



# Dynamics of fear and hope, and the resistance against patriarchal power: Quest for freedom in Hanan al-Shaykh's *Story of Zahra* Nijmeh Hajjar

## The Earth is closing on us

The earth is closing on us, pressing on us in the last corridor.  
We tear off our limbs to pass through. The earth is squeezing us.  
I wish we were its wheat so we could die and live again.  
I wish the earth were our mother so she'd have compassion for us.  
I wish we were images of the rocks that our dreams will carry as  
mirrors. We saw the faces of those who will be killed by the last of us  
in the last battle to defend the soul.  
We wept for their children's feast.  
And we saw the faces of those who will throw our children out of  
the windows of this last space, as mirrors that our star will polish.  
Where should we go after the last frontiers?  
Where should the birds fly after the last sky?  
Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air?  
We will write our names with scarlet steam.  
We will cut off the hand of melody for our flesh to complete the song.  
Here we will die. Here in the last corridor.  
Here or here our blood will plant its olive trees.<sup>1</sup>

Mahmud Darwish

As I was writing this paper, I was following what is happening in Lebanon





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and Palestine under the Israeli military force. For over three weeks, I have watched, with helplessness and despair, the killing of innocent people and destruction of my ancestral homeland. And every minute, I asked myself what hope is there in talking about "resistance against patriarchal power" while my people are oppressed by, and fighting the power of politics – the politics of the world dominant power.

Much as I like to talk about hope in the context of the political, or even the humanitarian crisis of the moment, I still think that women's issues deserve our attention if we hope to achieve a genuine socio-political transformation, and establish peace based on justice, freedom and human rights.

Arab intellectuals are divided over many issues, but none more than over feminism, a word on whose Arabic equivalent they have yet to agree. Associated with Westernisation, women's liberation and feminism are entangled in political and cultural debates.<sup>3</sup> Arab intellectuals and writers have also been preoccupied with the question of priority. Many, including some women, argue that however deeply they empathise with the women's issue they "can't give it priority in a society which is rife with social and political problems."<sup>3</sup>

Western feminist scholarship deals with Arabic feminist writing from a Western perspective,<sup>4</sup> and among Arab intellectuals there is a great debate over the relevance or suitability of the Western feminist theories in Arab societies. Moreover, I myself am not interested in the "hopelessly tiresome" feminist jargon, to borrow from Edward Said.<sup>5</sup>

Western discourse offers a great deal on hope and power. At some stage I considered Raymond Williams's *Resources of Hope*, Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and Social Hope*, and even Gerry Adams's *Hope and History*.<sup>6</sup> There is Michael Albert's *Realizing Hope*, with a social vision on gender relations.<sup>7</sup> There is also Chomsky's hopeful discourse on resistance and power, and of course, the "unhopeful" scepticism of Foucault and Derrida. All are mostly concerned with Western hope or with hope, power and society, from a Western perspective.

Despite this hopeless Arab age, or perhaps because of it, one could



select from the vast corpus of works on Arab politics, or the wealth of literary and cultural output in the Arab world in recent decades. Hope, fear, oppression, and resistance to power are current themes in the Arabic political discourse, Arabic creative literature, films, and songs, etc. The poem by the Palestinian Mahmud Darwish, with which I opened my paper, is just an opening.

My theoretical reference for this study is drawn from a combination of Arabic and Western, both religious and secular traditions. I'd like to say first, that I don't claim here to offer a new Arab feminist theory on hope and resistance to oppression. And I don't argue for, or against, "the dialectic of sex"<sup>9</sup> as the prototype for all forms of oppression. But I argue that we can't talk about hope in Arab society and politics and keep ignoring, or delaying, the issue of patriarchal oppression. In the ongoing debate about peace and democracy in the Middle East, and the determination of the world's superpower to force change in Arab societies, it is extremely important to address the struggle against patriarchal power as an integral part of the struggle against political oppression and imperial hegemony.

"Political power goes much deeper than one suspects."<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault's expression is, perhaps, nowhere more relevant than in the Arab world. Patriarchy may be a medium through which political power exercises itself.<sup>10</sup> In the holistic sense of power as "a capacity to dominate or control,"<sup>11</sup> patriarchy in Arab societies is a form of political power whose tenacity and oppression are not unlike state power, or superpower domination.

