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Third World Women and Patriarchal Society in *The Story of Zahra***Jihan Abdul Rahman Oshiesh**

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.4.6.01**Abstract**

This article focuses on the relationship of Zahra; the heroine of the novel, *The story of Zahra* by Hanan al-Shaykh with "male" community. Zahra is not only the victim of her family but of an entire society also. Her father who is always cynical of her face which is full of pimples and expected spinsterhood, to her mother and her betrayal of her husband with her lover, to her spoiled and failed brother, her family friend who raped her and forced her to abort twice. Her failed marriage to a friend of her uncle and her return to her homeland, which seemed to be suffering from the scourge of war, and her belief in her ability to distract the mind of the sniper by establishing a relationship with him. Zahra couldn't be an independent individual in her society, but a tool that everyone can see from his perspective. Zahra suffered from the oppression of the patriarchal society, which gave the man the oppression and abuse of women without any deterrent or a pretext for their oppression. Hanan al-Shaykh *The Story of Zahra* is a real example of what most women in the Third World suffer from the dominance of male society and their control over women, spiritually and physically.

Keywords- Patriarchy, Patriarchal society, Zahra, Third World, Oppression**1. Introduction**

Many scholars see the concept of patriarchy or patriarchal system as a social concept associated with social theories and thought and its socialization. This concept not only expresses the domination and authority of men over women but is a much broader concept and refers to the values, symbols and perceptions of the ego, whether in the family, power or the overall value structure.

The foundation stone of the patriarchal system is the domination of the male over the female, the enslavement of women, their oppression and the denial of their social existence. In patriarchal society, men control women because they are inferior to them and a male mentality of authoritarian tendencies that reject criticism and dialogue and punish anyone who comes out of this patriarchal system.

Since the dawn of the first high civilizations in history, women have been the victims of patriarchy/patriarchal-masculine society, which codified values, customs and traditions that

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made women inferior to men, which made them oppressed, and those who oppress them are men, although life is only complete by men and women together.

In fact, women were not persecuted and discriminated against because of biological, religious or psychological factors, but because of the social, class and masculine factors that resulted from men's interests in domination, possession and submission to their will, the basis of gender inequality and the eternal conflict between them.

In the definition of the patriarchal system in the Arab society, Hisham Sharabi makes modernism in exchange for the patriarchal system. The patriarchal system is a cognitive system based on religion or myth. It reaches the truth in religious and educational ways, its language is graphic and its system is based on power or bureaucracy and its social structure is tribal. Modernity is exactly the opposite: it is a system based on thought and reason that reaches the facts in critical scientific ways. (2000, p. 13)

Fran Hosken, in writing about the relationship between human rights and female genital mutilation in Africa and the Middle East, bases her whole discussion/ condemnation of genital mutilation on one privileged premise: that the goal of this practice is to "mutilate the sexual pleasure and satisfaction of woman" (1981, p. 11). According to Hosken, "male sexual politics" in Africa and around the world shares "the same political goal: to assure female dependence and subservience by any and all means" (1981, p. 14).

Beverly Lindsay's conclusion to the book *Comparative Perspectives of Third World Women: The Impact of Race, Sex, and Class* (1983) states that "dependency relationships, based upon race, sex, and class, are being perpetuated through social, educational, and economic institutions. These are the linkages among Third World Women." Juliette Mincos (1980) cites the patriarchal family as the basis for "an almost identical vision of women" that Arab and Muslim societies have, she falls into this very trap (1980, p. 23).

The use of the term *Third World Women* by Western feminists has been widely critiqued. Mohanty in her *Introduction* and "Under Western Eyes" in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* uses the term interchangeable with "women of color" (1991, p.7). She argues that "what seems to constitute 'women of color' or 'third world women' as a viable oppositional alliance is a common context of struggle rather than color or racial identifications. Similarly, it is third world women's oppositional political relation to sexist, racist, and imperialistic structures that constitutes our political commonality" (1991, p.7).

Why is it that women are always victims of all tragedies, from harsh paternity to violent wars and tensions that plague nations and peoples?

The extreme poverty of Zahra and her ardent face with youthful love were not only the emotional wounds of the domestic environment in this sensitive girl, but also the literal and ongoing conflict in society - the battle between men and women to control the female body. This summarizes Hanan al-Shaykh wrenching Zahra which wanted to be model of the Arab female broken that embraces silence silently.

