Mortar and Pestle, Orange and Navel:  
(M)otherhood, Exile, and Cultural Reproduction in Edwidge Danticat’s  
*Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Hanan al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra*

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ABSTRACT
In their novels *The Story of Zahra* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Hanan al-Shaykh and Edwidge Danticat, both women writing in postcolonial settings at the end of the 20th century, delve into the myriad expectations put on women in the midst of anti-colonial nationalist projects. Examining the role of memory, reproductive labor, transmission of trauma in the mother-daughter relationships of their novels, this paper argues that al-Shaykh and Danticat subvert traditional and self-destructive forms of women’s participation in national projects, while introducing new modes of resistance that do not rely on the biological and cultural transmission of trauma.

Hanan al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* explore several similar topics, most prominently exile, sexual violence, and war. A common thread that weaves through each bildungsroman, and connects each of the previously mentioned elements, is the relationship between the protagonists – both young women – and their mothers. Current scholarship on these two novels wrestles with similar topics to those in this paper, specifically the role of the woman-as-nation trope and gendered forms of resistance, and whether or not these characters’ actions can be deemed subversive (Adams 204, Alexander 373, Francis 82, Kabbani 340, Marroum 509). Several of these scholars focus on the unique roles of women in exile, and how gender roles in such cases intersect with nationalist woman-as-nation tropes. Less common is the analysis of the mother-daughter relationship as it interacts with these broader issues, though Simone Alexander and Donette Francis examine motherhood and transmission of trauma extensively in their papers on Danticat, which I draw from in my work. My hope for this project is to contribute to these critical conversations by pointing to common discourse on motherhood in postcolonial feminist contexts, and shed light on subtle subversion of nationalist and colonialist tropes by women writers.

The mother-daughter relationship is a point at which the two main pillars of feminized reproductive labor – biological and cultural reproduction – intersect. Women are expected to participate in child-bearing and child-rearing, while simultaneously upholding and reproducing cultural value systems. The relationship between mother and daughter is a space where the expectations associated with these gendered roles come into conflict. This paper explores the ways in which these mother-daughter relationships
are built and challenged by conditions of war, exile, patriarchy, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Using the lens of collective memory and trauma transmission allows one to better “explain both the relation between dominant social ideas and their ‘internalization’… how it is that subjects come to capitulate to their own subjugation,” and to hold in tension the subject’s agency and selfhood with the societal forces acting upon them (Radstone 11). The tension in these fraught mother-daughter relationships comes from the collective weight of intergenerational transmitted trauma, whether it is passed down from woman to woman through biology or through cultural practices and expectations. I argue that these mother-daughter relationships are microcosms of the often-contradictory expectations thrust upon marginalized women, and they subsequently become sites of both refuge and resistance for the novels’ protagonist daughters. While mothers search for their own agency – in tradition, in their children, in lovers, or some combination of the three – they compromise that of their daughters. Fleeing the old ways that their mothers, through taking on duties of cultural reproduction, enforce and come to represent, these daughters run directly into the tension of being human while those they love attempt to render them into symbols.

In her book, Gender and Nation, Nira Yuval-Davis discusses the ways in which women’s roles have been perceived by nationalist projects, both colonial and anticolonial, as part of the nation but only insofar as women give birth and reproduce the race or nation. She argues that it is “women who reproduce nations biologically, culturally and symbolically” (2). Yet not only are women typically excluded from traditional spheres of “resistance,” but the forms of reproductive labor with which they engage are understood to be acts lacking in creativity and agency. Childbirth is seen as a natural occurrence, rather than a choice, and like other natural forces, it must be harnessed and mastered by men (Plumwood 38). In addition to physically reproducing children, women also bear the task of reproducing culture and values. Of cultural reproduction, Gloria Anzaldúa writes,

Men make the rules and laws; women transmit them. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them… for wanting their husbands to help with the rearing of the children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives? (Anzaldúa 39).