In a critical theory of "distorted change" in modern Arab societies, Hisham Sharabi (1927-2004) describes the unchanging patriarchal power as "neopatriarchy, which is manifested in the family structure, as well as the social structure as a whole."<sup>12</sup> In the introduction to the Arabic version of his *Neopatriarchy*,<sup>13</sup> Sharabi argues that because the cornerstone of neopatriarchy is its oppression of women, any long-term vision for essential/foundational change in Arab societies must then be based on a comprehensive socio-political and behavioural struggle. While citing "pessimism of the intellect . . . optimism of the will", a quote from Romain Rolland with which he opens his study, Sharabi insists that "there will be

neither change nor liberation in Arab societies without eliminating the patriarch / father, both as a symbol and authority, and without woman's emancipation, in word and deed."<sup>14</sup>

Stronger "optimism of the will" is reflected in the life and work of two other Arab American intellectuals: Edward Said (1935-2003),<sup>15</sup> and Ameen Rihani (1876-1940).<sup>16</sup> Almost a century earlier than Sharabi's *Neopatriarchy*, Rihani had proclaimed (in 1897), "I had a dream that women will not be cursed forever . . . [women] are now and forever ready to cope with men and add to the wealth of the world their skills and genius. That is my dream. That is what I hope for. That is what we are going to have. If my dream is not interpreted right this time it's not my fault; but I earnestly hope it will be."<sup>17</sup>

Edward Said was another source of hope in Arab intellectualism. Defender of Palestinian rights and engaged advocate for peace and justice, Said has written widely on politics, power and resistance with a strong sense of Hope.<sup>18</sup> His *After the Last Sky*,<sup>19</sup> (where should the birds fly?) a title inspired by Mahmoud Darwish's poem, is "a politics of hope" rather than exile or victimhood.<sup>20</sup> And at the personal and intellectual level Said has inspired many as "the embodiment of hope", "the source of hope" in humanity,<sup>21</sup> and a reassuring presence in "depressing time" and a "hopeless age".<sup>22</sup>

Said's great sense of hope is expressed in his criticism of Foucault's theory of power, which he says is used "to justify political quietism with sophisticated intellectualism."<sup>23</sup> "There is after all, Said says, a sensible difference between Hope and hope, just as there is a sensible difference between the Logos and words: We must not let Foucault get away with confusing them with each other, nor with letting us forget that history does not get made without work, intention, resistance, effort, or conflict, and that none of these things is silently absorbable into micronetworks of power."<sup>24</sup> Agreeing with Chomsky, Said couldn't see the benefit of theorising about power and oppression without imagining a humane future society, or without "some intention of alleviating human suffering, pain, or betrayed hope."<sup>25</sup>

On this Saidian-Chomskian model, I attempt my analysis of the

dynamics of hope, fear, and resistance to patriarchal power in modern Arabic feminist writing, taking *Hikayat Zahra* (*The Story of Zahra*) by the contemporary Lebanese female novelist Hanan al-Shaykh, as a case study.<sup>26</sup> Here, I should note that while Said (like Chomsky) invests much hope in writers and intellectuals,<sup>27</sup> he is concerned with resistance in the context of war, peace, justice and human rights, mainly as a struggle against “the huge accumulations of power and capital.”<sup>28</sup> In the sheer volume of his work, he gives only a modest attention to women’s resistance to power, and to Arab women writers, including al-Shaykh herself,<sup>29</sup> and to their contribution to the intellectual debates as “resources for hope”.<sup>30</sup>

For other aspects of the dynamics of hope and fear that I discuss in this paper, I look into Islamic mysticism. Fear and hope (*khawf wa raja'*) are two stations/states belonging to the essential and long standing aspects of mystical life. The Qur'an speaks often of the fear of God, or fear of the last Judgement. To feel fear is essential for every pious Muslim. But hope is just as essential, for life would be impossible without hope. For the early leading Sufi Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (d. 988), “Fear and hope are the two wings of action without which flying is impossible”.<sup>31</sup> Another Sufi, Ibn 'Abdullah Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896) saw that fear is a masculine element, hope is a feminine one, and the two together engender the deepest realities of faith.<sup>32</sup> The influential theologian, jurist, and mystic, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) saw that equilibrium between fear and hope is absolutely necessary for a sound religious life.<sup>33</sup> And for the Sufi poet Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (d. 1273), who sought identification of the human self with the divine Being,<sup>34</sup> neither fear nor hope is required any longer once the wayfarer has reached his/her goal:

*“The seaman/woman is always on the planks of hope and fear  
“When the plank and the wo/man become annihilated,  
“There remains only submersion.”*<sup>35</sup>

These references will help me discuss hope in the context of women’s struggle against patriarchal power in modern Arabic societies.<sup>36</sup> More specifically, they will, I hope, lead to an original analysis of Hanan al-Shaykh’s *Hikayat Zahra* (*The Story of Zahra*) as a rather powerful, and hopeful feminist novel.

Hanan al-Shaykh was born of a Shiite family in South Lebanon, and had a strict religious Muslim upbringing. The mystical influence on her writing is discernible but not pronounced. Her education, work and life experiences in the Arab world (especially Beirut, Cairo and the Gulf countries), and the West (she's lived in London since 1982), have not only put her face to face with the power of patriarchy, but also familiarised her with the literary and political feminist movements in both worlds. Her short stories and novels have captured such experiences with vividness,<sup>37</sup> and "unexpected power," that Edward Said recommended Western feminists to attend to her writing, rather than to Nawal al-Sa'dawi for example, for a better representation of feminist Arabic literature.<sup>38</sup>

I am interested in *The Story of / Hikayat Zahra* not only because it is a fine literary work, but also because, contrary to the prevailing critical opinion, it permeates a powerful sense of hope. I am mostly attracted to this novel because of its exceptional representation of the dynamics of hope and resistance from a political-feminist perspective.

