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THE STORY OF ZAHRA AND ITS CRITICS

Feminism and agency at war

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For the first time, about three-quarters of the way through Hanan al-Shaykh’s Hikayat Zahra (The Story of Zahra) — and so several months into the civil war ravaging Beirut in 1975 — Zahra climbs the stairs of an abandoned apartment building to the landing where the neighborhood sniper passes his afternoons, and the two have sex. The passage reads:

His voice moved closer, and with it his body. 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 quickly, shuddering briefly in his spasm of pleasure. Then he stood up, wiped himself off at his trouser opening and began to tug 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.

This scene has had a curious critical afterlife in English, providing a relief of how female Arab characters are read through vectors of victimhood and pleasure under the gaze of Western imperialism.

Global feminism’s often-teleological theories of women’s agency undermine how we read Arab women’s writing. This chapter is intended for use in the classroom, to be read by students and their teachers in courses on women’s writing, the Arabic novel, war literature, translation, and American feminism; and invites students and teachers to take The Story of Zahra as an opportunity for closer reading. I argue that a focus on this stairwell scene’s changing critical afterlife can help students understand their own responses to the text, and in turn the stakes of several decades of feminist debate in the West as it encounters Arabic literature. The Story of Zahra offers a case study in which the hesitations of a piece of fiction both warn against the imposition of a reader’s politics of feminism, and yet seem persistently also to stage those very critical tendencies.

An influential and pioneering feminist reading of women’s writing of the Lebanese civil war, Miriam Cooke’s War’s Other Voices (1987), inspired many of the critics who would read the stairwell scene after her. Cooke interprets the stairwell encounter as one in which Zahra “decided to go where no one had dared … There she met the sniper, Sami, who raped her.” Cooke revises this reading slightly in 1995, describing Zahra as “crazy and alienated,” stating that she “decided to enter the fray” and so pays a visit to the sniper, who “rapes her.” Roger Allen makes a similar argument in The Arabic Novel, adjudicating that “their first encounter constitutes a rape,” while a number of other prominent critics have followed in this reading. In 1990, Evelyn Accad, and in the years to follow Muhsin al-Musawi as well as historian Samir Khalaf, would all read this scene as rape in influential books addressing contemporary Arabic literature in Lebanon.

By these readings, Zahra is a victim. However, she is also “mesmerized” by the sniper, as Rana Kabbani has it in her 1988 review of the English translation of The Story of Zahra, figuring Zahra as a 30-year-old woman with a “habit as pernicious as any addiction” of “sleep walk[ing] up to the rooftop … in order to offer him her body.” Cooke and Kabbani, when they describe Zahra as “crazy” or “mesmerized,” do not attend to why Zahra climbs those stairs to the sniper’s perch. Kabbani cites instead Zahra’s “passivity,” seeing Zahra as “a victim of her circumstances,” one in which she “does not take pleasure.” Kabbani ends the review essay “long[ing] for a different sort of heroism to emerge … one who is less a passive victim.” We understand from Kabbani that in The Story of Zahra, Zahra does not “transform her destiny through her own actions.”

Charles Larson in a 1991 article entitled “The Fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh, Reluctant Feminist,” seems to concur with the readings of Cooke, Kabbani, and others, describing Zahra as “directionless” and “little more than a victim,” visiting the sniper each afternoon “for reasons that initially make little sense to her.”9 Victimized, pleasureless, “ever controlled by the people around her,” in this stairwell encounter, one that ultimately bears deeply on both the end of Zahra’s life as well as that of The Story of Zahra, the tragic character of Zahra the victim leaves in her critical wake an aura of agency.

By the mid-1990s, feminism’s take on Zahra in the stairwell would dramatically shift. Replacing a “crazy,” “mesmerized” Zahra with one of political and erotic agency. As a historical register of critical responses, the stairwell scene yields something of a paradox. No longer legible as “crazy and alienated,” critics such as Joseph Zeidan in his 1995 Arab Women Novelists write of a Zahra who “experiences her first real sexual pleasure with Sami, the sniper,” focusing on a scene of orgasm and its part in “Zahra’s plans.” Here one meets an3 deeply agentive Zahra: she “brings about their relationship and she remains in control of it for most of the
story after this point [...] Zahra and the sniper are equals in this relationship, and they are in a war zone [...] It is the only time she has ever been in a position of power over her body and sexual activity.”12 “In control,” “in a position of power,” Zeidan reads Zahra as she climbs the familiar stairs to the sniper’s perch as not a sleepwalking addict or a crazy, alienated rape victim, but as the sniper’s “equal,” a woman with “power over her body and sexual activity.” In 2001, Ann Marie Adams goes further: it is with the sniper that Zahra felt “ecstasy for the first time.”13 Samira Aghacy, also writing that year, sees wartime Beirut as “giv [ing] Zahra license to do as she pleases,” and reads her initial afternoon with the sniper as “the first time in her life that she has had an orgasm.”14 Boutaina Shaaban’s recent book, Voices Revealed: Arab Women Novelist, 1898-2000, despite its intellectual indebtedness to cooke, breaks with her reading of this scene, hewing closer to Aghacy and others and seeing this as “the first time in her life she feels really alive, as the sniper is the first man to awaken her passion.”15

