

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC**

**218**

Volume 218

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers



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## Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

### Scope of the Series

*CLC* provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

### Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

## Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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# Hanan al-Shaykh

## 1945-

(Also translated as al-Hanan Shaykh; Hannan al-Shaykh; Hanān al-Shaykh) Lebanese novelist, short-story writer, and playwright.

The following entry presents an overview of al-Shaykh's life and career through 2002.

### INTRODUCTION

Al-Shaykh is a prominent contemporary Arab writer whose fiction typically features Middle Eastern women who live in oppressive patriarchal societies. Many of these characters suffer daily through physical, mental, and sexual violence perpetrated against them—acts which are frequently an accepted part of their culture. Drawing on her many years of experience in the Middle East, al-Shaykh explores the conflicts experienced by the men and women inhabiting these traditional societies, many of whom are torn between old and new cultures, as well as between Eastern and Western values and mores. Al-Shaykh's breakout novel, *Hikayat Zahrah* (1980; *The Story of Zahra*) was banned in most of the countries of the Middle East for its controversial treatment of matters sexual, religious, and political. Although she is fluent in English and has lived in London for many years, al-Shaykh prefers to write in Arabic. Her books have been translated into more than a dozen languages, including French, German, Italian, Spanish, Polish, and Korean.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Al-Shaykh was born in Beirut, Lebanon. She was raised in a Shiite Muslim family and first attended a traditional school for girls, followed by a secular secondary school. She began writing at an early age—by the time she was sixteen some of her essays had already been published in a newspaper, *Al-Nahar*. From 1963 to 1966 she attended the American College for Girls in Cairo, Egypt. While there she wrote her first novel, *Intihar Rajul Mayyit* (1970; *Suicide of a Dead Man*). When her studies were completed, she returned to Beirut, where she worked for television and the magazine *Al-Hasna*. In 1968 she was hired by the same newspaper that published her early essays, *Al-Nahar*, and was a contributor to that paper until 1975. In 1976 she fled



Lebanon due to the civil war, moving to Saudi Arabia. In 1982 she moved to London, which she continues to make her home with her husband and two children.

### MAJOR WORKS

Despite her acclaim, many of al-Shaykh's works have yet to be translated into English, including her first two novels, *Intihar Rajul Mayyit* and *Faras al-Shaitan* (1971; *The Praying Mantis*). Al-Shaykh has noted in several interviews that she considers both works unsatisfactory—nonetheless, they reflect the themes and subjects she continues to explore in later works. Her first novel to be translated into English is *The Story of Zahra*, which focuses on the civil war in Lebanon. The work garnered considerable critical attention. The novel's protagonist is a young woman named Zahra, who flees her war-torn Lebanon for Africa. After a series of personally difficult incidents, including sexual abuse by an uncle and a disappointing marriage, Zahra returns to Lebanon and falls in love with a sniper. Pregnant with his child, she is, at the end of the book, shot and

killed by her lover. Al-Shaykh's next major work, *Misk al-Ghaza* (1988; *Women of Sand and Myrrh*) examines the problems facing women oppressed under a patriarchal society. The work follows the lives of four women, an American, a Lebanese, and two others, who are also Middle Eastern. Nominated by *Publishers Weekly* as one of the 50 Best Books of 1992, the book brought al-Shaykh increased critical attention from Western critics. *Barid Bayrut* (1992; *Beirut Blues*) is a sequel of sorts to *The Story of Zahra*. Originally slated for publication in English as *Post Restante Beirut*, *Beirut Blues* is a novel written as a series of ten letters by a Muslim woman named Asmahan. It takes place in Lebanon in the 1980s and depicts the aftermath of war. The letters, termed "meditative" and "action-packed" by reviewer Marilyn Booth, are addressed to the lead character's friends, grandmother, Billie Holiday, the war, and Lebanon. *Aknusu al-Shams an al-Sutūh* (1994; *I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops*) is comprised of seventeen short stories concerning the lives of a wide range of Middle Eastern women. After writing two plays, *Dark Afternoon Tea* (1995) and *Paper Husband* (1997), al-Shaykh wrote another novel, *Innaha London Ya 'Azizi* (2000; *Only in London*). The work follows the fortunes of four individuals—three from the Middle East and one from England—who, in the book's opening pages, find themselves on a flight to London, where they hope to change their lives. The novel is notable for its departure from al-Shaykh's previous works, which tend to focus almost exclusively on characters in and from the Middle East.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Al-Shaykh has developed a reputation as a frank and unafraid voice representative of a wide segment of Middle Eastern women. Charles R. Larson notes that al-Shaykh's depiction of exploited women is disturbing but quite important in the body of Middle Eastern fiction. He believes her works constitute a force for change, stating that while there "are no positive male-female relationships" in *The Story of Zahra*, "nor is there a hint that there can be until women are no longer oppressed." Patricia Dubrava Keuning declares that al-Shaykh "writes without polemic: There are no fiery indictments of men, of Islam, of Bedouin culture." Instead, al-Shaykh offers a wide range of individual characters who exhibit a gamut of beliefs, opinions, and responses. Elizabeth Zahnd addresses the ways al-Shaykh's characters deal with being caught between two conflicting cultures, the old and the new. Zahnd focuses on the fact that violence against women often arises due to their opposition to tradition. Issa Peters, in a review of *I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops*, writes that "al-Shaykh blazes a new trail in Arabic fiction here in that she is open about sexual matters and innovative in some of her fictional techniques. On the first matter, she