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Hanan al-Shaykh in her novel spread the story of Zahra in the erosion of the ugliness of war and its destruction that afflicts individuals and societies. In this sense, we can say that this feminine text is the formulation of the revolution of women and the rebellion against patriarchal domination and the bloody war and its brutality and from another angle the story of the female in her stand against all forms of domination and violence. Zahra has endured years of abuse and oppression from nearly all the men she has known. Her misery begins at home, where she learns to associate betrayal, violence, and brutality with men.

2. Patriarchal Society and Zahra

2.1. Zahra and Her Father:

Always the girl considers her father as a defender that will protect her any time, immune fortress to which it comes in times of weakness and helplessness. But it's quite different with Zahra, and her father looks at her as a hard-to-get-off. He was never a loving or compassionate parent while treating her.

Her descriptions of her tyrannical father are terrifying; he "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" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 19). That last line reveals her father's, and by extension, Lebanese patriarchy's rigid dichotomous ideology. "All I know is that I was afraid of my father, as I was afraid of his beatings to me and to my mother while she trembled and trembled in his hands." (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 15)

Zahra tells us how her face and spirit were distorted by the degeneration of her society and the horrors of war. We noticed how her father had abandoned her since the early years of her life because of the pimples on her face. Her young face was not the only emotional wound to this sensitive environment in her delicate age, but also literally explained the escalating conflict in society, the battle between men and women to control the body of women. As a result, Zahra's father believes she will remain single throughout her life without hope of marriage. That what makes him to beat her and curse her mercilessly every time he sees her face full of pimples. Zahra's father behavior has only succeeded in deepening her sense of loneliness in a patriarchal society, which discriminated against her from her close relatives.

2.2. Zahra and Her Mother's Lover:

Zahra's mother was not the right and true model in the life of her daughter Zahra. A mother who had a relationship with a man other than her husband always went to meet him secretly with her daughter; Zahra opened her eyes to her mother's betrayal of her father.

Fran Hosken writes, "Rape, forced prostitution, polygamy, genital mutilation, pornography, the beating of girls and women, purdah (segregation of women) are all violations of basic human rights" (1981, p.15). In the opening scene of the novel, Zahra and her mother, visiting her mother's lover, hide in a dark room to escape detection. The mother

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presses her hand onto her daughter's mouth to keep her from revealing their hiding place. As we see from this initial scene of subjugation, the mother's primary goal is to control her daughter's voice. Zahra gladly submits to her mother's act of silencing, cherishing the physical closeness that her mother's lover has already begun to interrupt: "her hand smelled of soap and onions. I wished she would keep it there forever" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p.3).

Zahra could not understand the real meaning of the relationship between her mother and the mysterious man "Again the door opened and closed, and I heard a key turn in the lock. Then I saw a face I knew: the face of a man I had seen before, leaning his head on my mother's lap; a man the colors and patterns of whose suit are forever registered in my mind."(al-Skaykh, 1995, p. 4-5)

In this symbolic context the mother internalizes the patriarchal system and becomes its devoted representative, participating in an elaborate network of repression. Starved for her mother's attention, Zahra willingly submits. Ghandour observes that:

... the discourses by which Zahra's immediate and extended family construct her, along with the social discourses [...] are basically discourses that constrain and contradict her as an evolving human being. These discourses construct her, instead, as a speechless entity (Ghandour, p. 239).

2.3. Zahra and Her Brother:

Zahra suffered from her parents' preference to her brother, for her father's interest in saving the money that his son Ahmed could travel to America, even though he knew Ahmad was a failing and not interested in studying. Zahra did not forget how her mother was filling her brother's dish with meat while she did not give her one piece. The patriarchy society is very clear in her father's treatment of her brother and the differentiation between them. Ahmed changed completely after the war began and his involvement in it, Ahmed's sense of masculinity and his belonging to the male world.

The focus on the brother of Zahra, Ahmed, as a child, reflects the ideal ideas of patriarchy, and the strength of its power over society. "Every day, when we sit at the dining table in the kitchen, her love is revealed to him. She filled my plate with soup, and she filled Ahmed's dish and took her time searching for his best piece of meat taking the scoop down in the cooking pot, in search of the chopped meat, and pour it into Ahmed's dish" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 11). Ahmad, as a child, worked as an agent of patriarchy, exercising his power over his sister, inculcating social norms and principles. This is evident in Zahra's early memories of him. She recalls the first book he gave her to read, *Dracula*, the story of a man who sucks the life blood out of women and depends on their destruction for his own survival. Zahra also recalls the plays that Ahmad used to stage, always casting her in the role of maid.

