one of the casualty wards, which provided her with a deeper insight into the horrific realities of war.

Zahra lives in a society where the males seek to control the female body. Zahra's father despises her because of the scars on her face. For him, she has no hope of marriage due to her physical appearance. This is what drives him to beat and abuse her mercilessly every time he sees her peeling pimples on her face with her fingers. Zahra attempted to understand the real reasons for the war as well as the urgent need for action to stop this madness. There is no doubt that her reflections on this brutal war raise important questions about the role of women in stopping it, and about the strategies to be adopted in this regard. In her continuous attempts to stop the war, she tried to prevent the shooting of civilians by asking the militiamen she knows to release them. Due to war, Zahra and her mother clung to each other during the successive bouts of street fighting between the Lebanese factions, which made Zahra cling to her mother again, like an “orange and a nav- el”. The war brought the girl and her mother closer together than before, as they were horrified by its barbaric nature.

Throughout the second part of the narrative, the author underlines the masculine notion of war by exposing its ugly side revealing how war catastrophically damages the social fabric. The war devastated the dreams of Ahmad who wants to become an electrical engineer transforming him into an uncivilized militia member who was overwhelmed with great pride in robbing, desecrating and destroying
people’s homes. The war according to Ahmad provided him with power over others, and a way to earn money by stealing and plundering. The war provided Ahmad and his comrades with work that was not available to them in the past. He is proud of his belonging to the patriarchal system, and adopts masculine values. Ahmad’s words reflect the way in which war has given him and his comrades an occupation “that they did not have before and without which they would not know what to do” (Accad 1990: 53).

However, the author shows how war disintegrated Lebanese society. Recurring manifestations of this disintegration are drug abuse, loss of moral values, and disruption of traditional institutions. During war, Zahra criticized the collapse of moral values, and distanced herself from the patriarchal system in order to be able to develop the values of peace, tolerance and equality. She is aware that this war is a masculine activity, and that women are the innocent victims of war. The exclusion of women from patriarchal traditions makes them uniquely free from the greed and selfishness that those traditions have perpetuated, and more willing to criticize them. Women, being deprived of economic and social rewards in favor of the encroachment and greed accorded to men, become free to develop values essential to peace, such as cooperation, equality and creativity.

On the other hand, war provides Zahra with new roles because while war is a patriarchal construct, it also undermines masculinity and patriarchy by opening an avenue for the female protagonist to become part of it. While others cower in fear, Zahra rushes into the midst of the turmoil (Adams 2001: 201). In other words, war has suspended Zahra’s persecution at the hands of her father. Consequently, the patriarchal role of the father has receded into the background. He leaves Beirut to return with his wife to the village of the ancestors, which is a clear indication of his dissatisfaction with the war. They left Zahra in Beirut, who previously would not have been allowed to live alone without the oppression of the patriarchal system. The war disrupted the traditional institutions of a patriarchal society, which oppressed women.

Elaborating on the emerging roles of women during war, Nahla Abdo argues that there is no doubt that war creates spatial re-mappings, which can provide “a space for women’s emancipation by unsettling existing power structures” (Abdo 1991:22). In a related context, Virginia Woolf, in *Three Guineas*, argues that “women’s exclusion from patriarchal traditions makes them uniquely free of the greed and egotism fostered by those traditions and more willing to criticize them; denied the economic and social rewards for aggression and greed granted to men, women are freer to develop values necessary for peace such as cooperation, equality, and creativity (Woolf 1966: 56). Furthermore, Nadine Puechguirbal - in her account on armed conflicts in Africa - explained that war had tremendous impact on
women and temporarily suspended patriarchal structures. She adds: “today between 60 and 80 percent of women are single heads of households. Shortages of food, wood, water, and health care have created great burdens for them. Women and girls often have to travel long distances to find resources, inadvertently exposing themselves to violence by thugs roaming the countryside” (Puechguirbal 2003: 1273).

In a similar scenario, Cynthia Enloe argues that the military has a special role in the ideological construction of patriarchy because of the significance of combat in the construction of masculine identities and in the justification of masculine superiority. Likewise, Paul Higate points out that militaries are perceived as masculine institutions not only because they are populated mostly with men but also because they constitute a major arena for the construction of masculine identities. Moreover, Meredith Turshen points out that “war also destroys the patriarchal structures of society that confine and degrade women. In the very breakdown of morals, traditions, customs, and community, war also opens up and creates new beginnings” (Turshen 1998: 20). In this respect, Miriam Cooke says that war had opened up new vistas, but within its own logic. It could not yet be used to transcend it. This disruption of the established moral order provides some outlet for Zahra. She moved into a residence of her own, and was able to use her energy for the benefit of her survival. Within the framework of this new field created by the war, Zahra’s enormous energies are perfected in emphasizing a new set of human values, which enable her to resist the law of the jungle that Ahmad and his generation represent.