is perhaps the single most uninhibited Arab writer concerning sexuality issues, particularly when it comes to women's sexual gratification." Ann Marie Adams explores what the idea of "nation" may mean to the people of Lebanon. She finds that *Beirut Blues* is a less bleak work than *The Story of Zahra*: "Through constructing a fluid and locational narrative in *Beirut Blues*, al-Shaykh potentially allows women a way to reconstruct 'imagined communities' without gendered tropes of exploitation and control."

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Intihar Rajul Mayyit* [*Suicide of a Dead Man*] (novel) 1970  
*Faras al-Shaitan* [*The Praying Mantis*] (novel) 1971  
*Hikayat Zahrah* [*The Story of Zahra*] (novel) 1980  
*Misk al-Ghaza* [*Women of Sand and Myrrh*] (novel) 1988  
*Barid Bayrut* [*Beirut Blues*; also known as *Post Restante Beirut*] (novel) 1992  
*Aknusu al-Shams 'an al-Sutūh* [*I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops*] (short stories) 1994  
*Dark Afternoon Tea* (play) 1995  
*Paper Husband* (play) 1997  
*Innaha London Ya 'Azizi* [*Only in London*] (novel) 2000

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## CRITICISM

Charles R. Larson (essay date winter 1991)

SOURCE: Larson, Charles R. "The Fiction of Hanan Al-Shaykh, Reluctant Feminist." *World Literature Today* 65, no. 1 (winter 1991): 14-17.

[In the following essay, Larson analyzes the major female characters in *The Story of Zahra* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh*.]

In the fiction of the Lebanese writer Hanan Al-Shaykh, only a portion of whose work has been translated into English, women play the major roles, but only in the sense of plot and conflict. In some cases her female protagonists are more acted upon than active: the victims of an Islamic patriarchy that treats them as second-class citizens, powerless both politically and economically. Bewildered and passive, they permit themselves to drift along from event to event (and often from man to man) with little sense of fulfillment or

awareness that their situations might be altered. In other instances, when they attempt to assert some kind of independent stance from male authority, it is only with a sense of reluctance—not that this is their right, but simply a matter of happenstance. It is impossible to think of her characters as committed feminists, though the mere fact that Hanan Al-Shaykh herself painstakingly describes the situations that entrench women within the contemporary Islamic world implies that she herself identifies her role as that of a reluctant spokesperson for change in women's lives.

Hanan Al-Shaykh's career as an Arabic writer has been shaped both by her own rather peripatetic life (including the obstacles she has encountered in publishing individual works), coupled with the rigidity of her traditional upbringing in Lebanon. She was raised in a strict Shiite Moslem household, in which she covered her hair and wore full-length dresses with long sleeves. Beginning in 1963, she studied in Cairo at the American College for Girls. She worked as a journalist after her return to Beirut four years later. With her husband, she moved to Saudi Arabia for a year, followed by a return to Lebanon (at the beginning of the war) and then a subsequent move to London. Her four novels and a collection of short stories—all published in Beirut—have encountered frequent censorship in other Islamic countries. *The Story of Zahra* (her first novel translated into English) was sufficiently troubling to Lebanese publishers that she published it herself.