Of course, as Anzaldúa says, the task of reproducing culture and values, in patriarchal society, looks like reproducing patriarchal values. The pressure to participate in the maintenance of values increases when a culture is under threat – for example, Haitian culture in immigrant communities under threat of assimilation, or Shi’ite Lebanese culture in the face of ethno-religious civil war. These contexts – the settings of the two novels this paper focuses on – demand a lot of the women living within them. These demands often contradict each other. In the next section, I will examine these tensions as they manifest in al-Shaykh’s novel.

Hanan al-Shaykh’s The Story of Zahra
Hanan al-Shaykh’s The Story of Zahra takes place in Lebanon before and during the Civil War, and also in an unnamed part of Africa. The protagonist, Zahra, a young woman in her late teens and early twenties, travels to Africa to live with her uncle Hashem, an exiled member of the Popular Syrian Party, and eventually marries his friend Majed, who comes from a lower-class Lebanese family. Tossed back and forth between her immediate family in Lebanon and her uncle in Africa, Zahra becomes a woman both in the midst of war and in exile. Clinging to Zahra as a symbol of the homeland, Majed and Hashem compromise her agency. Clinging to her mother, seeking her approval and guidance into womanhood, Zahra takes on her trauma.

Ann-Marie Adams argues that “Hashem’s and Majed’s complementary visions of Zahra actively foreground the ways in which women are ossified and abstracted in national
discourse” (Adams 203). When these men conflate Zahra and Lebanon, “Zahra’s national figuration is predicated on neither her citizenship or her class but on her gender” (203). While her ability to tell her own story throughout the majority of the novel may represent a challenge to male-dominated discourse, Hashem and Majed’s narratives expose the forces shaping her reality (Ghandour 233).

Hashem, exiled from his home, “carrie[s] in his mind a symbolic image of his homeland, believing it to be the actual homeland” (al-Shaykh 20) and seeks to have that symbolic image confirmed and affirmed, first in his letter exchange with Zahra and then in his physical interactions with her. When eventually his other relatives cease their letters to him, Zahra remains. When she comes to live with him, he quickly develops strong feelings, which he struggles to put into words, and begins a series of behaviors that Zahra, in her narration, sees as disturbing and purely attention-seeking, but Hashem describes as compulsory. He is eager to wake her up every morning, craving what she seems to offer, regardless of her hesitation. He explains:

I never imagined that one day my feelings for Zahra would reach the pitch they did. I was only trying to express the strange condition which overtook me, once I had met her and let her sleep in my room as I slept on the living room couch. After all those long years it seemed that I began to breathe again, and even to touch the fabric of my commitment to my family and my homeland. 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-Shaykh 69).

He sees generations of Lebanese women in Zahra, including her mother and his mother (Abdo 221). He is mystified by her resistance and, at times, terror, but persists regardless.

Majed, rather than being particularly attracted to the homeland associated with Zahra, is focused on material gains, and opportunities he would not be able to obtain in Lebanon but might in Africa. His joy on their wedding night comes from being “the owner of a woman’s body that I could make love to whenever I wished” and he assures himself, “From now on, surely my feelings of deprivation must dwindle” (83). Majed also shows us, however, the struggle of that deprivation through his descriptions of a childhood in poverty and his difficult assimilation into Africa. Al-Shaykh says in an interview, “I feel that women are victims of society more than victims of men because men are sometimes victims of society as well” (al-Shaykh in Adams 206). After reading Majed’s experience of the world, including his relationship with Zahra, this common victimhood is made more apparent. Majed is not the enemy or purely oppressive. He is marginalized and exiled, and he transfers that burden to Zahra. In the imagination of Majed, wealth is land and land is woman, and in coming to own a woman’s body, he is shedding his disenfranchise-ment. Adams writes, “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” (203).

All characters are exiled from the homeland in some way, but they cannot be sources of comfort from this isolation and confusion for one another, because Hashem and Majed are unable to see Zahra as a bearer of the same feelings, merely as a solution to them. Zahra is twice driven to flee the men in Africa and return to her parents’ home, where she faces a different form of subjection.