Nevertheless, Zahra’s complicated relationship with the sniper aims to stop the war, even as she uses sexuality as a means. For Zahra, if she is unable to stop war and death, she is able, at least, to postpone it by creating new values of love, coexistence, and tolerance. Zahra’s bare-chested walk in front of the sniper was an attempt to distract him from his murderous missions. In other words, Zahra set herself a moral mission, which is to come to the sniper and establish a sexual relationship with him, in the hope that these forms of communication would mitigate the horror of the realities of war, and heal the wounds of her bereaved and shattered homeland. In Zahra’s relationship with the sniper, she sexualized with him using her body as a language to humanize this “beast”: I gave him my body, and my luck in life and death.” Zahra’s body, wracked by a painful past, is now being

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used creatively for a meaningful purpose. She is now experiencing sexual pleasure for the first time, something she missed in her previous traditional relationships with Malik and with her husband, Majed.

The sexual affair between Zahra and the sniper is a symbol of Zahra's belief in peace and human values. Her desperate attempt to stop the war, by offering her body and soul to the sniper, is seen as a tool of empowerment. This is because Zahra was able through it to defend a society that is more humane and peaceful, and less barbaric than that society, governed by the ideology of authoritarian patriarchy, which destroys any hope for a better future for women. Therefore, Zahra thinks seriously about meeting the sniper to discuss their marriage in the future when the war ends. At the end of the novel, Zahra informs the sniper that she is pregnant from him, which prompts a masculine response in him and he becomes upset. Afterwards, her lover changes his mind and cunningly pretends that he will propose to her shortly. Consequently, Zahra believes that the war is over, and it is time to build a new future but her feelings only lasted for few minutes. After she departed, she felt severe pain, and found herself falling in the street, with blood oozing from her body. Zahra's tragic death, at the end of the novel, may be seen as evidence that the war did not purify the traditional patriarchal forces that legally sanction everything that oppresses women, “although the war burned with it the standards of wealth and poverty, beauty and ugliness.” Perhaps this is the reason why the novelist placed the sexual encounters between Zahra and the sniper in the stairways of an abandoned building indicating the sterility and futility of this relationship, which is destined to kill any hope of a new life.

SUBVERTING THE TRADITIONAL WAR NARRATIVE

Castigating war and its horrendous impact on humanity Lloyd B. Lewis demonstrates that the image of the world that emerged in the aftermath of war is characterized by "absolute entrapment, permanent apocalypse and built-in catastrophe" (Lewis 1985: 226). Historically, war and armed struggle constituted a substantial part of Arab culture and currently, the capital cities of major Arab countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen were devastated by civil wars. Moreover, violence and terrorism spilled over most of the Arab borders threatening world security. These radical transformations had their ramifications on the political and literary scenes in the Arab world. They triggered what Sabry Hafez called “new sensibility” which “was emerging in the changing social, political and cultural atmosphere” (Hafez1980: 171).

In The Story of Zahra, the prominent Lebanese writer Hanan al-Shaykh, underlines the violence of the Lebanese civil war technically and thematically by creating
a unique novel giving the Lebanese tragedy mythic dimensions turning it into more than a historical event. Al-Shaykh attempted to pursue the history of the civil war in Lebanon and record this painful experience in order not to fade away from national memory. Disillusioned by the geo-political scene in Lebanon and exasperated with the traditional artistic themes advocated by previous generations of war writers, Al-Shaykh introduced a complicated novel that reflects the collapse of the social, moral and political structure of her country. Due to its explicit sexuality and violent scenes of war-torn Beirut, the novel was banned in several Arab countries. In order to delineate the socio-political upheavals, internal disintegration and national fragmentation resulting from the war, the novelist incorporated taboo motifs in her canvas castigating a patriarchal society, which intensified the impacts of war.

To capture the civil war horrors, Al-Shaykh abandoned those traditional war stories, which glamorize war by the glorification of brave heroes. Instead, she underlined the urgency of a new mode, which could reflect the atrocities of real war as she witnessed it in Beirut. Thus, in her novel, Al-Shaykh rejected the linear development of character, the sense of order and progression integral to traditional war novel. The horrific scenes of the war left Lebanon in ruins. These scenes had a traumatic effect on the novelist. Haunted by the war memories for a long time, she lastly managed to overcome them by reliving the whole experience through the narrative of *The Story of Zahra*. The novel, published in 1980 was one of the most famous Arab women’s books of fiction that has received criticism and was translated into many languages.