This male mentality continues to display its manifestations in the novel ... in Ahmed's addiction to Hashish, masturbation by hand, and stolen objects from dead bodies. Although

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the war has granted Ahmad greater autonomy and power, his participation in the overtly masculine war machine has also caused him to become more patriarchal and oppressive.

2.4. Zahra and Her Lover:

Zahra followed her mother's approach and established a relationship with her family friend in disguise, which led to her miscarriage twice. Malik's relationship with Zahra has had an important role in its collapse and loss of self-confidence. Zahra's sexual experiences with Malik indicate the high degree of her disempowerment and are an example of the male reinforcement of patriarchal patterns originally transmitted to her from her mother.

Zahra is still a virgin when she has sex with Malik for the first time. Despite her pleas, he refuses to marry her, insisting that it is for her own good: "he didn't wish to tieme down, to stand in my way. One lecture followed another about equality between men and women, about what the true significance was of a good relationship..." (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 33).

"I shivered every time and had no idea why I continued coming" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 32). Zahra's loss of her virginity in this manner contributes to her distrust of men and general fragility of character. As Annie Potts explains in *The Science/Fiction of Sex: Feminist Deconstruction and the Vocabularies of Heterosex* (2002), a woman's first experience of heterosexual intercourse is much different from a man's. While a man's first experience of heterosexual intercourse is usually regarded as a positive milestone influenced by "the valorization of the sexually active man, and the cultural sanctioning of the masculinist act of penetration as a means of conquering the 'feminized' other," a woman's first experience of heterosexual intercourse "signifies her enculturation into a subordinate position in heterosexual relations, and patriarchy's entrance into her in a particularly sexual way" (Potts,p.199).

Potts further explains: "through intercourse, she [the woman] is opened to the outside – to patriarchal culture – where she then becomes, more or less, 'public' property: *she is colonized by heterosexism*. Her initiation –*enculturation*– grants him the privilege to reenter her on his own terms: that is, whenever he desires" (Potts,p.209). We see this clearly in *The Story of Zahra*. Once Malik has managed to have sex with Zahra, there seems to be no way for her to escape his continued advances, as she sees it. Without any effort, Malik repeatedly violates Zahra's body. Even after Zahra has her virginity surgically restored, clearly demonstrating her intention to cut off sexual relations with Malik, it is only a short while before Malik takes away her virginity once again, "without it being any pleasure to him since he knew the restoration was counterfeit" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 34).

In *The Production of Space* (1998), Henri Lefebvre presents us with some insightful remarks on the dualistic character of the body. He tells us that the body is at once symbolic and concrete: concrete as a result of the aggression to which the body is subject; symbolic, on account of fragmentation of the body's living unity. This is especially true of the female body as transformed into exchange value, into a sign of the commodity, and indeed into a

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commodity purse (Lefebvre, p. 310). Malik is exercising his patriarchal right over Zahra's commodity, her body, which has become the source of his sexual gratification. Thus, the objectified body has become timeless, a concrete entity that narrates a bleak story about passivity and voicelessness. It is only later that Zahra begins to exercise power to resist men's attempts to re-inscribe her body against her will, and even then she never directly challenges her own exploitation. Zahra's destructive relationship with Malik results in her admission to a mental hospital to receive treatment.

2.5. Zahra and Her Uncle:

It is said in Arab societies that an uncle can be a father, when Zahra travels to Africa, she is in need for a protector, she yearned for those who contained and made her forgotten what she experienced in her country, while her uncle longed for his country's affinity to restore his memories of his past. "I felt I wanted to touch her hands and face and the hem of her dress. Through her I hoped to absorb all my life, both here and in Lebanon" (al-Shakyh, 1995, p. 69). Ghandour observes that "Lebanon, which he could not change, control, or take possession of when he was in Lebanon has arrived now in Africa in the figure of Zahra" (Ghandour, p. 243). It is not surprising, then, that Hashem attempts to control and possess Zahra in a way that he never could Lebanon.

The arrival of Zahra, however, allows Hashem to escape his nostalgia and envision a future for himself outside of Lebanon: "I felt that Zahra was my key to making contact with my past and present as well as my future. I thought that at last I could put down roots in Africa, provided I had this witness of my own flesh, blood and bones" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 70). Hashem's hopes are disappointed, though, first by Zahra's failure to communicate the warmth of his former familial and home spaces and second, by her failure to communicate with him at all.