A reading of victimhood in the late 1980s and early 1990s is — as the century nears its end, as critics read Zahra’s encounter with the sniper as one driven by Zahra’s agency — resisting both war and received notions of women’s action. Aghacy for her part is careful to point out that Zahra’s visits with the sniper are not only a moment of intense pleasure for Zahra, but also “a willed attempt on Zahra’s part at subverting an imposed social order.”16 Desire is for Aghacy “a revolutionary act”: “an articulate, erotic, and individualistic self is constructed that is strongly opposed to and in conflict with patriarchal constructions of femininity.”17 Kababni’s 1988 with that Zahra be a different kind of heroine, “less a passive victim,” able instead to “transform her destiny through her own actions,” seems to have been answered by critics like Aghacy, Shaaban, Adams, and Zeidan, reading an agentic, rebellious protagonist who — the scandal of it — takes her pleasure through her politics with the neighborhood sniper in the late fall afternoons of 1975 Beirut.

These paradoxically opposed readings of The Story of Zahra — both those that render Zahra a victim of repeated rapes, and those that see a defiant embrace of ecstasy in a stairwell — read Zahra, as Aghacy puts it, “in conflict with patriarchal constructions of femininity.” The patriarchy is either raping her, or she is acting against it and in the name of freedom. Many a student, in my experience, shares this predisposition for reading both The Story of Zahra, and Arab women’s writing more generally, against a backdrop of oppressive Arab patriarchy. Marilyn Booth, reviewing Accad’s 1990 Sexuality and War: Literary Marks of the Middle East, notes Accad’s sense of her academic work as an extension of “nonviolent resistance buttressed by reordered notions of sexuality, notions she feels are crucial for building a lasting peace in Lebanon.”18 Accad and others offer critiques of Arab women’s writing and the lives of their mostly female protagonists as a form of resistance, seeing in the violence of civil war Beirut a feminist opportunity to theorize “gendered differentiation” through the “ways sexuality is inscribed in Arab cultures and women’s struggles to free themselves of received expectations.”19 Literary criticism, for Accad, cooke and many other readers of Arab women’s writing, is a way to do feminist politics, to oppose the patriarchal order, whether Zahra is read through a prism of victimhood or agentic pleasure.

How it is possible to sustain such radically divergent readings of Zahra is something The Story of Zahra itself has already staged, with significant bearing on the American classroom. The first part of the novel is set in the months leading up to the war, as Zahra moves between her past and present, and between Beirut, a village in South Lebanon, and a community of Lebanese expatriates in an African village. The difficulty of interpreting what motivates Zahra structures the first-person narrative in Book One as it cycles from Zahra, to Hashem (her uncle), to Majed (briefly her husband in Africa), and back to Zahra, with each shift in voice marked by chapter breaks. Readers soon discover that with each new narrator, the question of why Zahra acts as she does remains both pressing and difficult for any of the characters, including Zahra, to answer.

Nevertheless, they try. When Zahra collapses and is hospitalized in Africa, Majed relates: “Zahra was suffering from a minor shock, [Hashem] told me, at being separated from her family, and for this she was undergoing treatment. It made me laugh up my sleeve. I never tried to tell Hashem the true reason for her disturbance as I saw it.”20 Majed maintains rather that the reason for Zahra’s condition is that she is “a liar, frightened of her own shame, and making a pretense of her remorse and regret.”21 These men are interpreting Zahra’s actions, narrating what motivates her when she will not. The Arabic is more explicit than the English’s “Shame,” directing us to a faḍḥah,22 a publicly scandalous and scandalizing act, by which Majed means the loss of Zahra’s virginity prior to their marriage agreement.23 Here too, Zahra is either crazy, or she is a rebellious pleasure-seeker courting faḍḥah.