Published in 1980, *Hikayat Zahra* is seen as the first and most impressive Arab feminist work mainly for its remarkable portrayal of life during the civil war in Lebanon (in the 1970s), and its feminist commentary on Lebanese society in general. It is the first novel where the "nationalist and feminist causes are treated as inseparable and equally critical."<sup>39</sup> *Hikayat Zahra* was read as a story of "individual psychological torment that expresses the collective suffering from sexual, social and national oppression;"<sup>40</sup> as the story of a woman's "hopeless relationships" in a truly fractured society;<sup>41</sup> and as a story of "despair, resignation, masochism and madness."<sup>42</sup>

I am a resisting reader! I read this novel as a tale of a woman's endless struggle between fear and hope: Fear of the patriarchal power, and hope for change and freedom. I argue that, at different levels, both fear and hope in al-Shaykh's narrative are intertwined in an infinite dialectical association that lingers on after the end of the novel and the death (or perhaps the near death?) of the female protagonist. Rather than one defeating the other, a new concept, which I call "fearful hope", is born of the struggle.

### Dynamics of Fear and Hope

Hanan al-Shaykh's novel is the story of a woman, called Zahra (flower in Arabic), looking back at her growing up years of physical, moral and sexual abuse. The narrator, Zahra divides her story into two main parts: The pre-war years of her childhood and adolescence in Lebanon, before she flees family and sexual oppression to Africa. There, her uncle's maddening control and harassment drives her into a deadly sickening possessive marriage of convenience. In the second part of her life, during the civil war in Lebanon, Zahra seems to gain some form of freedom, but not for long. The very man with whom she finds pleasure for the first time shattered her hope in a new life with a deadly bullet. He shot her!

Zahra ends her own story with a "hopeful" fear for her life. Or is it a "fearful hope"? 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." (*Hikaya*, 247; *Story*, 183-184).<sup>4</sup>

Reminiscent of a Sufi, Zahra seesaws between fear and hope. But hers is a quest for freedom and happiness in this world. As a child and adolescent (part one), her hope takes the form of an "escapist" reaction. Zahra hopes to resist the patriarchal power not by confronting it but by avoiding it, through silence, ruse, self-imprisonment in the bathroom, self-harm, suicidal attempts, even madness. Thus how her story begins: "We stood thinking trembling with fear behind the door. My heartbeats mixed with the pulse in her hand, as it stayed firmly pressed to my mouth. Her hand smelled of soap and onions. I wished she would keep it there for ever." (*Story*, 1; *Hikaya*, 7).

From Zahra's blurry remembrance, we learn that as a little girl she was forced to accompany her mother on her love affairs. Her first words describe her emotional state before, or after, one of those adulterous trips. On their return one day, the suspicious father hit both mother and daughter. Thus began Zahra's fear of the patriarchal power, embodied in her brutal father with a frowning face, Hitleri moustache and heavy body (*Story*, 19; *Hikaya*, 27); a man with a stubborn personality, always



preoccupied with his work routine, and obsessed with order and control. (*Hikaya*, 28) Zahra dreaded and loathed his fatherly patronising behaviour. He'd greet her with: "how are you daddy? (warm Arabic form of saying my child), and immediately ask: "where's Ahmad? Where's your mother?" (*Story*, 7; *Hikaya*, 13-14). His dream was to save money to send his son Ahmad to study in the US although he could barely read or write. (*Story*, 20; *Hikaya*, 28) She hated his crude way of dealing with her acnes problem, screaming at her and nagging sarcastically: "That will be the day, when Zahra marries. What a day of joy for her and her pock-marked face." (*Story*, 19; *Hikaya*, 27) His harsh character may have stopped her from disfiguring her face more badly, but couldn't erase the dreadful figure of this patriarch who knew only well how to hit.

### Hope in mother

Her immediate reaction to fearing her father was to hope in her mother who not only has the nourishing hand (onion), but also the protective one: a clean (soap), warm, and soft cushioning (plump) hand that would protect her forever. This instinctive hope in the mother is born of the biological bond, and represents an extension of the cord that ties mother and foetus together, and a continuation of the womb environment: warm, cosy and a "room of her own."<sup>44</sup> Here not only she would continue living a parasitic existence like "the orange and its navel," (*Hikaya*, 12, 16), but she would also be comfortable and, above all, safe. Her hope is also culturally natural. Coming from a traditional Arab family in a Lebanese village where the mother is still "an anchor for psychological reassurance,"<sup>45</sup> it was quite natural for Zahra to pin all her hope on her mother.

