"The Orange and Navel": Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma in Hanan al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra*

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The *Story of Zahra*, a novel written by Hanan al-Shaykh, follows Zahra, a young woman growing up in Lebanon before and during the Civil War of 1975. Zahra experiences traumas throughout her life at the hands of her family members, lovers, country, and the civil war that tears it apart. Throughout the novel and seemingly as a result of these traumas, Zahra is often confined to her bed and even hospitalized multiple times, due to unspecified mental illness. Zahra’s relationship with her mother is a central aspect of the novel that is directly connected to the traumas she experiences. A strong and almost seemingly involuntary connection between her and her mother is established early on in the novel, and she consistently explains how the strengthening of this connection is fueled and almost forced by her mother.

Many readers and scholars commonly perceive Zahra as a one dimensional, passive victim, rather than a victim of trauma actively responding to and coping with the compounded past and present traumas impacting her daily life. Zahra is read as passive and/or mad, (Accad 1; Larson 15) and in some cases, even self-destructive (Accad 1), among other negative and distrustful perceptions that all point to seeing her as an unreliable narrator and protagonist. In her article, “Sexuality, War, and Literature in Lebanon,” Accad calls Zahra “masochistic” because of the sexual relationship she has with the Sniper (Accad 1). She talks of Zahra as if she has no agency at all, or as if her madness is what fuels all of her decision making, and thus, as readers we should not see Zahra as legitimate. In a similar vein, Charles Larson calls Zahra “directionless” (Larson 14) once again denying Zahra any agency in her decisions, and acting as if Zahra’s experience of trauma results in her having some sort of deficit. Often, seemingly unintentionally or without awareness of the possible harm and delegitimization it can cause to Zahra as a protagonist and al-Shaykh’s novel as a whole, authors paint Zahra in a very negative light. I believe this perception of Zahra leads to devaluing the significance of the real experience of Lebanese people and specifically women in the Civil War that Zahra’s fictional experience represents.

In this paper, I explored the effects of Zahra’s and her mother’s traumas and experiences using the theory of transgenerational transmission of trauma to reconsider published critical analyses of the novel. I describe several instances of what I believe to be problematic interpretations of Zahra, the narrator, as “unreliable” in *The Story of Zahra*.

In their article, “A New Look at Transgenerational Trauma Transmission: Second-Generation Latino Immigrant
Youth,” psychologists Suzanne Degges-White and Ricardo M. Phipps explain, “In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the existence of what researchers have labeled vicarious or secondary trauma; this can be experienced by those who have significant, close relationships to the direct victims of trauma, such as therapists or family members. Additionally, when the effects of trauma extend to other generations in the same family beyond the generation of the person experiencing primary trauma, the phenomenon has been labeled *transgenerational trauma* or *intergenerational trauma*” (Degges-White & Phipps 175). In addition, research has found that the transgenerational transmission of traits is seemingly more likely to come from the maternal side than the paternal side (Yahyabi, Zarghami & Marwah 91).

Zahra’s psychological state is a key focus of the novel and is addressed both directly and demonstratively through her narration, thus making it possible to apply the theory of transgenerational transmission of trauma to Zahra’s experience and explore the psychological effects the transmission has on Zahra. Based on the definition of transgenerational trauma, there are multiple instances in *The Story of Zahra* in which there is clear evidence of trauma transmission between Zahra and her mother.

For example, in the second chapter of the novel, the text presents a moment in which Zahra appears to hold a memory as a result of her mother’s transmission of trauma when she, who has had two abortions herself, remembers her mother’s abortion:

> Ahmad was seven years older than me. Between us there had been a set of twins, girl and boy, who lived but briefly in a porcelain soup dish after my mother aborted them. Why did she let those bodies no bigger than a finger swim in a soup dish while she lay sprawled on the bed? The official midwife, Izdihar, shook her head, feeling sorry or happy, I did not know which. There was no accounting for it. I remember the neighbors pouring into the bedroom to greet my mother, then peering into the soup dish where the tiny embryos swam and then exclaiming, ‘In the name of Allah, the All Merciful. Blessed be the Creator. Look, here is a fully developed creature.’ But one was more forthright and asked, ‘Why abortion after abortion?’ Another grew more outspoken still, and spat, swearing and shoving the dish aside: ‘I spit on the human being. Is this how we all are created—as minute as a fingernail becoming as huge as mules!’ My mother would lean on a neighbor to visit the bathroom. The she would return to bed, pale, yet, with happiness almost jumping from her glistening eyes. She didn’t want to have children by my father. (al-Shaykh 26)

