

American University in Cairo

AUC Knowledge Fountain

Theses and Dissertations

6-1-2019

AN Unsilenced Text: The Literature of the Female Voice in Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant*

Mariam Mounir El Batran

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds>

Recommended Citation

APA Citation

El Batran, M. (2019). *AN Unsilenced Text: The Literature of the Female Voice in Hanan Al-Shaykh's Women of Sand and Myrrh and Leila Abouzeid's Year of the Elephant* [Master's thesis, the American University in Cairo]. AUC Knowledge Fountain.

<https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/802>

MLA Citation

El Batran, Mariam Mounir. *AN Unsilenced Text: The Literature of the Female Voice in Hanan Al-Shaykh's Women of Sand and Myrrh and Leila Abouzeid's Year of the Elephant*. 2019. American University in Cairo, Master's thesis. *AUC Knowledge Fountain*.

<https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/802>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by AUC Knowledge Fountain. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of AUC Knowledge Fountain. For more information, please contact mark.muehlhaeusler@aucegypt.edu.

The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

An Unsilenced Text:

**The Literature of the Female Voice in Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand*
and Myrrh and Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant***

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of

English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

By

Mariam Mounir El Batran

Under the supervision of **Dr. Stephen Nimis**

May 2019

The American University in Cairo

An Unsilenced Text:

The Literature of the Female Voice in Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and

Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant*

A Thesis Submitted by

Mariam Mounir El Batran

To the Department

May 2019

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The degree of Master of Arts

Has been approved by

Dr. Stephen Nimis
Thesis Committee Advisor _____
Affiliation _____

Dr. William Melaney
Thesis Committee Reader _____
Affiliation _____

Dr. Tahia Abdel Nasser
Thesis Committee Reader _____
Affiliation _____

Dept. Chair Date Dean of HUSS Date

Acknowledgments

To my parents,
Moshira and Mounir El Batran,
Thank you for all the love and support and for the effort that you put into raising us.

To my brother and sister,
Mohamed and Malak,
My best friends and life companions, to always having each other's backs and hearts.

To my advisor,
Professor Stephen Nimis, words won't ever be enough to express my gratitude for having been your student throughout this journey and chapter of my life. Without your constant guidance, support, and eagerness to always hear what I have to say- even when I did not make much sense- this thesis wouldn't have ever come together. I consider myself very lucky to have had such a supportive, understanding, and patient advisor, with a sense of humor that turns the hardest tasks into enjoyable and unforgettable experiences. Thank you for showing me what it is like to be a real mentor. I wish to progress in my career with the same sense of commitment and passion that I have seen in you.

To my readers,
Professor William Melaney and Professor Tahia Abdel Nasser , your classes, have contributed to shaping who I am as a scholar and as a person. I thank you for your dedication, and I am very thankful for the time and effort that you put into reading my thesis.

Finally, I would like to thank the ECLT department, a place where I'll always consider home. Faculty members and staff alike, thank you for many years of assistance, both as a graduate and an undergraduate student.

ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a critical reading of Hanan al-Shaykh's novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and Leila Abouzeid's novel *Year of the Elephant*, focusing on how the women in these stories seek to articulate and enact their own agency in the face of attempts to limit them. Recent critical literature, such as Lila Abu-Lughod's book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* have sought to use microhistories of individual women to counter the stereotypical image of Arab women portrayed in contemporary media, including modern Arabic literature in translation. My study has a parallel focus that will introduce new stories and models of Arab women as alternatives to the stereotype of being weak and oppressed. I offer close readings of the texts that highlight the individuality of the protagonists, while placing these works in a cultural context that provides a better understanding of the individual experiences of these women.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter One: A Woman’s Journey to Self-fulfillment: | |
| Leila Abouzeid’s <i>Year of the Elephant</i> | 15 |
| Chapter Two: Individual Stories of Defeat and Triumph: | |
| Hanan al-Shaykh’s <i>Women of Sand and Myrrh</i> : | 25 |
| Suha..... | 29 |
| Tamr..... | 47 |
| Conclusion..... | 51 |
| Works Cited..... | 52 |

Introduction:

The victimization of the Arab woman is a topos in art and literature. Western orientalist -who had no real encounters with Arab women- portrayed stereotypical images through painting and writing that used her as a symbol of lust and oriental exoticism, thus depriving her of any individuality and uniqueness. In Robert J.C. Young's book *Postcolonialism A very short introduction*, he discusses this in his chapter "The Ambivalence of the Veil." He uses, as an example, a color postcard produced by a German photographic firm in Egypt at the time with an image of an 'Arab Woman,' dating back to 1910. He comments on it saying:

The Representation has objectified the woman it depicts: A real Egyptian woman, with a name, a family, a voice, and history has transformed into an 'oriental', a universal, generic 'Arab woman'. The woman has been specially constructed for the eye of power suspended in the westerner's gaze and precipitated into the one-way street of 'the politics of recognition' (Young 80)

The significance of the two works I am studying is that they defy the objectification of the Arab woman: she is not always acted upon, she is indeed an agent of herself, the fact that she speaks up and speaks her mind means that she exists and has agency and willpower. It might differ from one culture to another, from one woman to another, but there is a great sense of resilience present.

Writing and understanding the Arab woman has always been challenging, to both writers and readers. There has been misrepresentation and misreading of who the Arab woman is.

Breaking the stereotype is a challenge in itself. Many authors have tackled the subject, but women authors have managed to excel at it. It is intriguing to read a woman author writing about women; there is more credibility due to the shared experiences. Having an Arab female author write about women of the region introduces a whole new experience to the reader. Lebanese Hanan al-Shaykh and Moroccan Leila Abouzeid are two authors who have lived in different countries across the Middle East, Europe, and the US. Their experiences show well in their writing. It is evident that place has a significant impact on their works. Having been raised in the culture, seeing their mothers and grandmothers' experiences as well as their own, makes them better witnesses and transmitters of the Arab woman experience. *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and *Year of the Elephant* are two works that shed light on a different Arab woman, different from the one depicted in foreign works. The stereotypical Arab woman, portrayed as weak, oppressed and inferior, is resisted in these works. This is not to say that these models of oppressed women do not exist. However, there are many other models of women who not only show strength, but defy in every sense that being an Arab woman is in any way degrading. Shedding light on the individuality of these women is what I am trying to get out of reading al-Shaykh and Abouzeid 's work.

The study of power dynamics within the Arab family is on top of my list as it not only highlights the power of the Arab woman, but also proves that she plays a crucial role in the making of such society. She creates herself as much as she shapes the family and culture that she inhabits. I also found that comparison with the foreign woman in both books assists me in my thesis: that nothing victimizes the Arab woman, a woman is a woman, she gets defined according to her set of experiences, and her identity is always in formation. It is an ongoing journey of self-discovery that does not differentiate between a woman of the east or a woman of the west. The

assumption that talking about power relations in the Middle East is an easy task to make is false because of how complex the Arab family is. Abu-Lughod states: "I imagined feminists as another audience for my second book; I hoped that the narratives would persuade them that it is not so easy to talk about "patriarchy" or put one's finger on how power works" (Abu-Lughod 6). Abu Lughod's main aim was to present a new Arab woman, not to herself, but the world. The stereotypes about Arab women are often based on lack of knowledge of the whole picture. Assumptions are made based on media representations that usually serve political purposes. She says: "I wanted my years of research to offer something unusual to a public that had little understanding of, but strong views about women in the Middle East" (Abu-Lughod 6). Abu-Lughod is aware of the little knowledge the public has access to in regards to Arab women. Therefore, she presents a thorough study of real women with real stories to share. Hoping to challenge an idea that has been present for quite some time:

I called what I was doing "Writing against culture". I was convinced that generalizing about cultures prevents us from appreciating or even accounting for people's experiences and the contingencies with which we all live. The idea of culture has become a core component of international politics and common sense. (Abu-Lughod 7)

In both novels, there seems to be a sequence of events all these women have in common. A cycle or katabasis that they all go through to reach self-discovery. Marriage is always the starting point. Each woman's encounter with the other sex is the point where she first discovers limitations. Thus, her real potential in overcoming them as well as her worth and her endurance of the mishaps instilled upon her are revealed. That comes out in the form of power struggle; that is why this study will focus on the power dynamics within the Arab family, to be able to depict the woman as an agent of her self-creation. Most of the women in these books either accept,

modify, or leave. The writer put our women in the foreground and put the male characters in the background for a reason: to emphasize the real power of women in the household.

