

# Hanan Al-Shaykh's *the Story of Zahra*: A Post-Modern Feminist Literary Criticism of Liberation through Madness

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**Abstract**— This paper investigates the notion of liberation through insanity in *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan Al-Shaykh. While many scholars and literary critics have explored domestic violence in literature, and notions of liberation through sexuality in *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan Al-Shaykh, the impact of domestic violence as a triggering factor in *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan Al-Shaykh which leads to liberation acted out in the context of madness has not been addressed. In order to investigate these aspects in the novel, this paper draws on the views of post-modern feminist literary criticism. This literary approach is crucial to highlighting the gender inequality. The analytical approach followed in this paper is that of thematic analysis. The paper mainly highlights the recurrent themes of physical violence and insanity. Then, the paper examines the content of the novel to support the argument about the association between insanity and liberation. Thus, three main issues are addressed: Domestic violence types and definitions, feminist theoretical views in relation to patriarchal authority, and notions of insanity in relation to liberation in feminist post-modern literary criticism. The main argument in this paper is that insanity is utilized as a tool directed towards liberation from male authority and oppression towards women; hence, the need arises to replace the recurrent term 'madness' in *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan Al-Shaykh with 'mental rebellion against male control and oppression'.

**Keywords**— Violence, male authority, insanity and liberation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims at investigating physical domestic violence that has been highlighted in Hanan Al-Shaykh's novel *The Story of Zahra* (Al-Shaykh, 1995). The impact of this form of domestic violence on the protagonist's relationships with men in her life is also highlighted. Literature on the various forms of domestic violence is highlighted (Chalk and King, 1998; Perry and DiLillo, 2007; Latham, 2009). These forms include physical violence (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Volpe, 1996; Saltzman, Fanslow, McMahon et al., 1999;

UNICEF, 2006; Kelly and Johnson, 2008; Meyersfeld, 2008; Haddad et al., 2011; Sun, Su and Wu, 2011; Mehraein, 2013), verbal violence (Mouradian, 2000: n.p.; Carlson, Worden, Van Ryn et al., 2003; United Nations Population Fund, 2008), financial (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Pollet, 2011), and mental abuse (United Nations Population Fund, 2008). The literature covered in this paper also involves post-modern feminist views and criticism in relation to domestic violence against women (Felman, 1975; Showalter, 1985, 1991, 1995, 1997; Senn, 2002; Meyersfeld, 2003; Berberoglu, 2005; Hanser, 2007; McCue, 2008; Herandl, 2009; Wallach, Weingram and Avitan, 2010; Abudi, 2011; Inglis and Thorpe, 2012; Anderson, 2012; Finley, 2013; hooks, 2015). Much research has been done to analyse *The Story of Zahra* in relation to sexuality (Accad, 1990; Abudi, 2011). Yet the investigation of her liberation through what is labelled in the novel as 'madness' is limited. Hence; this paper focused on the latter context to investigate this aspect of liberation in the novel. Therefore, this paper will be divided into eight sections. The initial section provides the abstract which is followed by an introduction to the content of the paper. In the third section, the methodological approach followed to investigate domestic violence aspects in the novel will be discussed. In the fourth section, however, the paper addresses the complexity of domestic violence, showing the diversity of its patterns. Section five discusses the feminist literary theoretical context through which the analysis of the novel is conducted. Then, the sixth section provides a brief summary of the novel, followed by an investigation of reflections of patriarchal authority throughout the literary work in relation to the protagonist's character in the seventh section. Finally, the eighth section concludes the paper presented. In the following section, the paper will discuss the methodological approach followed to conduct this paper.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This paper relies primarily on secondary data. The data drawn upon is mainly derived from books and scholarly articles centered on the identification of violence, and