Other non-organic conditions have created the environment for the girl to nourish hopes in her mother. Now that both women are united against the pressure of the patriarch's power, which glued them together with fear, hope in the maternal strength becomes a quest for mutual protection from patriarchal brutality.

But, Zahra didn't take too long to realize that her hope in her mother is "disappointable."<sup>46</sup> A victim of oppression herself, the mother is powerless and incapable of protecting her vulnerable daughter. For many years





now, Zahra's mother has been subjected to the oppression of the man she married without love, and the pressure of the man she loved outside marriage. In his marital capacity, her husband demands loyalty and obedience. He dominates her with physical force and the authority of his "legitimate rights" and social traditions. To resist his control, she resorts to telling lies (like taking her daughter to the doctor, or visiting her father to go out with her lover); or she escapes his wrath by locking herself in the kitchen or the bathroom.

Hoping to find meaning for her own life, the mother searches for freedom outside the marital space. Her escape to another man is full of risks and of fear too. Only later did Zahra realise why her mother always took her along. The mother needed her daughter's protection. (*Hikaya*, 10; *Story*, 9). This mother-daughter togetherness in fear and hope creates a complex of fear in Zahra. In addition to fearing her father, she now fears the strange man, the lover of her mother. She hates him for giving her little dolls to distract her when he is with her mother; she doesn't trust his arguments and attempts to send her away from the love making room, and she fears his whisperings and movements in the bed she shares with her mother. This kind of androphobia would haunt her in adulthood. But as a child, she is frightened, jealous and disappointed.

Zahra's hope in her mother is not static. She is uncertain about her mother's ability to free her self and / or protect her daughter. As much as she desires to be with her mother, she gets rejected. She is disappointed, but doesn't blame her. She has no doubt that her mother is ignoring her "unintentionally" (in Arabic *la'an qasd*, but omitted in English, see *Hikaya*, 12) because "that man became the centre of her life, and around him was nothing but flying embers." (*Hikaya*, 12; *Story*, 6).

The natural, organic and legitimate hope that the child had in her mother failed because it is not "mediated by solid facts," to use Bloch's expression.<sup>7</sup> The mother was too feeble, and fragile, to live up to her daughter's expectations. At this time, the father was still too strong. He was the head of the family, the breadwinner, physically and sexually able, and socio-politically unchallenged by other male authority (for example his own son during the war). Above all, he was a tyrant. Under



these conditions, the mother was unable to defend herself or protect her daughter as expected. She failed her prime responsibility, thus disappointing her daughter's expectations, when the other man became the centre of her world.

If according to Spinoza, disappointed hope can flip into fear,<sup>8</sup> Zahra's disappointment with her mother turns not only into fear, but also into hatred, disgust, and pain. "As I grew older and looked back with disappointment and regret,<sup>9</sup> I hated her all the more for having immersed me in a world of doubts and questions and magic while still so young and vulnerable." (*Hikaya*, 13; *Story*, 6) She would be filled of disgust every time she remembers the many abortions her mother had because she didn't want any more children from her husband. Over the years, Zahra understood her fear of her father but couldn't comprehend the nature of her feelings towards her mother. Is it jealousy? Or pity for her duped cheated father? Or is it her fear of the other man in her mother's life?

Zahra's hope of ever escaping from the tyranny of her father to the tenderness and warmth of her mother was almost abandoned. It was fear of her brutal father that fuelled her with renewed hope. Her father is showering both women with blows to tell the truth about their outings. The mother escapes to the kitchen with a death wish: "leave me. I want to die". Zahra doesn't know to whom she owes her loyalty. But she knows she's frightened. Her fear of her father, for her life and her mother's, gave her some strength for action. Seeing the blood over her mother's face, Zahra tore at her own hair, beat her chest, stood on a chair, and reached for the window. She meant to cry for help. She managed to distract her father while her mother gathered her strength and escaped to the bathroom. (*Hikaya*, 17-18; *Story*, 10-12).

This incident is quite significant. It is the first instance where the dynamics of fear and hope have resulted in some sort of action. Zahra's fear has actually given her an active sense of hope, not only to escape, but also to resist men's oppression and defend women's survival. Suggestive of the Sufi Sahl's, the "feminine Hope" has generated positive power to resist the "masculine Fear". It is a short-lived hope, but would prepare Zahra for more desperate times in the future. A Lebanese proverb says:



"hope without work (action) is like a tree without fruit."<sup>50</sup> But Zahra's active hope is just a moment of optimism. It was fruitless and eventually turned into self-harm. As Zahra reached the window to call for help, her father, thinking she was going to jump, threw himself at her. At that moment she "really did want to jump for fear of him." (*Hikaya*, 18; *Story*, 12).