Zahra is haunted by her mother’s trauma: her stagnant and sometimes abusive marriage, her thwarted affair with a local doctor, and her otherwise strict adherence to what is expected of her as a woman and mother. Early in the novel, Zahra clearly recalls a memory of her mother having an abortion that occurred before Zahra’s birth, indicating a biological transmission of traumatic memory (Abdo 222). When Zahra is young, her mother takes her along on visits to her lover, the local doctor. Zahra describes this experience as “embarrassing,” (al-Shaykh 12). It was possible that this man was a source of her shame and timidity towards others as an adult. She comes to understand why her mother brings her along, despite
her suffering. Referring to a previous desire expressed to be closer to her mother, Zahra says, “She wanted us to be inseparable, like the ‘orange and navel.’ She wanted me to shield her” (al-Shaykh 13). Her mother uses Zahra in her own quest for agency, and Zahra reasons that this is simply her mother’s desire to be closer to her.

While Zahra’s mother uses and neglects her, she showers Zahra’s brother with attention. Speaking of her parents’ prioritization of her brother, Zahra says, “Meat continued to be for Ahmad. Eggs were for Ahmad. Fresh tomatoes were for Ahmad. So were the fattest olives. If Ahmad was late arriving home, my mother would rumple his bed and push a pillow down under the bedclothes…. She lied for her son, even when he tried to steal her gold bracelets as she slept” (25). Though, by erasing her own needs and those of her daughter, Zahra’s mother attempts to partake in the project of survival in the face of violence, her sacrifice goes unappreciated. Zahra bears witness to this process time and again, eventually internalizing it.

After travelling between exile and home for some time, Zahra lands in war-torn Lebanon in her family home. The effect of war on Zahra is, in many ways, a liberating one. She is able to shed her fear of people, her timidity, and her acne. She claims, “This war has made beauty, money, terror, and convention all equally irrelevant. It begins to occur to me that the war, with its miseries and destructiveness, has been necessary for me to return to being normal and human” (al-Shaykh 161). While Zahra’s statement might be slightly hyperbolic and certainly not universal, she speaks to the ways in which catastrophe can throw every aspect of social normalcy – roles and customs determined by gender, class, and ethnicity – into question. For these characters, tragedy and violence offer opportunities for clarity, and then intervention. The protagonist in Danticat’s novel experiences a similar catastrophic break following the death of her mother.

Edwidge Danticat’s Breath, Eyes, Memory

Edwidge Danticat’s novel Breath, Eyes, Memory follows Sophie, a young Haitian woman who, after growing up in Haiti with her aunt for the first eight years of her life, is sent to live with her estranged mother, Martine, in New York City. Unlike Zahra, Breath, Eyes, Memory does not directly take place in the middle of war, but rather a reactionary and repressive post-colonial regime. Sophie’s primary fear is not snipers or bombs but the tonton macoute – a militarized, violent police force doing the bidding of the dictator (Francis 78). She is the product of a rape committed by one of the macoute in a sugarcane field, an incident of sexual terrorism that haunts Martine throughout their time together, and which Sophie herself cannot escape (Francis 81). Unlike Zahra, Sophie’s exile from her homeland is a return to her mother rather than a departure from her. Like Zahra, the family she finds in her new home clings to her as a piece of the homeland, and the values associated with it. The tension between Sophie, her American lover, and her mother is tinged with the mother’s desire to reproduce certain cultural values in Sophie, while simultaneously transmitting her sexual trauma.

Though Sophie and Zahra’s experiences of exile from homeland are quite different – Lebanese immigration to Africa has different racial and economic dynamics than Haitian immigration to the United States, not to mention Zahra chooses to leave while Sophie does not want to – Sophie’s experience of exile is also deeply bound up in experiences with men and sexuality. As an eighteen-year-old in New York, Sophie meets Joseph, who tells her, “I am not American. I am African American… It means that you and I, we are already part of each other” (72). While Sophie’s mother reacts to her coming-of-age by imposing strict regulations, telling her not to talk to men, that she must be a “good girl,” Joseph offers an escape, though he is also looking for something else in her.
When Sophie’s mother suspects that she is involved with a man, she begins “testing” her. Sophie describes this as a practice passed down from woman to woman in their family, one that her aunt warned her about as a child. The mother puts her fingers into the daughter’s vagina at the end of every day to ensure her hymen is still intact. Martine later tells Sophie that she began the testing because it was something her mother did to her, and though it was one of the “greatest pains” (170) of her life, she does not know another way to mother a teenage girl.