books and articles that discuss domestic violence in relation to English literature. The literary work analysed through the lens of contemporary post-modern feminist literary criticism is *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan Al-Shaykh. The choice of feminist literary criticism as the theoretical context is due to the importance of highlighting the impact of gender differences in the investigation of domestic violence in literature. With regard to the analytical approach followed throughout this paper to discuss the aspects of oppression in *The Story of Zahra*, it is that of thematic analysis. The process of thematic analysis, as a method of qualitative analysis, is a process in which the researcher gives 'minimal attention to the structures selected by the narrator to tell her/his story, function or contextual details of the story' (Frost, 2011: 108). Rather, a researcher employing thematic analysis starts the analysis by reading the raw data he or she has in order to familiarize himself or herself with the content of the data (Frost, 2011). Secondly, the researcher codes the data at hand (Frost, 2011). That is, the researcher pinpoints the main ideas or thoughts that are discussed in each sequence of content words. Thirdly, the researcher builds 'a set of themes by looking for patterns and meaning produced in the data, labelling and grouping them in connection with the theoretical framework of the research' (Frost, 2011: 108). Finally, the researcher gathers the different narratives under each highlighted theme and compares between the different narratives categorized under each theme (Frost, 2011). In this paper, the raw material from the novel was read in order to highlight the forms of violence and oppression that the protagonist experienced. Physical violence and sexual violence were mainly highlighted. Then, this paper provided comments on those forms in the light of patriarchal cultural values pinpointing their impact on the protagonist's character and relationships with men. After having explained the methodological approach, this paper will proceed to explore the literature on various forms of domestic violence.

### III. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: DEFINITIONS AND PATTERNS

Domestic violence is a 'global phenomenon' (UNICEF, 2006: 5; Mehraein, 2013), as 'more than half the world's women experience violence in intimate relationships. The abuse is severe, debilitating, and deadly' (Meyersfeld, 2008: 62). Domestic violence became a recognizable issue in the West in the 1970s (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Kelly and Johnson, 2008; Sun, Su and Wu, 2011). Since then, numerous attempts have been made by researchers and organizations to define the different types of domestic violence and investigate their impact on people's lives (Volpe, 1996). During the early 1970s, western research

on domestic violence focused mainly on addressing physical violence:

When violence between intimate partners emerged as a recognizable issue in our society in the mid-1970s . . . , empirical knowledge of this social, psychological, and legal phenomenon was very limited. As advocates for women organized shelters across the nation to provide safety and assistance for abused women, clinical information emerged that described patterns of severe physical and emotional abuse. The victims were most notably described by Walker (1979) and others as 'battered women,' and the male perpetrators were labelled 'batterers.' (Kelly and Johnson, 2008: 476)

Yet, with time, other forms of domestic violence than battering were also explored in the literature on domestic violence. On the whole, domestic violence is a term that includes various forms of aggressive behaviour within the family such as wife abuse (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Latham, 2009), child abuse<sup>1</sup> (Perry and DiLillo, 2007) and elder abuse<sup>2</sup> (Chalk and King, 1998). Wife abuse in particular might be carried out in a multitude of practices ranging from emotional, physical and sexual assault (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Haddad et al., 2011) to verbal (United Nations Population Fund, 2008), financial (Dobash and Dobash, 1992), and mental abuse (United Nations Population Fund, 2008).

Many attempts on the part of western and non-western scholars and researchers investigating domestic violence have been directed towards clarifying its patterns. With regard to physical abuse, western and non-western

<sup>1</sup>Most statutes define child abuse in terms of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Physical child abuse is the physical injury of a child, resulting from, but not limited to, strikes, shoving, shaking, biting, burning, poking, twisting limbs, and bodily throwing. Child sexual abuse can occur as a single act or a series of abusive behaviors. It can occur in a single event or over the course of many years. Child neglect occurs when a caretaker by act or lack of actions places the child in a dangerous situation' (Bernades and Wallace, 2007: 704).

<sup>2</sup>Elder abuse is conduct that results in the physical, psychological, or material neglect, harm, or injury to an elderly person. This definition includes abuse by family members as well as institutional abuse. The term material in this definition refers to the exploitation of the elderly person's financial resources. An elderly person is usually someone over the age of sixty-five' (Bernades and Wallace, 2007: 704).

scholars and researchers have identified domestic physically abusive behaviour as

The intentional use of physical force with the potential for causing death, disability, injury, or harm. Physical violence includes, but is not limited to: scratching, pushing, shoving, throwing, grabbing, biting, choking, shaking, poking, hair-pulling, slapping, punching, hitting, burning, use of a weapon (gun, knife, or other object), and use of restraints or one's body, size, or strength against another person. Physical violence also includes coercing other people to commit any of the above acts. (Saltzman, Fanslow, McMahon et al., 1999: 11-12)

Verbal domestic violence may involve 'insults, criticism, ridicule, name calling, discounting, and discrediting' (Carlson, Worden, Van Ryn et al., 2003: 3). Emotional domestic violence has been defined as

the use of verbal and nonverbal acts which symbolically hurt the other or the use of threats to hurt the other . . . behaviors that can be used to terrorize the victim. . .that do not involve the use of physical force . . . the direct infliction of mental harm and threats or limits to the victim's well-being . . . and . . . an ongoing process in which one individual systematically diminishes and destroys the inner self of another. The essential ideas, feelings, perceptions, and personality characteristics of the victim are constantly belittled (Mouradian, 2000: n.p.).