Zahra would like to break her own silence and reveal what is really going on in her mind. "My uncle, would you tell me why you are stretched by my side. Uh! I wish I could utter those words! My uncle, if you can hear my heart beats, you can see the disgust and anger accumulated in my soul, and if you know the truth of my feeling. I lose my mental integrity, disturbed myself, and hate it because I am silent. When will my soul cry like a faithful woman to a faithful love?" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 34)

Zahra is profoundly troubled and preoccupied with her own needs, which prevents her from providing her uncle with the emotional continuity with his past that he had hoped to gain. Her hand extends to him like a piece of cold plastic or she lies like wood on his bed, refusing to play the role that he has cast her in, as Hashem reveals in his inner thoughts:

You are the only witness to my destiny. Please don't reproach me and turn into wood. I can't communicate with a block of wood. I can't reveal to it my emotions. A block of wood has no living pores. It can absorb dew, but not my emotions, which are like streams that have swollen into torrents (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 71).

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When Hashem realizes that Zahra is not going to fulfill his needs, he becomes desperate, his only option the continued exaltation of the communal, comrade and familial ties of his lost Lebanon juxtaposed with the weak social ties that characterize his present life in Africa. In this last plea, Hashem's selfishness becomes apparent. Until he has been totally rebuffed by Zahra and she is married to Majed, he is completely unconcerned about her needs and desires. She is merely a blank screen upon which he wishes to project his memories and fantasies.

2.6. Zahra and Her Husband:

Arab always says that the husband is a shelter but not in the case of (Majed), who increase the misery of Zahra. He is looking for a wife with a sense of proportion and descent, is looking for the body of a woman who satisfies his lusts and gives birth to children. To Majed, Zahra was not the woman who could achieve what he wished. Majed represents the patriarchal society in all its subtlety with his wife Zahra led to her collapse again and her return to her country broken and empty - handed.

When Zahra marries her uncle's friend, Majed, who feels that his honor is wounded when he discovers that Zahra is not a virgin. He is shocked and feels betrayed upon his initial discovery that Zahra has had sex with another man. In *Dehumanizing Women: Treating Persons as Sex Objects*, Linda Lemon check argues that "treating persons as sex objects involves treating persons as less than the moral equals of other persons" (1985, p. 2).

Majed sexually objectifies Zahra and sees her as just a body to have sex with, irrespective of her free will or desire, and his objectification of her is heightened when he realizes that she has been sexually active. From this point on, Majed deems Zahra morally unworthy and completely dehumanizes her. When he hints that he will go to her uncle Hashem, her fear of her family's anger and reprisal becomes clear: "Kill me...do whatever you wish...but I beg you not to tell Hashem or my family. I beg you" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 87).

In her essay "Virginity and Patriarchy"(1982), Fatima Mernissi comments that virginity is a matter between men, in which women play the role of silent intermediaries. 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 (Mernissi,p.183). She also highlights an important contradiction in the structure of the social values that lies in men's desire to violate women's virginity before marriage and their severely unwelcoming reaction to the premature loss of it in their own wives. It is legitimate to point towards this social schizophrenia; however, essentialist thinking like this is a little extreme. It is clear that men tend to negotiate their desires and act upon fulfilling them but at the same time they can transcend the limits of patriarchy.

This distance brings with it a certain immunity to strict cultural traditions:

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"Zahra's story could be my secret, for no one except myself had any knowledge of the truth" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 86). In time, he comes to accept the situation.

2.7. Zahra and Sniper:

The war has given Zahra a new hope that she can love and be loved; she is given this hope by the sniper who controls the street. She intends to distract the sniper by establishing a relationship with him and going to him daily believing in her ability to change him. The moment the sniper knows she is pregnant in her fourth month, he does not hesitate to get rid of her and her unborn baby. The sniper embodies patriarchal society that is unable to accept production of its faults.

Mature and more experienced, Zahra seems to have a better understanding of the patriarchal power. She knows its strengths and weaknesses. And hope has fueled her with energy and determination to resist it and defeat it. She may have used her body as a sexual weapon, perhaps a too traditional feminine trick, to challenge and defeat the male power. For a woman who has experienced so much abuse and exploitation, she didn't seem to mind using her body cleverly, and freely this time for a good cause. At her age, and in the circumstances, Zahra is able to take the initiative. She goes to the man by herself, and she enjoys being with him.