Zahra's death wish is paradoxical and an ironic hope. Her fear of the masculine seemed so great that her only hope to end it was to escape from life into death. But her fear/suffering hasn't reached yet the very extreme point of tension where, according to Teilhard de Chardin, the existent can only hope through death.<sup>51</sup> She will hope in death in the future – another paradox – when the patriarchal power becomes more oppressive while she grows up more powerless and hopeless.

Zahra's childhood hope in her mother doesn't die with this incident, which keeps cropping up in a Freudian "return of the repressed" syndrome,<sup>52</sup> every time she fears the wrath of her father and the oppression of other men. Her instinctive biological hope in the feminine flips into fear when disappointed, not just fear of the masculine other, but also fear of the feminine self as well as other women. Does she turn into a "woman against her sex",<sup>53</sup> or a misanthrope? Grown up into an oppressed woman, Zahra hated her mother and feared her. Now that she has learned her mother's tricks (illegitimate sex, lies, ruses, suicidal threats, etc) she was scared that her mother, who knew so much about women and men, would betray her. Three times she fell pregnant out of wedlock, and with every abortion she felt fear, disgust and despair. Those were feelings not only towards her male abusers, but also towards other male oppression perpetrators (father, husband, uncle, brother, doctor, etc.) and female accomplices (represented in her mother and the female nurse in the abortion clinic).

Zahra's hope in her mother was not only biological and natural, but also legitimate. It involves no rule breaking, nor challenging the social system, because it has developed from within the family itself, the first and most important social institution in Arabic culture. So hoping in the maternal to resist the patriarchal does not challenge patriarchy or the family institution, especially as Zahra is a legitimate child. Hypothetically, her maternal hope was to be, not only expected, but also enduring.



"Whoever seeks God's help doesn't get disappointed," according to a classical Arabic saying (*sa'ilu Allah la yakhib*).<sup>54</sup> And to the child Zahra, her mother was almost everything. No wonder why her disappointment was as great as her hope, and why when she lost hope in her mother she turned to her maternal family: Her grandfather and uncle.

### Hope in maternal grandfather

Zahra's disappointment, fear and hatred of her mother didn't turn her into a misogynist, at least not as a child. Her natural instinctive feeling of maternal (like orange-navel) love still engenders hope in her. This now takes the form of great expectations in the patriarchal but still from within matriarchy. By taking refuge in the male members of her maternal family, Zahra hopes to use the patriarchal power, even if from within the matriarchal spectrum, to defeat patriarchy itself. Between her grandfather in the village and her uncle in Africa, her hope takes also another dimension in time and space.

As a child, Zahra thought she could salvage her maternal love by getting away with her mother from the man she loved in the city. She feared the health hazards in the village, but her hope in the help of her loving and caring grandfather was even greater. But, no long, she felt the village had slipped away from her grasp, and her mother was no longer present. "This man had followed us here where we were: my mother, I, and the wind." (*Story*, 5; *Hikaya*, 11). Her hope "is gone in the wind" too. "I wanted to throw myself into the old man's arms, beg him and hope (*arjuh*) he'd let me stay with him in the warm protecting green tobacco tent." (*Hikaya*, 15). But the old man has no more authority on his now married and trickster daughter. Had he lost his patriarchal power with the loss of the phallus? The "phallic symbolism" in the text is very telling. The grandfather's small tent in the village in contrast with the high buildings in Beirut; his old hands threading soft green tobacco leaves on to skewers to dry. I couldn't resist the cigar contrast here!<sup>55</sup>

Was this loss of male sexuality what made Zahra pin her hope on her grandfather in the first place? Was the grandfather's loss of patriarchal authority due to the loss of his sexual prowess, or because another male



in the family, stronger, and more determined, is now challenging the maternal patriarch? Anyway the grandfather, who dies in the story, was too old and powerless to sustain hope. Otherwise how could Qasim, her maternal cousin, dare to sexually molest her when she was sleeping in her expectantly safe bed of her grandfather? Her memory of Qasim, her first experience of sexual abuse, will send shivers of fear in her spine every time a man approached her. Even when she hoped she could find some sense for her life with her uncle in Africa.

### **Hope in Love**

Zahra turned to her uncle after a disappointing love experience in Beirut that, literally, drove the young woman into madness. After years of physical and moral abuse in her childhood, Zahra's fear and disappointment have turned into aggression, but against herself rather than against her aggressors. She lost faith in her worth. She didn't care about her appearance and her acnes problem worsened under her own fingers. She left school although she was doing well. She couldn't understand why her parents insisted on educating her brother Ahmad while he couldn't care less. She got herself a manual job in a tobacco company and she was in love. Hope in hell!

The man she hoped would free her from her tyrannical father, a friend of the family, seduced her with romantic words of love, friendship and gender equality. He was married with children and refused to take another wife, even after he impregnated her and she underwent two abortions while still a teenager. She was willing to accept the humiliation of polygamous marriage to evade death on her father's hands. Fearful of him discovering she had tarnished his honour she took refuge in Africa.