Clearly, in this scene, Zahra is describing an event that happened before she was born, and thus, logically, readers could interpret Zahra as unreliable. While that is a logical interpretation, upon further analysis, I believe this particular scene does not present Zahra as an unreliable narrator to readers, but rather as a recipient of her mother’s trauma. As a result of transgenerational trauma transmission, Zahra vividly remembers her mother’s abortion and feels the visceral combination of shame and relief that her mother experienced due to aborting a child whose father physically and emotionally abuses her. It is possible that when Zahra says that she remembers, she is not necessarily speaking literally. Thus, this demonstrates that the trauma her mother experienced as a result of the abortion, along with the backlash that she received from her community after she had it, was passed on to Zahra, when her mother shared this experience with her. Additionally, the transmitted trauma from her mother is compounded by the trauma Zahra herself experiences at the hands of the same event and the same societal pressures. For example, while locked in the bathroom after she is married to Majed, her uncle’s friend who lives in Africa in exile, Zahra remembers the traumatic event of one of her own abortions and identifies how social pressures as a result of her abortion, which are the same social pressures her mother experiences, led her to marry Majed: “I wish to remain forever in this bathroom despite all the knocks on the door that still throb in my ears and the voice of the stranger who has entered my life because I was once spread out on the old doctor’s table.
as his nurse combed her hair and casually put on lipstick. Because of that I am here, in this stranger’s bathroom” (al-Shaykh 99). Zahra and her mother have each acted in ways that are deemed unacceptable in Lebanese society due to beliefs influenced by patriarchy and misogyny, and as a result of this, they both are largely traumatized by the backlash they receive in response to these acts.

al-Shaykh demonstrates how similarly Zahra and her mother are affected by this trauma through the use of repetitive images in the text. For example, the image of Zahra during her abortion in which she spread out on the doctor’s table mirrors the image of her mother after her abortion as she is sprawled on the bed. Both women respond to the trauma of the event with the same exhausted relief to be without a child they did not want because the father of that child used, abused, and failed them. al-Shaykh employs this technique of repetitive action or mirroring again when Zahra is thinking about her marriage to Majed and how she is going to get through it, saying, “I don’t need to forget that I am capable of keeping my feelings to myself, especially since marriage, after a while, becomes a sort of contract. That was what Malek used to say. That is what everybody says. All I need to do is keep my real self hidden” (al-Shaykh 107). Zahra mirrors her mother’s relationship history in some ways, as she marries a man from whom she is forced to hide her “real self,” and who she does not love, but has entered into a sort of contract with.

In other moments in the text, al-Shaykh similarly creates mirror images of Zahra and her mother, especially in their responses to trauma. For example, when Zahra is witnessing her father abusing her mother and accusing her of adultery, she says, “I wanted then to run to her, to pull her to me so we could again become like orange and navel, and began to cry and whimper with her.” Later in this scene,

Zahra says, “Seeing the blood covering her face, I tore at my hair and beat my chest, exactly as she would do herself” (al-Shaykh 15). Once again, the image of the orange and navel appears, reminding us of the umbilical, inseparable nature of the connection between Zahra and her mother, a connection that can only be severed by further trauma: “My mother and I shouted out together as if we were once again as close as the orange and navel, as we had been when we stood trembling behind the door, back in my earliest memories” (al-Shaykh 136).

The image of the orange and navel appears again toward the end of the novel right before Zahra’s death at the hands of the Sniper. Initially, Zahra thinks of killing herself after learning she is pregnant with the Sniper’s baby, and she thinks of her mother discovering her death, saying, “I wondered whether she would think of the past, and of my existence as an extension of her own since we had been inseparable, like orange and navel” (al-Shaykh 196). As the novel is coming to a close, al-Shaykh repeats the image of the orange and the navel and reestablishes the connection between Zahra and her mother, which has greatly diminished over time. This moment recalls Zahra’s trauma and the roots of her trauma. It is almost as if Zahra herself is acknowledging the occurrence of the trans-generational transmission of trauma that has occurred between her and her mother.

The image of the orange and navel and its being reminiscent of the connection of a mother and child through the umbilical cord is significant and further provides evidence of this sort of transmission of trauma model because the umbilical cord is how the mother transmits nutrients and life to her baby when it is in the womb. It is possible to imagine that the traumas that the mother experiences can also be passed through the umbilical cord or through the closeness and connection of mother and child, which is like “the orange and navel.” Considering the literal image of the orange and navel is also significant, as the navel of the orange can only be removed by way of force or inducing a sort of trauma upon the orange and navel. The seeds of that traumatized orange remain and produce another generation of oranges, which then
experience more trauma and pass that down to another generation of oranges.