Majed reveals his diagnosis of Zahra during a conversation with Hashem to which Zahra is a silent witness, if also the first-person narrator. Though Majed begins the conversation, “With Zahra’s permission, I have to make certain matters clear,” the text moves immediately to Majed’s account without any accession by Zahra.24 Upon hearing of this alleged faḍḥah, Hashem immediately dismisses the idea that it could be the root of Zahra’s condition, telling Majed that “the question of whether or not [Zahra] was a virgin was beside the point.”25 The diagnosis focusing on faḍḥah is revoked, however, only to shift the parameters of diagnosis to make space for yet another interpretation of Zahra’s state. Hashem, sure now that Zahra must be in love, tells Zahra to let him help her marry her former lover. Writing over Zahra’s silent silence, Majed and Hashem construct a chain of narratives explaining Zahra’s condition; they both interpret and critique. Voiceless, Zahra silently asks herself in the midst of her uncle’s questioning: “what chance did I have of making him see things otherwise? ... How could I express it in simple terms and say that this was something which really had nothing to do with me — that, from beginning to end, I had been a mere spectator (ṣahīḥah)?”26 A spectator, a witness, Zahra silently attends the narration of herself: The Story of Zahra.

It is not fear that keeps her from speaking, though the reader of the English translation — the one most frequently taught in the American classroom — might not know that, as two lines in the Arabic that get close to explaining Zahra’s
actions are missing from Peter Theroux's translation, done in cooperation with Hanan al-Shaykh: "La uridu an aotawwala iila innah ar ukhrat. Uridu an akina al-mar'ah alallat ta'rifa thata uridu an atmaka Afrigiyat: "I do not want to change into another woman. I want to be the woman that you know and I want to leave Africa." Following the Arabic, there is the suggestion of a causal relationship between Zahra's silence, her inability to tell her uncle what she is feeling, and her remaining al-mar'ah alallat ta'rifa, the woman he, and we, know. Silence is presented by Zahra in her first-person Arabic narrative as constitutive of the image others have of her and of who she wants to be, extending to our image and knowledge of Zahra as well as we read The Story of Zahra.

Attenive to this silence, Saba Ghandour points readers to how Zahra becomes the object of narration, an effect that plays on the double sense of the title in both Arabic and English: the story of Zahra. Rather than finding in Zahra a teller of her own tale, Ghandour reads characters such as Hashem and Majed as discursively "construct[ing]" Zahra "as a voiceless entity, a woman 'who cannot speak to anything,'" showing how Zahra is "made into an object or an entity that is constantly 'spoken for.'" It is Zahra's own silence that enables the paradoxical interpretations of Zahra by Majed and Hashem. Here, we can read The Story of Zahra as a novel that warns against the hazards of interpretation, but does so through its textuality, insisting on close(s) reading in order to approach the significant stakes at work in the act of interpretation.

Zahra's objectification as docile subject—in an Arab women writers classroom, perhaps reminiscent of Delacroix tableau on the cover of Assia Djebar's Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement and the essay on the Orientalist gaze it contains—has a long imperial history. In 2003, Anastasia Valassopoulos read The Story of Zahra alongside al-Shaykh's later Beirut Blues and Mai Ghoussoub's Leaving Beirut, charting a literary and critical tradition of "silencing ... the Middle Eastern woman through the persistence of the Orientalist fantasy," a gesture that Valassopoulos sees repeated by cooke and Accad in the tendency of "both critics [to] pay little attention to Zahra's actual words." Valassopoulos redirects her reader in an effort to "piece together a logic underlying the apparent confusion and disorientation attributed to Zahra.

When in 1995 cooke writes of a "crazy, alienated" Zahra, that same sentence ends reading her as a victim-cum-"combatant," a role she is figured as hystERICally maintaining through successive rapes by the sniper. Valassopoulos reads instead a nexus of pleasure, desire, and masochism in a time of war, offered in response to what she terms a "re-Orientalization" of Arab women by literary critics, whereby "they are re-interpreted to an audience that cannot accept, and presumably cannot be persuaded to accept, an autonomous Arab woman ... rather than post Zahra as the agent of her actions, she is presented as a victim of war and of her mental faculties."

In an effort to attend to the text itself, to the "actual words" on the page, Valassopoulos takes Zahra for neither a repeat rape victim nor a political combatant, but rather an "autonomous Arab woman." While she condemns readings in which "female protagonists are denied a sexual experience by their critics and made to carry the burden of political foresight," the Zahra that Valassopoulos reads still rages against the Arab patriarchy. Loosed from political burden, martyrdom, and victimhood, Valassopoulos celebrates Zahra's "freedom": "Zahra's visits to the sniper symbolize her ability to be free from regulatory norms that restrict her movements otherwise." Valassopoulos, though well aware that "it can be dangerous to propose a living feminism that can only flourish in the context of the destruction of ethical and social norms," nevertheless maintains that "normal society is deadening for women." Mobilizing for a reading of Zahra that rejects not only victimhood and political burden, but also "regulatory norms that restrict" women, Valassopoulos plots Zahra on a feminist telos of liberation and freedom, this time through the pleasure of sexual experience.