Perhaps the metaphor that best typifies the conflict between the male and female worlds in Al-Shaykh's writing is the unknowable. Too many of her male characters act as predators, stalking women because they know little about them: sexually, emotionally, mentally. Others merely endure the situation in which they find themselves, demonstrating little or no curiosity about the opposite sex. In a two-page story called "The Unseeing Eye" an old man searches for his wife in a hospital the day after she has had a heart attack. First he is told that he cannot enter her ward, "because there are other women there," a remark that reveals the context of the problem. When he tells the nurse his wife's name, he is informed, "There are two women called Zeinab Mohamed. One of them, though, has only one eye. Which one is your wife so that I can call her?" (148). The question throws the old man into a state of confusion.

One eye? How am I to know? He tried to recall what his wife [of thirty or forty years] looked like, with her long gown and black headdress, the veil, and sometimes the black covering enveloping her face and sometimes removed and lying on her neck. He could picture her as she walked and sat, chewing a morsel and then taking it out of her mouth so as to place it in that of her first-born. Her children. One eye. How am I to know?

(148)

Somehow one feels that the old man's wife (one-eyed or two-eyed) perceives far more about her husband than he has ever known of her.

In *The Story of Zahra*—certainly a major work of Middle Eastern fiction—the situation is even more unsettling. In this novel, set both in Lebanon and in Africa, women are depicted as extraneous, as not fitting in, as mere pawns of the men around them. Their lives are precarious, always in such flux and in such control by men that they are little more than victims. The men themselves, however, are ineffectual, sexually repressed, spineless spouses, perhaps because of their pampered and favored status. Needless to say, there are no positive male-female relationships, nor is there a hint that there can be until women are no longer oppressed.

Zahra herself is directionless. While still young, she enters into a lengthy affair with a married man, which provides her with no genuine satisfaction. After two abortions, she decides to join her uncle Hashem, a political refugee who has fled to Africa. The move appears to be precipitated only by her desire to try a change of venue, since she herself is basically apolitical. Unfortunately, Hashem in his frustration turns toward Zahra, whom he regards as the personification of his lost motherland. Though she repeatedly thwarts his sexual advances, she is propelled into a loveless marriage and immediately denounced by her husband because she is not a virgin. Zahra's sexual encounters take one final permutation after she returns to Lebanon, now in a state of war. For reasons that initially make little sense to her, she gives herself freely to a sniper, once again becoming pregnant and trapped by the possibility of motherhood.

Almost at the end of the narrative the story takes an unusual turn both thematically and structurally. Zahra informs the sniper that she is pregnant, only to encounter the typical masculine response: get an abortion. However, her lover shortly changes his stance and implies that he will marry her. The thought of legitimacy makes her momentarily believe that the war has ended, but then as she leaves him (and the rooftop where they have held their clandestine meetings), she feels such excruciating pain that she believes she is suffering a miscarriage or—worse—that her sniper/lover has shot her. Whichever it is, she lies in the street, blood draining from her body.

The pain is terrible, but I grow accustomed to it, and to the darkness. As I close my eyes for an instant, I see the stars of pain. Then there are rainbows arching across white skies. He kills me. He kills me with the bullets that lay at his elbow as he made love to me. He kills me, and the white sheets that covered me a little while ago are still crumpled from my presence. Does he kill me because I'm pregnant? Or is it because I asked him whether he was a sniper? It's as if someone tugs at my limbs. Should I call out one more time, 'Please help!'

Miscarriage or bullet, it hardly matters, since the result is the same: her continued plight as a woman at the pursuit of many men.

In the last sentence of the novel Zahra's thoughts juxtapose the horror of her situation with the beauty of transcendence: "I see rainbows processing [*sic?*] towards me across the white skies with their promises only of menace" (184). The war metaphor has been fused with male aggression. Wars kill, but so do men. The difference is inconsequential. Women are still victims, and it makes little difference what one wants to call it. Moreover, the fallacy of having a first-person narrator relate her own death (the "I am dying, I am dead" violation) is totally convincing within the context of the novel's ending.