To Deveau's emphasis on empowerment, it is apparent that Zahra feels inwardly empowered and motivated to rebel against entrenched social structures through her sexual relationship with the sniper, who towers overhead a top the roof of a high building. Monuments and towers themselves have a phallic aspect and exude political and patriarchal authoritarianism as representatives of repressive space. Lefebvre emphasizes that the vertical is "arrogance, the will to power, a display of military and police-like machismo, a reference to the phallus and a spatial analogue of masculine brutality" (Lefebvre, p. 144). Zahra's entry into this male space is forbidden, and therefore liberating. By ascending the stairs to the sniper's position, Zahra challenges traditional, assigned gender roles, rejecting the submission and weakness assigned to her. She, if only fleetingly, becomes a part of the phallic power represented by the vertical, becoming complicit in the sniper's brutality and masculine violence. "My lord and master a god of death who had succeeded in making my body tremble with ecstasy for the first time in thirty years" (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 154).

For the first time in her life she felt happy, satisfied and in control. Zahra's hope was shattered when she learnt she was four months pregnant despite taking the pills. Unable to have abortion, she considered suicide. But when she explained to Sami her situation, he promised to marry her. That's how she describes her state of hope and fear when he said to her "trust me".

I said good-bye and ran down the stairs. I want to fly home. I want to tell my mother that I am getting married. But remembering how she and our neighbor laughed at me last night killed in me every desire. It seems as if the war has suddenly come to a stop

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with his promise that he will marry me. Everything seems normal ... The night is beautiful. I am late. I wish I'd wake up in the morning and hear that the war has seriously ended. Can he be a sniper? I must leave all my anxiety and questioning behind. I try to run. I try to skip into the air? Why does home seem such a distance? This is the last time I'll have to walk along here on my own. I feel afraid. ... The rain falls. I stumble. (al-Shaykh, 1995, p., 215).

She is shot several times. Was he trying to kill her? Her last words read:

He's killed me . . . Again I feel the drops of rain. I'm still in my place. As though I hear them: 'this is still the sniper'. It seems they've left me. I close my eyes again, or perhaps I haven't opened them before? Again, I see in the white skies rainbows coming towards me in frightening abundance. (al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 215).

These are Zahra's last words in her own voice. It may look or sound as though she's narrating her own death. But the symbolic message is rather different. In rain and rainbows, there is still new bright hope. Let's not forget that with rainbows and rain there is always a rising sun somewhere. Before Zahra closes her eyes on loads of rainbows, she calls for her brother Ahmad, for whom she has great passion and love. And she wishes she were in a warm room with him and her mother. She doesn't ask for her father.

3. Conclusion:

It is very unfortunate that Zahra is a non-independent human being, for her family and her community. Zahra is embodied by the worthy person, the helpless woman who has to obey and accept what is filled with orders, she must accept this status without complaining or grumbling. Zahra that was abused by her family, raped and assaulted several times, gradually sunk into the gloomy of the patriarchal system that left the woman without hope of prosperity. Al- Shaykh's novel thus reminds us that society cannot achieve peace when half of its population is shattered and misrepresented.

In *The Story of Zahra*, the reader is granted a female viewpoint through the chapters narrated by Zahra. In this way, Ghandour explains, Zahra resists patriarchy's attempts to reduce her to ghost as well:

... by telling her own (hi)story Zahra is, in fact, disrupting the coherent continuous narrative of the patriarchal story of the state. In other words, Zahra's story subverts the dominant discursive narrative of the patriarchal story, the prevalent discourse in Lebanon (Ghandour, p. 234).

Here we see that even though Zahra manages to rebel against society and the patriarchal social codes that have governed her body, experiencing her sexuality in new and liberating ways, she cannot affect any permanent change. While war grants women more mobility, any freedom they experience is temporary and contingent upon the war itself. Adams stresses that upon her return to Beirut, "Zahra may finally register a relationship with her society, but this is problematically predicated on the war itself" (Adams, p. 205). Her efforts to sustain the

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changes that she undergoes in a permanent way can only result in failure. In Alison Booth introduction to *Famous Last Words* (1993), she explains that one of the most powerful tools of resistance available to the heroine at the end is that of voice (expressed through dialogue) or overt narration, as is the case in *The Story of Zahra*: "the image of wronged woman is quite capable of shattering its pantomime pose with a 'telling' act of revenge" (Booth, p. 16). In this way, the heroine can re-imagine or re-contextualize her own end. Zahra accomplishes this by narrating the entire second section of the novel, including her own death. In this way she indicates patriarchy's inability to completely silence her, her story and her acts of rebellion, even in death.

Hence, any attempt to stop it without breaking the heinous patriarchy will be a weak and humiliating effort made in the framework of an autocratic patriarchal family, as we have seen in the tragic death of Zahra. Finally, *The Story of Zahra* in the name of humanity and civilized values symbolizes a humanistic statement in defense of peace, love and tolerance.

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