In her protest against war, Virginia Woolf argues: “(We) daughters of educated men are between the devil and the deep sea. The question we put to you, lives of the dead, is how can we enter the professions and yet remain civilised human beings; human beings that is, who wish to prevent war” (Woolf 1966: 39)? Failing to cope up with the Lebanese war of attrition, Al-Shaykh, in *The Story of Zahra*, dealt with war as a metaphor of the human condition as a reflection of such a complete inversion of the world order. She wrote within the contours of the realistic realism, but she refined the convention by incorporating within it certain innovations in style and point of view as a part of the modernist strategy of representation. Al-Shaykh made the realistic novel more introspective in order to reflect the new reality of the civil war. She considered the novel form as a substitute for the world devastated in war. In other words, her art of story-telling was an attempt to forge a fictional world in order to create some sort of order, to substitute for the one she had lost in war. The novel captures the author’s fictional rendering of the annihilation and destruction of Lebanon evoking the issue of war as an inevitable consequence of moral degeneration and poses as a metaphor of a world where sectarian war senselessly massacres innocent citizens to achieve dubious political and religious ends.
The novelist, in *The Story of Zahra* succeeded, to a large extent, in creating a realistic fiction, by narrowing down the focus from a vast social canvas to the perception of a single character. In other words, Al-Shaykh abandoned the large social and political issues of war and concentrated on the impact of war on the psyche of a common lady, the protagonist of the novel, Zahra. Thus, Al-Shaykh attained success within the mode of realism by shifting her attention away from a broad socio-historical perspective to the internal consciousness of a single character. The complex nature of the Lebanese civil war and its consequences were captured by Al-Shayk in *The Story of Zahra* where the fictional perspective was narrowed for the sake of fulfilling more significant purposes in connection to the psychological turmoil experienced by the protagonist. The novelist exploited the image of war as total destruction to undercut the additional heroic ideal of war prevalent in Arab culture.

Further, Al-Shaykh adopted new modes of representation reminiscent of Bakhtin’s polyphonic paradigms in order to cohere the chaotic reality of the civil war. She rejected the fictional techniques of traditional war novels replacing them with new narrative polyphony in order to articulate the horrendous experience of war.

In fictional literature, voices of utterances can be referred to as either homophonic (single) or poly-phonic (multiple). Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, conceives of the polyphonic novel as having a hero who becomes subject and enters into dialogue with the author and the reader, rather than an object of authorial analysis or simply a spokesperson for the author’s completed monological worldview. In a related context, Bakhtin argues: “The consciousness of a character is given as someone else’s consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into an object, is not closed, does not become a simple object of the author’s consciousness” (Bakhtin 1984: 7). The author can create such a subject-character by representing the character not as an observed personality but as an observing and commenting consciousness. Bakhtin states: “We see not who he is, but how he is conscious of himself” (Bakhtin 1984: 99). The reader, according to Bakhtin, can experience such a visualization only if the author lets the character speak (Bakhtin 1984: 53). Although authors will no doubt inject their own voices, to some extent, at any literary work, they can prevent this incursion from overthrowing the dialogical character of the work’s polyphony by giving up the last word on each character to the character himself as the author of the *Story of Zahra* does in the novel.
CONCLUSION

Evidently, Arabic-Islamic cultural heritage abounds with war literature not only narrating Arab-Muslim wars against external enemies but also comprising war narratives viewing internal Arab-Arab conflicts. Since early Arab-Arab wars and bloody sectarian conflicts, starting with the battle of Karbala in the seventh century which divided the Muslim nation into two parties – Sunnis and Shiites - domestic conflicts among Arabs never came to an end. Currently, the Arab world is torn into pieces by civil wars extending from Iraq to Yemen. The political upheavals and atrocious events triggered by the post Arab Spring era 2011, leading to the disintegration of several Arab countries and turning them into failure states, is reminiscent of the Lebanese civil war. For more than fifteen years (1975-1990), Lebanon was systematically devastated by internal armed conflicts engaging various ethnic and political factions. The war ended nowhere and Lebanon, the beautiful touristic country on the shores of the Mediterranean was reduced into a wasteland.