Interestingly, there is a possible source for Zahra's sexual indecisiveness regarding the men in her life. The opening scenes of the story describe her mother's multiple liaisons with men who are not her husband, encounters perceived by Zahra as a child, since her mother drags her along in order to help conceal these activities. The purpose of these scenes is not to suggest that Zahra is like her mother (they are worlds apart) as much as to establish a cycle of repetition within the family (and perhaps the culture) itself. As one reviewer wrote of the novel, "Rarely can the family life of Islam have been portrayed in such an unattractive light."<sup>3</sup>

This depiction of a Moslem family with no sense of cohesiveness (and the mother's adultery) is apparently the primary reason for the novel's being banned in several Islamic countries. Zahra's father is portrayed as a tyrant with little control over his wife's promiscuity. Zahra is ever fearful of him. Her brother Ahmad is little more than a spoiled lout. The attention lavished on him as a child manifests itself in his adulthood in his addiction to hashish, masturbation, and stolen goods (often stripped from the bodies of the dead). The war, in short, serves him well. He lives on other people's miseries, though he is certainly one of the sources of misery (or menace) in Zahra's immediate world.

The wonder of Hanan Al-Shaykh's novel ultimately resides in Zahra herself, ever controlled by the people around her (initially her mother, father, and brother; followed by her various lovers; and finally the war itself, represented by her sniper/lover). So convincing is the narrative that the reader feels the immediacy of autobiography, yet with all the frustration that can only be conveyed by a failed life. One hazards to guess how many other Zahras populate Al-Shaykh's homeland, how much of their story has been told in this raw account of one woman's inability to step outside the circle of contempt.

That continuing circle also begs the question of for whom *The Story of Zahra* was written—Al-Shaykh's own Lebanese people, a wider Muslim audience, or one

outside the Islamic world? Posing such a question often places the critic (especially the Western critic of non-Western literature) on dangerous ground. The answer, however, belies Al-Shaykh's dilemma as a woman novelist within an Arabic context, faithfully attempting to write of the world as she knows it. Her subject matter quite naturally becomes that of women in a patriarchy, and that alone can often guarantee a limited readership in many areas of the Third World. This is not to imply that Arabic fiction is devoid of male writers who expound women's rights. One thinks immediately of Zohra in Naguib Mahfouz's *Miramar* (and wonders at the similarity of their names) or Hamida in his *Midaq Alley*. Recalling the years that Hanan Al-Shaykh spent as a student in Cairo, it is impossible not to assume some kind of kinship between the two writers' works.

*Women of Sand and Myrrh*, Al-Shaykh's fifth published book and her second translated into English, would not seem so disturbing were it not for the fact that four female characters dominate the narrative, quadrupling the bleakness of *The Story of Zahra*. The setting is an Arab country somewhere in the Gulf, most probably Saudi Arabia, where Al-Shaykh lived for a time with her husband. The four women referred to in the title of the English version represent differing perspectives and degrees of entrapment within the patriarchal order, though often the confinement is more figurative than literal.

The first of these is Suha, who, along with her husband, is in flight from the war in Lebanon. Well educated, she is what would be regarded as a career woman if the setting were not so conservative. Tamr, the second, is largely self-educated, twice divorced, and diligently struggling for survival as a seamstress. The third, Suzanne, is a middle-aged American housewife, no longer attractive to her husband but sought after by Arab men. Nur, the last, is rich and spoiled, an international playgirl when she is away from the Arabic world. The lives of these four characters are only loosely intertwined. The story itself is plotless, connected thematically by images and incidents of repression that control both the men and the women within an ultraconservative society.

If Al-Shaykh's picture of life in an Islamic gulf state is accurate, it then becomes a question of who is fooling whom. The activities of both the men and the women in this novel are dominated by sex, liquor, and videos—not the sand and the myrrh of the English title but rather what can be imported, especially in the form of consumer goods. Air-conditioners, telephones, and swimming pools (whatever money can buy)—all these material objects are vehicles for escaping the traditional world. One is left with the impression of a medieval society that has been transported into the modern world. When all else fails, the government can resort to censorship and repression.

Suha responds to the loss of the freedom she knew in Lebanon by frequently hiding herself in a packing box in the department store where she works. (Zahra, it might be noted, was forever hiding in bathrooms, the one place apparently off limits to her male pursuers.) Suha pleads with her husband to leave the country, to take her away. "I'll go mad. I could accept life in the fighting, but not this," she tells him.<sup>4</sup> She cannot stand the stultifying atmosphere; she constantly states that she is miserable. At the end of the novel, as she is about to return to Lebanon without her husband, Suha notes the literal barriers that have restricted her activities during her symbolic imprisonment in the gulf.