These readings cohere around a Zahra who sets out one Beirut afternoon in 1975 to shock the lone and stoic, almost archetypal figure of the neighborhood sniper, joining many of my students in registering their alarm. In her work on Lebanese women writers, Agniesz presents "the city [of Beirut] has represented a liberating experience for women generally since the 1960s," and that beginning in the 1960s "the rigid taboo and traditions inherited and represented by the nuclear family, the father, as well as by the rural setting" were being superseded. Beginning in 1975, however, the matter of taboo and norms becomes more complicated, and this "liberating urban experience ... became inextricably bound up with the war experience." The taboo-breaking literary antics of Beirut's women writers during the 1960s, represented by works such as Laylah Ba'llabaki's erotic 1963 short story "Safiat hanin iila al-qamar" ("Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon") and its explicit engagement of female arousal and pleasure, are deployed by Zahra in the midst of civil war in order to shock her audience, the sniper. Zahra is looking to stage a faḍīlah; as readers, we are reading acts of performance, interpretation, reception. Norms have collapsed into a state of civil war, and with them "the rigid taboo and traditions inherited and represented by the nuclear family, the father," and indeed, by Lebanese women's writing of the 1960s. Through Zahra's encounter in the stairwell, shock though it might its readers into a paradox of interpretation—Is she crazy? Was she raped? Is this a political plan? Private erotic?—in the "actual words" of the text, the paradox rests in her work to reinstate norms through faḍīlah, a contravention of taboo that can only take place if those norms and taboos are legible, if the patriarchy (or even the feminists) are still maintaining some sort of order.

Having once seen the sniper while hanging out her aunt's wash, Zahra is vexed by the sniper's image in the newspaper: "I tried to wipe the image clean and think how should I act. Should I throw a hand-grenade at him? Should I learn to use a gun and aim it at his heart?" Zahra becomes obsessed with the sniper and with finding a way to act:

A strange idea took place in my mind. I wondered what could possibly divert the sniper from aiming his rifle and stare him to the point where he might
open his mouth instead? Perhaps a troupe of dancers would do it? Perhaps a gypsy with a performing monkey? Or perhaps a naked woman, passing across his field of fire? Maybe if such a sight crossed his vision he would pause for just one moment and wonder whether the world has indeed gone mad in the midst of this war.  

The Arabic makes the project more explicit, asking if such a shocking sight might lead the sniper to wonder “hal janna huwa bi-qasilihi li- stabil?,” “had he gone crazy in his sniping of the innocent?”

Zahra returns one afternoon to her Aunt Najiba’s apartment, her aunt having left Beirut for their village in the south, to see if she might be able to “possibly divert the sniper from aiming his rifle.” Walking out onto the balcony, she finds herself surrounded by several women, who ask her, “what is the young lady doing there?” Zahra hastily grabs a towel and runs inside, later reflecting on the relative success of her foray out on the balcony as she thinks, “I had got him to look at me as a man would look at a woman in peacetime.” A few lines later she adds, “I should have asked him to lay down his arms.” Zahra’s afternoon encounter in the stairwell is an extension of her will to break the war frame so that the sniper might look at Zahra “as a man would look at a woman in peacetime.”

Yet, however daring Zahra’s pursuit of the sniper is, however much pleasure she in the end derives from their afternoon together, and however many ineffective birth control pills she takes while sleeping with him, Zahra’s ultimate aim — to get the sniper to look at her “as a man would look at a woman in peacetime” — is one that sits uneasily with the model of rebellious agency championed by successive generations of feminist literary critics. “How a man looks at a woman in peacetime” is not what feminist critics read for: Valoisopoulos reads for an “autonomous Arab woman,” who for Agahy would be “strongly opposed to and in conflict with patriarchal constructions of femininity,” Kabbara “long[s] for a different sort of heroine to emerge,” and Acland’s literary criticism is part of a project of “non-violent resistance buttressed by reordered notions of sexuality.” Zahra, though, wants to be liberated from the war frame not into a transcendent feminist freedom, but rather to a state where the sniper is not a sniper, but a man who would look at her as he would a woman in peacetime. To the extent that Zahra is agentic, she is not raging against the patriarchy; what she is resisting is the collapse of the gendered status quo.