The definition of emotional domestic violence stated above makes a clear distinction between verbal and emotional domestic violence. While behaviours included under these two patterns might intersect in terms of their ability to hurt a woman's feelings, emotional domestic violence might be carried out in a non-verbal manner.

Finally, financial domestic violence refers to a form of abuse that is directed at exercising control over women by means of preventing them from accessing the financial resources they require in order to carry on with their daily lives (Pollet, 2011). In the next section, the difference between various feminist views on domestic violence will be discussed.

#### IV. THEORETICAL CONTEXT: FEMINIST VIEWS ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Feminist critics have centred their efforts on questioning and combating the sexist domination of men in the private as well as the public sphere (hooks, 2015). They mainly reject patriarchal cultural beliefs that support inferiorizing and marginalizing women (hooks, 2015). A particular aspect of inequality against women that feminists focus on is domestic violence including wife abuse. In the context of domestic violence, feminist theory 'provides the basis and justification for the existence of domestic violence throughout history. The theory posits that intimate partner violence grows out of inequality within marriage (and other intimate relationships modelled on marriage) and reinforces male power and female subordination within the home' (McCue, 2008: 15).

Yet, feminist theoretical views in relation to domestic violence are far from unified (Mc-Cue, 2008). Feminists investigating domestic violence against women have developed many theoretical perspectives, including radical feminist, Marxist feminist, and Arab feminist ones. During the second-wave of the feminist movement, extending from the 1960s to the 1980s, both radical feminists and Marxist feminists introduced theoretical frameworks through which they endeavoured to investigate the reasons behind women's oppression. Radical feminists had a pioneering role in drawing public attention to the severity of domestic violence against women. Radical feminists' focal point was to investigate this phenomenon in association with male-dominating patriarchal values (Hanser, 2007). Patriarchy is, from a radical feminist perspective, a social unit of power. The advocates of patriarchal values, radical feminists argue, utilize various forms of violence against women in order to reinforce men's power and social control (Hanser, 2007: 326). According 'to radical feminists, women, as women, regardless of class, race, ethnicity, and other differences, are vulnerable to rape, domestic violence, and homicide at the hands of their intimate partners' (Berberoglu, 2005: 143-144).

However, radical feminist views in relation to domestic violence against women have been subjected to the criticism of feminist theoreticians such as liberal and Marxist feminists. The 'flaws that critics of Radical feminism discerned are fairly obvious. Critics alleged that the central idea of patriarchy as the root and cause of all things was overstated' (Inglis and Thorpe, 2012: n.p.). Instead of restricting the causes of domestic violence against women to the power of patriarchal cultural ideologies, Marxist feminists proposed that 'women's subordination was the result of a system in which men held and controlled most private property in society' (Hanser, 2007: 323). For Marxist feminists, patriarchy is not the sole source of women's oppression. Marxist

feminists maintain that gender roles 'are built around the economic system whereby men are perceived as the breadwinners. When they feel they cannot be successful as providers, the result might be violence against women as a means of reasserting feelings of power and control' (Finley, 2013: 389). Finley elaborates saying that research 'does bear out that women are at highest risk for lethal abuse when they are employed and their abuser is unemployed, suggesting this situation is perceived as a threat to the man' (Finley, 2013: 389). Some researchers argue that concentrating on the individual *per se* has diverted the scope of the investigation of this phenomenon from the social interest in exploring and combating domestic violence against women to focusing on the individual, which in turn has resulted in an increase in the tendency to blame the victim instead of the perpetrator who has initiated the assault (Senn, 2002: 483). Yet, despite the differences between radical and Marxist feminist views, both do not dismiss the impact of patriarchal ideology on women's oppression especially when investigating domestic violence, an aspect that will be the focal point of this paper.