Because of the circumstances of her conception, Sophie and her mother both have complicated relationships with the land – both Haiti as a nation and as nature – and this manifests primarily in how they relate to cane fields. Cutting cane is typically gendered as a masculine sphere of work, yet Sophie’s aunt associates the fields with childhood and play. The fields are a male-dominated space, yet the nature of the colonial and postcolonial economy means that the men are completely alienated from the fruits of their labor, so control of the space is not truly in their hands. The work is brutal and dangerous: “Whenever she was sad Tante Atie would talk about the sugar cane fields, where she and my mother practically lived when they were children. They saw people die there from sunstroke every day” (Danticat 4). Danticat’s novel culminates in a scene of rupture. After her mother commits suicide, Sophie returns with the body to Haiti so she may be buried in their family cemetery. Standing at her funeral among the graves of generations of women in their family, Sophie looks out and sees her family home, standing between her and the cane fields.

I turned around and ran down the hill, ahead of the others, I felt my dress tearing as I ran faster and faster down the hill. There were only a few men working in the cane fields. I ran through the field, attacking the cane. I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding.

The men working in the fields look on, thinking she is possessed. Tearing the cane – at once a phallic image, a site of sexual violence against her mother, and a site of colonial violence and exploitation – out by its roots, Sophie refuses to settle for partial liberation, the kind that led her mother to abuse her. Generations of women surround her – her grandmother and Tante Atie – and echo, “Ou libere!” or, “Are you free?” (233). For Sophie, genuine freedom requires that she break the cycle of transgenerational abuse in the name of cultural reproduction. This means going beyond the work done by mothers before her, and getting to the deeper origins of her trauma: patriarchal and racist exploitation. These origins are represented by the cane field, at once sustaining and devastating, which she literally uproots.

Mothers Versus Lovers

When Sophie’s mother firsts “tests” her, she tells her the legend of the Marassas, or two lovers who were duplicates of the same person. She explains that this level of closeness is an ideal romantic relationship. She goes on to say, “The love between a mother and daughter is deeper than the sea. You would leave me for an old man who you didn’t know the year before. You and I could be like Marassas. You are giving up a lifetime with me” (85). In short, she tells her daughter that she must choose between a man, who represents assimilation into American culture, and a mother, who represents some version of Haitian values, culture, and tradition.

In an inaugural act of rebellion against her mother and her mother’s values, Sophie decides to break her own hymen, to put a stop to the “testing” regardless of the cost – expulsion from her home. Experiencing suicidal thoughts, Sophie goes to her mother’s spice cabinet, retrieves the pestle, and returns with it to her bed. She tells herself a story of a
woman who transforms into a butterfly, then performs the act: “My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet. I took the pestle and the bloody sheet. It was gone, the veil that always held my mother’s finger back every time she tested me” (Danticat 87). In this act, Sophie momentarily stops looking for salvation or escape from her mother in Joseph, who she could have easily asked to play the part of the pestle, but rather seizes agency independently. The goal of escaping the “testing” supersedes any security or comfort granted to her by “home,” as well as any desire for Joseph. At the same time, this is an act of desperation and self-mutilation – not to be mistaken for liberation. Sophie is unable to reject one form of control – the mother, and tradition – without falling into the other – the lover, and assimilation.

In contrast to Sophie’s rebellion, Zahra more closely mirrors her mother’s sexual transgressions and reluctant compromise to marry. While Sophie’s mother clings desperately to her daughter, going so far as to molest her, Zahra longs to be closer to her mother. I would watch her when she was with me, and study her when she was at a distance. I thought all the while, as I looked up at her, how much I wanted to draw her towards me… I wanted to disappear into the hem of her dress and become even closer to her than the navel is to the orange! But whenever I began to think this way, I felt a bitterness towards her and shuddered. I carried this pain and hatred inside me whenever I disobeyed her and felt rejected. The man became the center of her life, and around him was nothing but flying embers (al-Shaykh 8).