Read against Zahra’s normative gender roles of peacetime Beirut, the critical tendency to register shock at Zahra’s encounter with the sniper, to read it as anything from rape to ecstatic rapture, is where we can approach the horizon of the normative giving way to the taboo. Saba Mahmood challenges her readers to “problematize … the universality of the desire — central for liberal and progressive thought, and presupposed by the concept of resistance it authorizes — to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination.”

The readerly assumption of a “desire … to be free from relations of subordination” reads Zahra into a state of resistance that The Story of Zahra itself resists.

Zahra is, rather, invoking norms through her provocating of both the neighborhood’s sniper and her audience. Zahra can only elicit a sense of shock and scandal from the sniper if there are patriarchal norms to contravene, and her project cannot succeed unless it goes beyond their afternoon encounter and establishes a more enduring relationship that “inhabits” patriarchal norms: “Could I say I had been able to save anyone, even in those moments when we met and had intercourse? But I couldn’t even consider these to hold a reprieve of death for anyone. My visits only replaced his siesta.” A reprieve for Zahra, and in turn for wartime Beirut, would begin with a wedding.

Zahra dreams of a lasting peace; she is looking for an end to both the inner and the outer turmoil, and she locates salvation in the sniper, whom she wants to look at her as he would “a woman in peacetime.” When we turn away from a progressive feminism as critical frame to consider the words on the page, we find a pregnant Zahra who is neither a victim of the sniper’s repeated rapes, nor longing for a radical new feminist agency of politics and/or pleasure, but instead willing into wartime Beirut the normative gender roles of peacetime in the city. Confessing to the sniper that she is too far along in her pregnancy to abort, the sniper momentarily fulfills this fantasy, promising Zahra that he will visit her home the next day with his family. For Zahra, “[i]t seems as if the war has suddenly come to a stop with his promise that we will marry. Everything seems normal.” Zahra has no illusions about peacetime, given what she has witnessed at the foot of her mother and her lover’s bed, at the feet of her belt-wielding father in the kitchen, in the back room of a factory in Beirut, and in her marriage bed in Africa. Indeed, she has never even experienced sexual pleasure in peacetime. Yet faced with life in civil war Beirut, it is the “normal” of “how a man looks at a woman in peacetime” for which she longs, however untraditional her means of getting there.

The Story of Zahra is not looking for women’s liberation, even if critics and our students might be. In a 2005 interview, Hanan al-Shaykh objects to being read as a feminist writer: “I’m not talking about women’s liberation. I’m a novelist and I want to meet my artistic ends. People in the Arab world, but especially in the West, try to portray me as a feminist writer defending Arab women; they pigeonhole me.” Elizabeth Mckee, writing in 1996, testifies that this has been a source of enduring frustration not only for al-Shaykh, but others as well: “Several Arab women writers that I know (including Layli Alalbaki, Hanan al-Shaykh and Emily Nasralah), have expressed their irritation at the way in which Western feminist critics have appropriated their works and manipulated their contents to serve a feminist agenda.”

Reading The Story of Zahra as part of a project of “women’s liberation” and “feminist agency” reads Zahra as either a victim or a resistor to the patriarchy. This chapter invites a reading that would attend rather to the quiet narrative aporia surrounding a recitific Zahra, the challenge her will to be “look[ed] at [as] a woman in peacetime” presents to liberal feminist literary criticism in English, and what that all might have to do with the narrative conditions of war in Arabic.
Notes

2. Cooke 1988, 55.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 341.
10. Ibid., 15.
12. Ibid., 216.
15. Shaaban 2009, 123.
17. Ibid., 509.
19. Ibid., 18.
20. al-Shaykh 1988, 90.
21. Ibid., 89.
22. Ibid., 105.
23. My thinking on ḥādhak here is indebted to Tarek El-Aris’s discussion in Trials of Arab Modernity.
24. al-Shaykh 1988, 112.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 114.
27. Ibid., 134 (my translation).
29. Ibid., 240.
31. Ibid., 185.
32. Ibid., 187.
33. Ibid., 186.
34. Ibid., 187.
35. Ibid., 194.
36. Ibid., 190.
38. al-Shaykh 1988, 156.
39. Ibid., 157.
40. Ibid., 185 (my translation).
41. Ibid., 188.
42. Ibid., 159.
43. Ibid., 160.
44. Mahmood 2004, 10.
45. al-Shaykh 1988, 160.
46. Ibid., 212.
47. al-Shaykh 2005, 16.

Bibliography