Diya Abdo points out how instances throughout the novel “[suggest] that [Zahra’s] memory, indeed her consciousness has not entirely been her own” (Abdo 222). This suggestion can on one hand be an explanation for thinking of Zahra as an unreliable narrator, and on another hand this suggestion shows that Zahra’s memory and consciousness is in fact not entirely her own because she is a recipient of trauma from previous generations. For example, Mona Fayad suggests that “Zahra is able to find a voice through telling her own story and her mother’s, providing, instead of the reassuring voice of the radio announcer that denies the existence of the war, an account, not only of the Lebanese Civil War itself, but of the social systems that generate the violence of the war” (Fayad). Zahra’s mother has experienced trauma of various forms and transmitted that trauma to Zahra, she has also, as a result of her own trauma, contributed to Zahra’s traumatization in many situations. It is clear that her mother has also received her own trauma from previous generations and is deeply affected by that throughout her entire life. For example, when Zahra returns from Africa for the first time, she sees her mother and describes her by saying, “I saw my mother’s round face, seeming about to explode, so full was it with suppressed anxieties” (al-Shaykh 102). Zahra’s mother suppresses all emotions, not only those resulting from her own life of perpetual trauma, but from Zahra’s as well. Not only does Zahra in many ways learn and mirror this behavior, she is also directly affected by her mother’s suppression of her emotions from the moment she is born because that results in the transmission of her mother’s trauma to her.

Abdo posits that in The Story of Zahra, Zahra attempts to “rewrite the national self” and create a new national identity by means of employing “…subversive sexual and psychological identities constructed within and against highly patriarchal communities…” (Abdo 217). Abdo further explains how the woman as nation trope often shows itself in Lebanese society and that the fate and success of the nation is largely based on the purity of its women and their success in embodying the right woman based on patriarchal standards. She says, “Thus in Lebanon…woman’s role was circumscribed. Her place became restricted to and indeed epitomized by the private, the domestic, the apolitical and idealized in ‘pure’ womanhood and motherhood” (Abdo 220). Imposing the identity of a nation upon the identities of the women of that nation is in itself an action that causes harm upon those women due to the oppressive ideology of patriarchy that shapes and fuels the constant reproduction of this trope. Trauma can be, and is, enacted by ideology. Thus, as ideology carries over, and is strengthened and further enforced, trauma is transmitted across generations through each generation’s introduction and subscription to that ideology.

Like Abdo, Marianne Marroum points out that Zahra’s uncle, Hashem, and husband, Majed, substitute Zahra for Lebanon, their homeland, and I think that while that is a product of the perpetuation of the patriarchal woman as nation trope, it also highlights the significance of the timelessness, and sometimes placelessness, of Zahra’s memories, and the legitimacy of memories of such a quality. Marroum argues that The Story of Zahra is a “literature of displacement, one that is neither bound by time nor place” (Marroum 511). Marroum’s evidence relies on examining Hashem and Majed’s experience of exile and deep homesickness for Lebanon. I would add that Zahra’s ability to remember the past of her ancestors, for example, her mother’s abortion, is also evidence of that.

When explaining that there are many forms of homesickness, Marroum references Roberta Rubenstein, who coined the term “sickness of home” (Marroum 495) to describe a type of homesickness. This term refers to the idea that one can be made sick by their home due to the negative impact of certain ideologies of their homeland, i.e., the imposition of patriarchal ideals on women in
various countries, and this sickness can affect an individual even after they have left their homeland. This sickness of home can be transmitted between person to person who share the same home, something that Zahra points out in her observation of Hashem and Majed, who live in exile from Lebanon in Africa (Marroum 504). It can be argued that Zahra also notices that she herself has this sickness of home, and that anyone within or without their home country could have this sickness.

This sickness of home, which is produced by war and oppressive ideologies, is plausibly transmitted across generations and across a nation or nations. Combining this idea of a sickness acquired from one’s home, or specifically in this novel, a sickness acquired amongst Lebanese people as a result of a warring Lebanon, and the concept of transgenerational transmission of trauma, I believe another mode of transmission of trauma that is exemplified in this novel is what I call transnational transmission of trauma. Zahra and her experiences of trauma present various examples of this transnational transmission of trauma throughout the novel.

The most blatant example is the fact that Zahra, by both the novel itself, and by particular characters in the novel, is traumatized by the imposition of the woman as nation trope upon her, which results in her uncle seeking a misguided and detrimental solace in her that escalates to sexual abuse, as he is dealing with the trauma of exile and leaving his homeland, Lebanon. (Abdo 221; Adams 203; Marroum 503) This does not excuse his actions, but certainly contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Uncle Hashem, who also appears to be a recipient of the transnational trauma experienced by so many in Lebanon, but specifically by his family members, at the hands of the civil war. Speaking of both Hashem and Majed’s attempts to impose ideas and dreams of their nation onto Zahra, Adams points out that “neither man is able to understand or help the troubled girl because each is too busy attempting to fashion her as his own idealized image of Lebanon. As a result, they may come to understand that they want different things from Zahra…but they fail to acknowledge Zahra as an individual with her own personal needs” (Adams 203). This failure to acknowledge Zahra does her real harm that she cannot undo; and is evidence of the trauma that she experiences at the hands of the women as nation trope and the dominant patriarchal ideology of Lebanon.