At this age, Zahra's struggle against patriarchal power enters a new phase. Her hope, which now takes an emotional dimension, doesn't take long to collapse. I am even inclined to say that what she experienced then was not a hope driven relationship, but rather an act of desperation. For a woman who has experienced the rage of the injured patriarch, it shouldn't have been very difficult to imagine the consequences of sex out of marriage. Even as a child, she learned the hard way that in her world,



a man's honour rests in his women's chastity. To dare challenge this must be a mistake, an irrational act or out of despair, or all of the above.

When Zahra entered this relationship, her hope in love must have been greater than her shame or fear. It may be irrational, but promising. Through "free love" (out of marriage) Zahra was seeking freedom, not from the marriage institution or from men's power, but just freedom from the authority of her father. Although her hope in love was illegitimate (unlike her natural, accepted and expected hope in her mother and grandfather), it should have been liberating. But this hope was illusionary because there was no love at all. Malik, which means owner in Arabic, actually owned Zahra, he didn't love her. And she herself never loved him. She "couldn't stand him." She hated and feared every moment of their encounter. Their secret underground relationship was simply a series of oppressive sexual intercourses void of any passion or pleasure in humiliating conditions and consequences for her. Rather than being a liberator, her love was a source of more humiliation, subjugation and exploitation.

Based on false promises and misleading expectations, Zahra's "hopeful" relationship with Malik began with a seductive, and sadistic, sexual penetration in an underground garage and ended in two painful, humiliating abortions in an illicit clinic. Her hope was essentially "disappointable", in Bloch's definition, because neither the subjective nor objective facts by which it was mediated were certain.<sup>8</sup> The patriarchal power, embodied in Malik and the father, was never going to allow such hope to thrive because it goes beyond the allowed to the forbidden. Her hope in love failed because it's resisting the patriarchal power from within. While her "free love" challenged her father's authority and her own fear of him, she became oppressed and enslaved by the patriarchal power of her disappointingly abusive lover.

But why did she always go to him? Fear! "I was hypnotised, she says, Fear would always dominate me the moment I entered home and avoided speaking with my father and mother. What if my father saw Malik? Why did I let that amazing fear take over every moment of my life? Why did I let it consume me and, bit by bit, make me ravage my face? I have lived in a cyclone of uncertainty and fear. I only needed to say no once." (*Story*,



96; *Hikaya*, 133). Was it weakness that she didn't do so? At her adolescent age, Zahra was still unable to take some action to challenge her fear. She couldn't understand the nature of her weakness. She was never free of her own situation, nor was she free to negate that situation or try to change it. This Sartrean freedom of choice was still beyond her grasp.<sup>57</sup> She will undergo more painful experiences before understanding her predicament and becoming free to imagine and free to choose. For now, she is bitterly disappointed. She failed to challenge or resist the patriarchal authority, which was embodied in her father and abusive lover, and thus doubly powerful and oppressive, physically and emotionally. Her hopes were shattered and she was driven to her first nervous breakdown. Madness has become her hopeful liberator.

### **Hope in uncle**

After her hospital treatment with electric choc, unaware of the causes of her illness, Zahra's parents allowed her to travel to Africa. For sometime she had been corresponding with her maternal uncle, Hashim, who excitingly invited her to his exile home. An ex-activist in the Syrian Popular Party, Hashim had taken refuge in Africa after a failed coup d'état in Lebanon. Hashim embodied a renewed hope for Zahra. Everything she remembered of him was out of the ordinary: his life style and friends, his admiration of intellectual women, his political activism and defiance, even his sportsmanship and physical strength. In Lebanon, no one could stand in Hashim's face, and in Africa, he managed in a short time to become a prominent member of the Lebanese community.

Unlike her hope in love, Zahra's hope in Hashim (like in his father) doesn't challenge the patriarchal family system. On the contrary, Hashim was a strong male family member (unlike his powerless father), who could take good care of this young vulnerable female. Otherwise how would her father allow her to go to him to Africa? Hope in the uncle represents a renewed faith in Arab patriarchy, which the author presents here as a progressive patriarchy that advocates women equality as part of its political program for national liberation and progress. Hashim in West Africa also represents hope in the young generation of Arab men in

the Diaspora: liberal, powerful and financially established. And he is at a distance from the main centre of traditional patriarchy, physically and intellectually. It was in her uncle, not in her young brother for example, that Zahra hoped she would find a solution to her problems. She loved her brother, but this love didn't engender any faith in him. Ahmad was uneducated, unemployed and still under the control of his authoritarian father. In Lebanon, he was part of the patriarchal order that oppressed her and couldn't be part of the solution. This is why Zahra saw in Hashim a true "white hope". But in "black Africa", Zahra realised how much she idealised her uncle. She wrote in her diary: "I feel very disappointed now that I have seen my uncle. He sounded so different in his letters. I'm afraid he's a very mixed-up person." (*Story*, 21; *Hikaya*, 29). Hashim reminded her of Qasim, her cousin and child molester. And she thought he was as authoritarian and violent as her father.