The novel The Story of Zahra is a record of a woman's rejection of the discourse of war and the patriarchy it generates. Zahra, as an oppressed woman forced into silence by the tyrannical traditions of a masculine culture, rejects these restrictions and stresses her right to express her opposition to the authoritarian patriarchal

16 The massacre of Karbala which took place forty-eight years after the death of Prophet Muhammad could be traced back to the antagonism between Ali, Prophet Muhammad's cousin and Moawiya, his political rival and the founder of the Umayyad Dynasty. When Othman, the third Muslim Caliph was mysteriously assassinated, Ali became the Caliph of the Muslim people but the murder of Othman and the inability to identify his killers triggered a conflict between Ali and Moawiya, the governor of Damascus, because Ali believed that Moawiya was aware of the identities of the Caliph's assassins. After the murder of Ali, Moawiya became the Calipha and Ali's family accepted him as the leader of the Muslim nation on the condition that Moawiya's successor should be selected by the Muslim people through election. Nevertheless, Moawiya violated the agreement and appointed his corrupt son Yazid as a future Caliph. After the death of Moawiya, Yazid became the Caliph of the Muslim people. Some prominent figures from Mecca expressed rebellion against Yazid in addition to the people of Iraq who sent to Al-Hussein, inviting him to come from the Arabian Peninsula to establish a separatist Islamic State in their country. In response to their invitation Al-Hussein and about thirty of his followers including his family came from Mecca to Iraq riding horses and camels. When Al-Hussein and his company arrived at Karbala, southern of Iraq, the Iraqis betrayed him because they were intimidated by the powerful army of Abullah Ibn Zeyyad, who was appointed as the governor of Iraq by Yazid. After being besieged and prevented from food and water in Karbala, Al-Hussein was given two options, either to acknowledge Yazid as the Caliph of the Muslim people or face his army, more than thirty thousand soldiers. Al-Hussein appealed to the leaders of the enemy army to allow him to return to Mecca in peace, but his appeal was turned down. Determined not to surrender or acknowledge Yazid as the Caliph, Al-Hussein's decision to fight to the end was a suicidal mission. After being killed, the dead bodies of Al-Hussein, his families and followers were mutilated and his head was cut off and fixed on a spear and carried to be exhibited in Yazid's palace in Damascus.
system. In this regard, the novel indirectly suggests that women and men should work together towards a reformed patriotism, devoid of masculine chauvinism, war and violence. Hence, any attempt to stop it, without destroying the outrageous patriarchy, will be a weak and feeble effort carried out within a despotic patriarchal framework, as we observed in Zahra’s tragic death. Finally, Zahra’s actions, triggered by moral and civilized values symbolize a humanist statement in defense of peace, love and tolerance.

In a comment on the Story of Zahra, Isam M. Shihada argues that “the urgency to retrieve memory in many Arab women’s writings becomes the impetus to retell the stories of women silenced, marginalized, and excluded by their own communities. There is no doubt that with the retrieval of memory comes the resituating of the body from its condition as an object of male desire (Shihada 2008: 177). Mona Fayad argues that with the retrieval of memory inevitably comes the resituating of the body from its condition as an object of male desire, and “its transformation into a desiring force that rejects its subjugation to a narrative of erasure” (Fayad 1995: 148). Fayad points out: “Aware that such a process of mythification places woman outside the movement of history, Arab women writers have developed a number of strategies to produce a counter-discourse to such a historical representation. Such strategy is a move to reclaim history and specificity” (Fayad 1995: 147). Further, Nawal El-Saadawi explores the same notion from a different perspective. She suggests a new approach, which incorporates a re-reading of Arab history from the of Arab women’s perspective. The new reading will illustrate that the struggle of Arab women against sexual, religious and class oppression is not newly born, and that the Arab women’s movement doesn’t come from the void, and is not modelled on women’s movements in the West, but is evident throughout the course of Arab and Islamic history, extending over fourteen centuries.\(^\text{17}\)

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Razpravljanje o vojni in patriarhalnosti: praksa smrti in nasilja v Zahrini zgodbi

Grozljivi prizori libanonske državljanske vojne (1975-1990), zaradi katere je bila država v ruševinah, so travmatično vplivali na celoten narod, še posebej na libanonsko pisateljico Hanan al-Shaykh, ki so jo preganjali grozljivi spomini na vojno, dokler jih ni premagala s podoživljanjem celotne izkušnje v svojem izjemnem romanu Zahrina zgodba. Razočarana nad političnim dogajanjem med vojno in razburjena nad tradicionalnimi umetniškimi temami, ki so jih zagovarjale prejšnje generacije vojnih pisateljev, je al-Shaykova zavrnila linearni razvoj lika, občutek reda in napredka, ki so bili sestavni del vojne literature v arabskem svetu. Namesto tega je z ustvarjanjem edinstvenega romana prikazala grozote vojne, libanonski tragediji dala mitske razsežnosti in jo spremenila v več kot le zgodo-vinski dogodek.

Ključne besede: Hanan al-Shayk, vojna, Libanon, patriarhalnost