## V. SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

Al-Shaykh celebrates the liberation of Zahra, the protagonist, who rebels against the constraints of not only her family, but also the conservative Muslim, Lebanese society in which she was imprisoned. The novel highlights the various forms of violence that the protagonist endured such as physical and sexual violence, portraying their impact on Zahra's personality. Overwhelmed by her mother's abuse as she used to force the child Zahra to accompany her whenever she met her lover, and by her father's brutal physical violence, Zahra begins to exert harm upon herself by scratching her pimpled face: 'It was as if my fingers had to go to work before I could say a word. Even when I was about to respond to some question, my fingers would begin probing' (Al-Shaykh, 1995: 24). As her sense of violence and oppression escalates, the protagonist's exercise of self-harm worsens. Describing her self-destructing behavior Zahra elaborates: 'My fingers would search one out, touch it, peel off the dry skin, then squeeze it out of existence. I would not stop until I found a drop of blood on my finger' (Al-Shaykh, 1995: 24). Zahra's control over her mind and body fade due to her continuous traumatic experiences with her parents, and she ends up entrapped in an abusive sexual relationship with a married man named Malek, a man who deceived her and pretended that he actually liked her. She has two abortions and experiences a nervous breakdown. Eventually, her family sends her off to West Africa, where an uncle once active in Lebanese politics now lives in exile. Haunted by her previous experiences with men, mainly her abusive father and Malek, Zahra

was terrified by her uncle's affection and attention. She chooses the bathroom in her uncle's house to be her hiding place. In her attempt to escape her fear, she accepts a marriage proposal that she receives from a local man who also comes from Lebanese descent. Yet, the marriage falls apart as the man finds Zahra's behavior intolerable:

I saw and heard Majed beating his head with his hands as he told my Uncle Hashem how he was at wit's end...The day before yesterday they saw her walking round the outside of the house, carrying the radio, playing it turned up so loud that God himself could have heard it. Madame Zahra carrying a radio, dancing in the street. Yes, by heavens! Even gypsies would be ashamed to do such a thing (Al-Shaykh, 1995: 99)

Consequently, Zahra chooses to return to Lebanon in an attempt to settle down. Yet, the violent status of the war-shredded country places greater pressure on her. She moves with her parents to their native village. Torn between her memories of parental violence and the violence of the surrounding warfare, Zahra attempts to find peace and comfort. Yet, her dream is never to be fulfilled amidst the turmoil of war. After having provided a brief summary of the novel, the following section will address the traces of patriarchal authority in the novel.

## VI. PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY IN THE STORY OF ZAHRA

This section attempts to provide a discussion on male authority as portrayed through the behaviour of Zahra's father and how this authority affected Zahra's relationships with Malek and her husband. In the introductory part of this section, this paper will attempt to define 'patriarchy' and highlight its complexity. Then, it will discuss the impact of this authority on Zahra's relationships with males. Wallach, Weingram and Avitan (2010) define patriarchal or male authority as follows: 'Patriarchic societies believe in male dominance. In these societies, force used by a man to control his wife is seen as legitimate' (Wallach, Weingram and Avitan, 2010: 1285).

However, patriarchal values are far from unified (Meyersfeld, 2003). Therefore, it is important to highlight the work that has been done on the varying effects of culture on domestic violence against women. In the African context, Wallach, Weingram and Avitan (2010) highlight Ethiopian society as reflecting an example of a traditional patriarchal society where gender roles that support male dominance over women are the norm, and any potential deviation from or rebellion against this socio-cultural behavioural framework constitutes a solid

ground for the use of domestic violence against women (Wallach, Weingram and Avitan, 2010: 1287). Other research that has been done to discuss the association between patriarchal cultural values and beliefs and the exercise of domestic violence against women has drawn particular attention to the Chinese society. For instance, a study conducted by Parish, Wang, Laumann et al (2004) investigating Chinese culture also affirmed the direct impact of predominant patriarchal cultural views on the likelihood of women's encountering domestic violence.

With regard to the portrayal of Zahra, the protagonist is victimized physically by her father from an early stage in the novel: 'All I knew was that I was afraid of my father, as afraid of the blows he dealt her as I was of those he dealt me' (Al-Shaykh, 1995: 15). Abudi (2011) discusses Zahra's dysfunctional abusive relationship with her father saying: 'The father is a tyrannical figure who terrorizes the household with his violent temper and leather belt' (Abudi, 2011: 286). The physical violence the protagonist endures from her father figure impacts her choice of her future male companions/husband negatively: 'Zahra feels alienated and isolated from all her family members, who are united only in their fear and hatred of the brutal father. Characteristically, this dysfunctional family fails to provide its members with the basic modeling and interpersonal skills necessary for forging close ties with significant others' (Abudi, 2011: 286). Abudi continues 'As a result, she drifts from one man to another, from Malek to Majed to the sniper, all of whom exploit her sexually and push her closer to the brink of self-annihilation' (Abudi, 2011: 286). Malek ended up walking out on her, would not commit to her, and forced her to have an abortion. From a feminist literary perspective, such behaviour is a form of overt abuse through the exercise of which a woman is denied full control over her body (Showalter, 1971). Zahra describes her attempts to escape her fear after the abortion incident saying: 'I erase from my mind my return home after the abortion when I kept my feet and thighs pressed tightly together so that my father would not discover my secret' (Al-Shaykh, 1995: 30). However, the author's choice of the words 'I erase from my mind' in the aforementioned quotation is important to the interpretation and understanding of the protagonist's behaviour and state of mind. While some literary critics argue that mental illness or madness is a way to marginalize women (Showalter, 1985; Anderson, 2012), others consider mental illness as a way to liberate women from male oppression and predominant constraints (Felman, 1975).