From the early days of Zahra's stay with her uncle, he's gone down in her esteem. Her hope in him was too idealistic – like his own political idealism – that soon after she stepped on Africa's soil, it transformed into a feeling of disgust, fear and embarrassment. According to her own story (the "I" narrates with the female voice), she hated him for using her as a sounding board to his nostalgia and political frustration and patriotism. She also feared and despised his way of controlling every moment of her life. In her mind, he sexually harassed her and exploited her female body to compensate the loss of his family and homeland. According to his story (the male voice in the novel), the exiled uncle wanted his niece's full attention because she represented everything he lost back home. She was his only tie to his past and future and his family and homeland. She restored confidence in him and changed his whole life in Africa, and he was not going to let go of her. His feeling towards her was so strong that he admits If Zahra wasn't his niece he would have married her.

No matter which of the two stories we want to believe, the fact remains that Hashim couldn't understand Zahra's desperate need for protection, free from patriarchal control. Despite his modern life style, apparent liberalism and open-mindedness, he remained too possessive and dominating. For Zahra, his obsession with his own form of patriotism,



his egocentrism and authoritarian behaviour, not unlike her father's or Malik's, turned to be a new form of patriarchal oppression.

Zahra's hope and disappointment with her uncle reflects the disillusionment of the author with the so-called "progressive" national political movements in Arab societies. These have not only ignored gender dynamics and women's issues in their modernising programs, but their patriarchal discourse and vision have contributed to the marginalisation of women in their society.<sup>8</sup> Under national governments the status of women has continued to be subordinate to that of men in most Arabic societies, despite apparent indicators of modernisation. Arab feminists, men and women, have condemned the dominant "male-oriented" outlook, which has continued to "assign privilege and power to the male at the expense of the female," a state of affairs Hisham Sharabi terms "neopatriarchy."<sup>9</sup>

Zahra's reaction to this neo-patriarchal and sophisticated power as she experienced it with her uncle led her to feeling sexually and emotionally exploited, disappointed, of course, and frightened. But away from the tyranny of her father and her humiliating past, the "black continent" and her oppressed men and women, didn't inspire Zahra with much hope. Haunted by the heavy burden of the past, and the new conditions of the present, her resistance to oppression continued to be as passive and escapist as before. But Africa has alerted her to the new conditions, and made her wary about everything, and constantly watching to avoid any embarrassing situation. She has also developed some new techniques to overcome her fear.

One particular incident is quite telling of how Zahra reacted / did not react to the aggression of the new patriarch. One day she caught Hashim reading her diary in her room. She pounced on him "like a little tigress" and snatched her diary from his hands. (*Hikaya*, 29; *Story*, 21). But immediately she turned her anger against herself. She locked herself in the bathroom, but not before destroying her notes and hiding them in her underwear. This "cleverness" and sort of deception, which she had always used with her father, filled her with a sense of happiness, but not with enough strength to stop her uncle, or to face him with the true feelings she had towards him. Older and more experienced, Zahra now



knows her feelings quite well. But she is not strong enough to actively resist the oppressive conditions that caused her so much pain. She felt powerless against this new patriarchal force, which is doubly oppressive. By facing her uncle with the truth she would have to tell him the whole truth, including her humiliating relationship with Malik. She didn't fear his physical wrath, as much she dreaded the idea of destroying the nice image he, and the rest of the family, had formed of her. (*Hikaya*, 134). Her "respectability", defined by the patriarchal society according to her sexual behaviour,<sup>60</sup> was as important as gaining her freedom from patriarchal power. The dilemma between breaking the ties with patriarchy and staying within its respectable constraints has contributed to her powerlessness and despair. Under these conditions, hope was impossible. Her pain was insurmountable. It drove her to another nervous breakdown.

Her physical and psychological suffering, and her fear of not coping with the pain, has driven her to accept a marriage offer from her uncle's friend, Majid. Her hope in this exit strategy was obviously short-lived. Majid was enraged when he found out that she had sex prior to marriage. But he was prepared to keep her as long as he could force himself on her. Majid himself represented no real promises to Zahra. But marriage presented her with the opportunity to escape her uncle's domination and break ties with her family and her past without fear of social consequences. Unlike her illegitimate relationship with Malik, which she hoped to free her from her father's domination, marriage represented a legitimate hope to free her from the domination of her uncle. Through marriage, she hoped for change without revolution. But this institutionalised hope was far from liberating.