I believe that Hanan al-Shaykh appears to be a recipient of both transgenerational trauma and transnational trauma. Abdo points out that Hanan al-Shaykh had a complicated and estranged relationship with her mother, which is how one could describe Zahra’s relationship with her mother, and which may point to transgenerational trauma transmission between al-Shaykh and her mother. Speaking of her mother in her essay, “War and Writing,” al-Shaykh says, “My mother remains my strongest connection to Lebanon. She represents my country of origins, my past and my history. She’s my memory” (al-Shaykh, “War and Writing” 17). Perhaps al-Shaykh shares her mother’s memories of Lebanon in the same way that Zahra shares her own mother’s memories. Both al-Shaykh and Zahra live in their mothers’ memories and because of their mothers’ memories, both as a result of being recipients of their mother’s trauma, along with carrying on their mother’s creative attempts at resistance. al-Shaykh explains that she wrote about her mother’s story and the stories of “many Arab women who lived before World War II” in another one of her novels, It’s A Long Story, and says of her mother, “She always wanted her story to be told because she suffered a lot. And by doing so, I am revisiting my country of youth” (al-Shaykh, “War and Writing” 17). al-Shaykh is writing her mother’s story to understand that story, but also to understand how that story has grown into her own story. Considering this, whether or not al-Shaykh is conscious of the theory of transgenerational trauma transmission, it appears that she understands and subscribes to the basic ideas that explain the theory.

Regardless of explicitly knowing of the trauma she has received from past
generations, al-Shaykh clearly uses storytelling, and specifically, the telling of Zahra’s story, in order to unpack her trauma and the trauma her mother and ancestors have experienced. Multiple authors also point out the fact that Hanan al-Shaykh herself primarily experienced the Lebanese Civil War in exile in London, where she wrote The Story of Zahra as the war was happening, rather than in Lebanon, her homeland. It appears al-Shaykh is remembering her own experience of both transgenerational and transnational transmission of trauma in her writing of *The Story of Zahra* and commenting on the fact that she herself has been infected with the sickness of home as a result of the civil war. Further, she may be commenting on the trauma that she has experienced at the hands of the dominant patriarchal ideology of Lebanese society that she is acknowledging in *The Story of Zahra*. In the novel, she shows both Zahra and her mother being traumatized and oppressed by this ideology, while also attempting to resist the dominant ideology and beliefs that are imposed upon them as Lebanese women. al-Shaykh’s writing of *The Story of Zahra* itself is resistance to this oppression that she and other Lebanese women have faced at the hands of patriarchy.

In “War and Writing,” al-Shaykh also discusses the current younger generation in Lebanon, whose forms of resistance against patriarchy she seems to disagree with, saying, “Now when I go to Lebanon I see girls going topless at the beach, and they think that’s revolutionary. Needless to mention they’re as oppressed as before only they don’t know it” (al-Shaykh, “War and Writing”15). She goes on to say, “In my generation, on the other hand, we were all fighting before the war against that. We fought our families and our traditions. We fought misogyny and machismo. The surprising thing is that today’s women in Lebanon are perhaps better educated and more informed than my generation, but they are very subdued” (al-Shaykh, “War and Writing” 15). Here al-Shaykh is acknowledging, if not intentionally, how the trauma of patriarchy and misogyny is passed down or perpetuated by the transmission of this trauma through generations of women, and through the passing down or perpetuation of dominant ideology. She is also acknowledging the power of ideology to enact harm upon those who are forced to subscribe to it and are the most affected by it. Further, al-Shaykh is demonstrating how attempts at resistance of patriarchal oppression, however different the methods are, are passed down or transmitted through generations.

Using the theory of transgenerational transmission of trauma to analyze further the interpretation of Zahra as unreliable serves to present Zahra in a new light, along with restoring the reader’s sense of trust in her as a narrator. She emerges as a reliable narrator who is remembering as a result of both the very real trauma she experienced and also the trauma passed down from her mother to her. Zahra experiences her own very real traumas due to various events in her life, but that trauma is influenced and further exacerbated by the trauma experienced by previous generations in Lebanon, including that enacted upon the entire nation of Lebanon at the hands of the war. *The Story of Zahra* also appears to serve as a way for Hanan al-Shaykh to remember and cope with her own transgenerational and/or transnational trauma that she and so many other women have experienced due to the war and their experiences of patriarchy and misogyny as Lebanese women.
REFERENCES