One of the most prominent western feminist literary critics who has explored the issue of 'madness' in English literature is Elaine Showalter. Her works in this field include *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture* (1985), *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and*

*Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (1990), *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (1991), and *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (1997). Showalter argues that madness in English literature has been used to undermine and marginalize women. She explains that women 'within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind' (Showalter, 1995: 3-4).

Earlier, in the context of the early twentieth century literary criticism, Sarah Anderson, in her recent book *Readings of Trauma, and the Body* (2012) argues that the 'madwoman is a unique character— a marginalized figure within an already marginalized group' (Anderson, 2012: 63). Madness is thus utilized to pinpoint a deviation from the norm, the acceptable, or in other words the logic of men. From a feminist perspective, such discourse of binary opposition has been critiqued by feminist critics Elaine Showalter, Julia Kristiva, and Luce Irigaray as intensifying women's marginalization in literature. These critics stress the necessity for feminists to keep their 'feminist voice' when analysing literary works. This voice must be distinct from that supporting predominant patriarchal values (Faris, 2004), one that highlights the importance of the experiences and struggling of women.

Thus rather than devaluating women through placing them under the category of 'the mentally ill', some feminist literary critics argue that mental illness could provide women with power. Herndl (2009: 304), for instance, argues that this group of feminist theorists considers mental illness as a 'resistance' or rejection to male oppression and domination. It is thus an 'an expression of feminine power'. The power she refers to is derived from refusing to succumb to cultural norms, ones that normalize depicting men's behaviour as the valued and women's actions, if different, as the devalued abnormal.

Going back to Al Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* and in the light of the aforementioned literary criticism discussion on mental illness and women's power in literature, Al Shaykh's choice of the words 'I erase', it ought to be pointed out, shows the speaker's maintaining control over her mind. That is, she has not slipped into a state of the oblivion, allowing her failed experiences with the males in her life to rob her of her identity. Instead she has chosen to act differently from culturally acceptable behaviour. She refuses to remain silent and rejects male pre-set behavioural values that normalize women's obedience to their partners or husbands. Thus, her refusal is reflected onto her actions:

The presence of the *qarina*, a spiritual guide... makes explicit this separation of

body from consciousness. Her repeated escapes to the bathroom, a place of cleansing, allow her the place and privacy to pull herself together. Such periods of silence and withdrawal are labelled madness because they are forms of behaviour that none can understand (Cooke, 1993: 189).

This paper argues that Zahra's deviating actions that were viewed as a reflection of madness were an expression of her inability to accept male control and sovereignty. She was 'a mere spectator, a witness' striving to rid herself of male authority (Al-Shaykh, 1995: 133).

Her husband, on the other hand, is extremely annoyed by the 'loud' music she listens to. Such actions are non-conforming with the norm, with the expected behaviour that men, and particularly her husband, approve of. Thus, they must be labelled 'mad'. Yet, instead of stopping this habit and yielding to her husband, she chooses to leave him and return to Lebanon. She rejects his control over her. Zahra's rejection to continue living with her husband, it could be concluded, should not be read as failure to maintain her marital bond intact, but rather a gain of her battle against male control over her.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Zahra represents the character of a woman who was raised amidst a family governed by oppressive male control and violence. The physical violence she endured from her father from an early age was a tool to keep her passive, submissive and controllable. However, as the violence continues and the pressure escalates, Zahra reaches to a point of zero tolerance. She decides to take counteraction, to break her silence and challenge male control over her. She tries to reclaim her control over her body by having a sexual relationship, and later leaving her husband's home, the place in which she is culturally expected to remain under the control of her husband. She reclaims her voice that was robbed by the authority of her father, the tyrant male, and overtly informs her husband, who treated her like no more than a complementary sex toy for his pleasure, that she needs to stay away. She needed to be free.

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