As if I had just arrived I noticed the walls; every house had a different wall, made of marble, cement, natural stone like the stone you see in the mountains: tiles, factory-made stones, patterned and plain; there was a wall that took the form of a series of arches, so high that only the water storage tank was visible. New young branches were tied to one wall to give them support; electricity cables and telephone cables dangled down from another: no building, nothing in this place, was ever completely finished. The walls were high; the newer they were, the higher they seemed to be . . . walls constricting everybody.

(278)

If Suha's education helps her only marginally, Tamr's lack of schooling restricts her in numerous other ways. The closest character to mere chattel, Tamr is married when she is twelve. That "marriage" ends in divorce, as does a second one lasting but a month. Though she eventually learns to read and write—in preparation for starting her business as a seamstress—she still finds herself hampered in every direction. Men have the authority to close down her shop; she has no true home of her own (as a divorcee, she is largely restricted to her brother's household); the inheritance from her father has not been left to her but instead passed on to her son. When she attempts to take economic matters into her own hands and enters a bank, she is told, "You're not allowed to come in" (104). As she remarks on one occasion apropos of the difficulty of starting even a modest business, "I didn't remember signing my name on a single official document in my life" (105). She is, in short, a woman with no rights at all, a nonperson.

Suha hides in a packing box and ultimately escapes the claustrophobic atmosphere by leaving the country, Tamr is under symbolic house arrest within her brother's family, but Suzanne (as a Western woman) has little denied to her—at least as long as Arabic men find her attractive. She represents for them all that has been denied sexually. Since she wears no veil or restrictive clothing and enjoys freedom of movement and availability, it is no surprise that men follow her like a bitch

in heat. These perks (if one wants to consider them that) initially make her feel as if she is the only woman in the world—not exactly a feminist goal. As she wryly comments:

It wasn't difficult to find men. The men in their white robes searched for women among the freezers and food-stuffs in the supermarkets. They tailed foreigners and car passengers who weren't wearing veils. As they walked along the street they stole glances at the gates of houses just in case a woman going in behind the high walls gave them a smile: telephone and electricity workers and private gardeners were the worst offenders.

(213)

Suzanne is in sexual heaven—or so she believes for a time. She even considers becoming the second wife of her lover, an alcoholic businessman, who can indulge his own sexual fantasies by trips overseas, where even more attractive women are readily available. In the end, however, sex becomes Suzanne's downfall. She fears that she will be apprehended for her indiscretions and deported. The last time she visits Maaz, her lover, she nearly retches at the sight of the poor man's newborn syphilitic child. If that is what sexual liberation leads to, then it is time for her to leave the gulf also.

Of Al-Shaykh's fourth character, Nur, little need be said. Great wealth has brought her no more happiness than the others. Overseas, like her masculine counterparts, she is able to indulge herself freely, at least until her husband hears of her activities and takes away her passport. At home there are brief affairs with both men and women. In one of the final images the author presents of her, Nur is dressed as a man, coming to visit Suha, with whom she has had an earlier liaison. Is this the ultimate freedom of an Arabic woman: assuming the identity (sexual or otherwise) of a man?

The men in *Women of Sand and Myrrh* are a faceless lot, except for Suzanne's lover Maaz. Otherwise, they are best typified as controlling forces (or menaces, as in the author's earlier novel). Tamr refers to them as "traps set ready for [women]" (152). On one occasion when Suha goes swimming, she watches a man nearly drown, so concerned is he with the impropriety of viewing the seminaked bathing women. Suha's husband seems oblivious to her complaints about life in the gulf and much more concerned with watching videos. Nur's first husband is bisexual. Maaz, however, has the final word on male-female relationships. As he tells Suzanne after she has had the audacity to enjoy herself in bed with him, "God created you to bear children, and to give pleasure to a man, and that's all" (210). When she says she does not understand what he means, he replies, "God created women to make children, like a factory. That's the exact word, Suzanne. She's a factory, she produces enjoyment for the man, not for herself" (210).