Men – Zahra’s father, Dr. Shawky, and Ahmad – come before Zahra in her mother’s life. It is of little surprise that Zahra seeks refuge from this disregard first in Majed and Hashem, then in her relationship with a character she refers to only as “the sniper” – replacing her mother with her own set of men. Upon returning to Lebanon, Zahra uses her newfound boldness to seek out a sniper who occupies the rooftop of a building near her home. Risking her life to cross into the territory he controls, Zahra climbs to the rooftop and, without exchanging any words, she and the sniper have sex. Al-Shaykh does not, initially, give the reader access to Zahra’s intentions in pursuing this relationship. It seems like an act of insanity, affirming the narratives of the men in her life. Scholar Rana Kabbani reads the instance as another example of Zahra’s “passivity” and lack of agency, but her argument does not hold up to Zahra’s stated motives, which al-Shaykh eventually states later in the text: “My reason for coming to him was that I might put a stop to the sniping. He probably thinks, me being a woman and this a time of war, that I need a man, any man. He must see it as mere chance that the one I have found happens to be a sniper” (al-Shaykh 162). Al-Shaykh does not mention for which side the sniper is working, and this matter does not seem to concern Zahra – which is appropriate for a complex war fought between many parties for many reasons (al-Shaykh 165). Zahra’s only intention is to intervene, to actively put herself between her neighbors’ lives and the sniper’s bullets, regardless of party allegiance. In addition to her determination to seize some form of agency, Zahra seeks refuge from the neglect and monotony of her nuclear family in the sniper. In doing so she follows the same pattern of destructive escapism, and eventually self-sacrifice, paved by her mother. It must be noted that Zahra’s action is an altruistic one, and perhaps her mother’s precedent grants Zahra a certain permission to carry out her mission. Zahra pays no attention to the sniper’s political allegiance, which in context represents a rejection of nationalism and colonialism alike. She does not act purely in self-interest, as her mother did, nor does she act in the name of any nation-building effort. She acts for herself, and for others, but ultimately it kills her.

Conclusions
If these two coming-of-age stories are illustrative of the tensions between race and gender, nationalism and feminism, the good and
bad of both tradition and change, then the different poles of these tensions are represented quite differently. Zahra’s mother upholds both tradition and resistance, as she dedicates her life to sacrificing for her husband and son, but also engages in acts of sexual deviance. Hashem and Majed are pillars of patriarchal tradition, insisting on restrictive gender roles and holding fast to traditional indicators of masculinity, but they are also victims of political exile and poverty. Martine holds fast to tradition, yet seeks liberation in her own self-imposed exile. Joseph offers a certain freedom, but insists on his own boundaries, which are shaped by his own set of patriarchal values.

The plurality of the mother characters, in particular, is unmistakable, yet what they represent to Sophie and Zahra – as sources of repression and trauma, whether passively or actively transmitted – is more one-dimensional, mirroring the ways in which the young women are reduced to symbols. In both cases, traumatic transgenerational memory is transmitted both willingly and unwillingly, but intention or lack thereof has no effect on the outcome. Zahra and Sophie understand the roots of their mothers’ trauma, perhaps better than most abused people understand the trauma that caused their abuser to act in such a way, but that does not stop them from searching for escape. The collateral damage in these mothers’ attempts at self-liberation is not their oppressors, but their daughters. Limited by the fact that “woman should fulfill the individual male need for scopic/sexual gratification and yet be the figurehead for national culture” (Natarajan 401) the mothers in these novels act within strict boundaries when seeking freedom, and those boundaries then become the burdens of Sophie and Zahra. Simone Alexander writes, “Women in Danticat’s novel unwittingly adopt certain stereotypical roles. Nevertheless, these very women frame a counter-discourse by operating within the existing (patriarchal) structures of state violence, using their mutilated, abused bodies as weapons to resist and rebel against the nationalist agenda” (374). This theme dominates both Danticat’s and al-Shaykh’s novels, speaking to and subverting a widespread paradigm that forces women of color to choose allegiance to just one of their identities, embodied here in the figures of mother and nation.