Her marriage to Majid was a typical traditional marriage of convenience. For her, he offered a space in Africa outside her uncle's home. For him she's an economic and social convenience. She was already there, he didn't have to go to Lebanon, and spend a fortune to marry. Sexually frustrated, both physically and emotionally, marriage made Majid "the owner of a woman's body" that he could make love to whenever he wished. (*Hikaya*, 98; *Story*, 69). Rather than finding in marriage a remedy to her problem, Zahra finds herself in the midst of a more serious crisis. All she could feel



towards her husband was hatred, disgust and fear. She feared and hated him because he reminded her of all the men in her life. She escapes once more into madness. And finding no more hope in Africa, she returned to Beirut, a city ravaged by the civil war.

Ironically, the torrents of civil war give Zahra some peace. The war has changed everybody's life including hers. Her father has lost his patriarchal authority now that the new generation has taken over (his son is now with the local militia).<sup>6</sup> Because of the war in Beirut, her parents live in the village and her brother in the battlefield, so she has a home of her own, and she can move freely in the neighbourhood. The war has also given her some happiness. For the first time in her life she experienced real sexual pleasure with Sami, the sniper.

Zahra now has gained maturity. She can understand the dynamics of politics and war. And she is willing to take some action, not in fighting and killing like her brother, but on the other side of the war. Having experienced pain herself, she now could feel the sufferings of other people, and is willing to take some action to alleviate their pain. Despite her fear of the war, and the hopeless conditions around her, Zahra found hope in a new life in some form of activism. Her philosophy of action was altruistic and humanely driven. It was the suffering of other people rather than her own pain that drove her hope in active participation. She did some volunteer work in the hospital. But this wasn't enough to stop the killing of innocent people. She had to stop the sniper, even though she knew he was aiming at the Christian side of the street.

Zahra's renewed hope in life inspired her with an idea to distract the sniper. She paraded half-dressed on the roof for him to see her, and she visited him when he invited her. She has questioned the morality of her tactics but was determined to persist until the sniper stopped killing people, at least when she was with him. Zahra's individual suffering as a child drove her to a death wish. But human suffering renewed in her a positive energy to hope for life and work for it, even if she has to work against man's power. She has suffered enough from male oppression, and is determined to stop it for the sake of other people, women and men.

Mature and more experienced, Zahra seems to have a better

understanding of the patriarchal power. She knows its strengths and weaknesses. And hope has fuelled 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. 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 (Sufi wings!). I want to tell my mother that I am getting married. But remembering how she and our neighbour laughed at me last night killed in me every desire. It seems as if the war has suddenly come to a stop 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." (Hikaya, 244).*

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." (Hikaya, 247; Story, 183-184).*

This last scene is very important not only for its stylistic creativity and imagination, but also for its symbolic message. These are Zahra's last words



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in her own voice. It may look or sound as though she's narrating her own death.<sup>62</sup> But the symbolic message is rather different. In rain and rainbows, I see new bright hope. Let's not forget that with rainbows and rain there is always a rising sun somewhere. Rain in Arabic culture is a symbol of fertility and rainbows are symbol of joy and happiness. I remember as kids we associated rainbows with "the wedding of the lizard".

Rather than death, I see in this last scene hope in a new life and a new society where the young are in charge (young men came to her succour), strong, courageous, and daring. 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.

My reading of the *Story of Zahra* indicates that the narrator/author's hope is persistent. Against all odds and disappointment, the female protagonist persists in her hope to resist the patriarchal power and defeat it. But instead of defeating the man himself, she hopes to overcome her fear of the man and overpower his oppression of her. She hopes to surmount the fear within the feminine "Self" and to triumph over the oppressive power within the masculine "Other". The author also offers an alternative, in the Chomskian and Saidian sense of power. Rather than hoping to establish a "male-less" world, Zahra's story (in its rain and rainbows symbolism) ends with a vision of a new world free from the patriarchal power and the powerlessness of woman.

For me, the *Story of Zahra* is not only a "quest for freedom" but also a quest for a new feminist literary outlook in Arabic literature. Hanan al-Shaykh narrates with both female and male voices. Two chapters on men (uncle and husband) are written in the male voice. The author doesn't blame the two men for Zahra's plight. She actually let them speak for themselves. She has expressed full range of experiences encompassing both masculinity and femininity.

Zahra's story has no romance plot, and may not appeal to Arab women, or to Arab men readers. But this story may make Arab women aware of their own lives and experiences. It may also allow them to vent some anger about their situation.



Unlike other critics who read the last words literally to argue the case of despair, resignation and death, I interpret the symbolism of the last words in terms of hope. Al-Shaykh's narrative envisions a new feminist "androgynic" world-view, where, hopefully, both women and men would be free from patriarchal oppression and able to build a world free of dominance and hierarchy. It may be a "wishful flight" from the material conditions that oppress women, or a vision that disguises sexual bias. But it is still a hopeful vision!

## NOTES

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