It is not only sexuality that restricts the women in Al-Shaykh's novel, though many of the restraints apply to one gender only. Suha complains to Tamr, "There's no freedom here. You can't play tennis, go to the cinema, go for walks. There's no entertainment" (96). Newspapers and magazines are censored: advertisements with scantily clad women are excised from them. Western music is referred to as "the work of the devil" (35). Playing cards are illegal. The stuffed toys and dolls that were shipped to the store where Suha worked for a time "had [to be] destroyed, every one that was meant to be a human being or animal or bird, since it was not permissible to produce distortions of God's creatures" (13).

Are all these incidents in *Women of Sand and Myrrh* a challenge to traditional Islam? When I asked Hanan Al-Shaykh that question, she responded:

Of course not. I have never thought only of religion when I was writing [*Women of Sand and Myrrh*]. I knew that I wanted to open a curtain on a way of living which is part of the Middle East and yet different. This closed atmosphere attracted me and became juicy material for my imagination . . . for the unusual daily life there which carries many social problems, tempted me to write about my feelings. That women are still oppressed, etc . . . Even when I write [about] what appears to be Islamic behaviour, it is really more under the domain of social habits—which don't relate to the true teaching of Islamic societies.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, Al-Shaykh adds that her second novel (*The Praying Mantis*, yet to be translated into English) shows "how a young girl who belongs to a pious religious family can suffer!!"

It seems proper to conclude that what Al-Shaykh means by her answer to my question—and what her fiction clearly demonstrates—is the condition of exploitation that women in certain areas of the Moslem world experience. I would call this exposé spontaneous feminism without the more familiar dogma of some of her Western counterparts. Without that rhetoric, her writing soars above the commonplace. Certainly it is only a matter of time before her dialogue with the Islamic patriarchy is no longer one-sided.

#### Notes

1. Hanan Al-Shaykh, "The Unseeing Eye," Denys Johnson-Davies, tr., in *Storia* 2, 1989, p. 148.
2. Hanan Al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, Peter Ford, tr., London, Quartet, 1986, p. 183.
3. Robert Irwin, "On the Treadwheel," *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 May 1986, p. 535.
4. Hanan Al-Shaykh, *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, Catherine Cobham, tr., London, Quartet, 1989, p. 34.

5. Hanan Al-Shaykh to the author, in a letter posted (but not dated) 10 March 1990.

Paula W. Sunderman (essay date fall 1992)

SOURCE: Sunderman, Paula W. "An Interview with Hanan Al-Shaykh." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 31, no. 4 (fall 1992): 625-36.

[In the following interview, Sunderman questions al-Shaykh on her background, her views on the oppression of women, and other major themes expounded in her writing.]

Hanan al-Shaykh currently resides in London. In addition to *The Story of Zahra* . . . , a vivid depiction of a woman's and a country's tribulations during the Lebanese Civil War, she has written *Suicide of a Dead Man*, *The Praying Mantis*, *Women of Sand and Myrrh* . . . , and a number of short stories. Her latest novel, *Post Restante Beirut*, a sequel to *The Story of Zahra*, was published in Cairo last summer. She is writing a one-act play, *We Stand Alone*, about the problems of emigrants and is at work on another novel. Although she writes only in Arabic, several of her novels and short stories have been translated into many languages, including English, French, German, and Danish, with translations into Dutch and Italian now in progress. Doubleday has recently published *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, assuring her of the wider audience that she deserves in this country.

This interview took place during the period of December 1991 through April 1992. Written questions were submitted to Ms. al-Shaykh on December 21, 1991 and February 18, 1992. Her responses were mailed back on January 20, 1992 and March 20, 1992.

[Sunderman]: How did your upbringing affect your later outlook as you expressed it in your fiction?

[Al-Shaykh]: I grew up in Beirut, although from a southern origin. I was raised in two different worlds: a strict environment (due to my Muslim religion) and a cosmopolitan, relaxed environment which I experienced due to my secondary school which was secular. In Beirut my parents' relatives and friends used to come with their tribal, village traditions, expressions and stories. While our neighborhood in Beirut was mostly *Beirut*, our neighbors were different from us in their way of living. They were city people, so I never felt I belonged to Beirut or to the south, and this has made me more sensitive and more observant. These feelings of not belonging helped me in feeling the need to write.

Could you elaborate on this, please?