Buffeted back and forth between mothers and lovers, and all they offer and represent, both women are driven to deviate drastically from the norm of acceptable behavior. In both cases, various guardians of traditional values interpret this as insanity. Sophie breaks her own hymen and attacks a stalk of sugarcane. For Zahra, these moments come in her reactions to Majed in wedlock, and then in her relationship with the sniper, which eventually leads to her death.

One can deliberate endlessly over whether or not any of these are acts of liberation or if they are the reactionary results of living under multiple oppressions. To varying degrees, they all are both. They all disrupt oppressive norms, but also come at great personal cost to the actors, who are oppressed subjects. The cost of Zahra’s final act of transgression is her life: the sniper shoots her after she tells him that she is pregnant. In contrast, though some outsiders think her actions are marks of insanity, Sophie is uplifted by generations of women in her family in her final act of transgression. This difference aligns with the ways in which each character navigates her suffering throughout each novel. While Zahra retreats into the coping mechanisms passed down by her mother, Sophie actively confronts them and seeks out alternatives. This is not to suggest that Zahra is passive or that she can be blamed for her death, but rather that the constraints on each character's agency differ greatly based on context. For example, Sophie is able to seek refuge in group therapy, which is not an option for Zahra. Ultimately, Sophie and Zahra succeed where their mothers try but fail (Martine through self-imposed exile, Zahra’s mother through multiple abortions): they break the cycles of mother-daughter abuse and transgenerational transmission of trauma. However, Zahra only does this through her
death, not by choice.

In exile of various forms, seeking redemption from the trauma of their mothers but offered no guidance as to how this can be done; Sophie and Zahra are led to these points of rupture that can be understood metonymically as the two possible conclusions of lives lived under forces of oppression that demand self-destruction. Together, these novels illustrate the complexity of forced transmission of culture, values and trauma – the weight of being both an individual with agency and the product of history and systemic forces, which is exacerbated in a subaltern context.

Speaking from a psychoanalytic standpoint of the conflation of woman and nation, specifically the rendering of all women into mother-symbols, Melanie Klein writes,

... Anything that is felt to give out goodness and beauty, and that calls forth pleasure and satisfaction, in the physical or in the wider sense, can in the unconscious mind take the place of [the infant’s perception of the mother’s] ever-bountiful breast, and of the whole mother. Thus we speak of our own country as the “motherland” because in the unconscious mind our country may come to stand for our mother, and then it can be loved with feelings which borrow their nature from the relation to her.

(Klein, 103)

For Zahra, Hashem and Majed, the separation of mother and child is congruous with their exile from their nation. Joseph and Sophie are both of diasporic identities (though the homeland that he longs for is one he has never seen) but Sophie’s exile brings her to her biological mother, while ripping her from the forms of motherhood she experiences in childhood. In both cases, estranged from both mother and homeland, these characters cling to the memory of both, sometimes conflating the two, in their search for agency and selfhood.

In seeking orange and navel, and mortar and pestle – symbols of the mother, women’s work, and points of connection and closeness between mother and child – Zahra and Sophie long for connection to their mothers: connection that feeds and nurtures. They are connected, deeply so, but it they are only able to find this connection through this transmission and reproduction of trauma. Martine and Zahra’s mother’s motherhood itself is thus compromised by the very demand that they perform reproductive labor. Mothers perform reproductive labor in the form of child-bearing and child-rearing, which is then hindered by the ways in which they must perform cultural reproduction and transmission of values. In attempting to work towards freedom within the confines of their own oppression, these mothers act as oppressive forces in their daughters’ lives. By illustrating this tension, al-Shaykh and Danticat challenge the validity of the traditional woman-as-nation trope that renders all women into idealized mother figures. They expose the tax this expectation of idealized motherhood has on both mothers and daughters, stripping it of its fabled liberatory potential.
REFERENCES