Arab women go through so many experiences that shape and change them, they have agency, power, and will. Even if it does not match the western stereotype of agency and liberation, it is still considered agency: only a different form. Many critics have tackled this topic— that of Arab women’s representation— identifying a great deal of misrepresentation that either happens through translation of Arab works to the west or by writing aimed at a western audience from the beginning. By criticizing the way these women get misrepresented or by how the term "woman" is being used to serve political, cultural, or patriarchal purposes; I am trying to shed light on Arab women with different experiences. Women who suffer and recover individually, a model often disregarded when writing the Arab woman.

Misrepresentation of women does not only happen in literature, as discussed by Abu-Lughod, but it has also been present in the media, serving political purposes for an extended period. An interesting thing to note is how these representations form a pre-assumed image of the Arab woman, that later takes much effort to be resisted by scholars and intellectuals. In addition to this is the gap that these stereotypes form between the east and the west. Abu-Lughod states:

I am often bewildered by what I read or hear about the “Muslim Woman”. It is so hard to reconcile my experiences with the women I have met in rural Egypt with what the American media present, or with what people say to me casually in dinner parties... I am surprised by how easily people assume that Muslim women do not have rights. (Abu-Lughod 4)

Hanan al-Shaykh and Leila Abouzeid are trying to do the same thing as Lila Abu-Lughod through a different genre: “By presenting women’s dreams, desires, anger, and

disappointments —In their own words— I hoped to lay to rest some stereotypes.” (Abu-Lughod 5). The true representation of these women would only come from reading their experiences individually. The individuality of these women and their experiences is what I will be focusing on in this thesis. When speaking of individuality, Abu-Lughod says: “The individuality of these women’s experiences and their reflections on life and relationships challenged what I felt was anthropology’s tendency to typify cultures through social scientific generalizations” (Abu-Lughod 6).

Abu-Lughod's point when it comes to understanding culture is the first step towards reading al-Shaykh and Abouzeid 's work. Reading them as a study of a culture that has been under constant stereotypical misconceptions allows for a new and fresh representation of its individuals. One cannot stress enough the importance of accurately presenting a culture, in this case, Arab culture. The presentation of culture has been associated with women for a very long time. Arab women have been held responsible for presenting their culture to the west. Judith E. Tucker, in her book *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, she talks about how women have always been used metaphorically to represent their cultures. She asks the question in her chapter “Gender and Authenticity” saying:

There is still ambiguity as to why it is often women, whether visible or not, who may be assigned the task of representing culture. Are they, as primary transmitters of culture through their reproductive and mothering roles, repositories of tradition? Do women communicate messages? Women represent the status and power of their group, exhibiting its wealth and upholding its honor” (Tucker 53)

The concept of women communicating messages is highly present in the two books we are studying in this thesis. We are experiencing Moroccan and Saudi culture through the voices of

women. Al-Shaykh and Abouzeid are offering a close reading of a society that seems alien to outsiders. Tucker asks: “Are women metaphors that transcend social discontinuities for the basis of a social language intelligible to believing Muslims?” (53)

The importance of establishing a relationship based on understanding one’s culture is important in bridging the gap between the east and the west. Dealing with postcolonial works makes this even more critical to the culture and its individuals. Tucker discusses that saying the following:

The presentation of culture is a communicative act, a means of initiating and establishing the parameters of dialogue with outsiders. It is a statement asserting existence, especially where historical and political existence and cultural specificity have been denied. Indeed, its interpretation and analysis should be solidly located in a sociopolitical context (52)

This applies to Leila Abouzeid 's book, *Year of the Elephant*, where discussing colonial and postcolonial Moroccan woman is a metaphor for the struggle and independence of Moroccan thought. Tucker further adds: “The focus on how culture is presented assumes an added imperative in colonized or recently decolonized societies, where definitions of and control over cultural content and meaning can assume paramount importance” (Tucker 50). That only adds to the importance of presenting one’s culture. Not only does it matter politically but also sociologically and ethnographically. A lot of colonized countries have been denied the right to fully present their cultures and individuals. Literature, in that case, serves as a medium for depicting the real culture and society living behind political turbulent Morocco. In her book, Tucker discusses privacy and the choice of how to be presented. She talks about how much of a privilege it is to have such right, a luxury that not all colonized or decolonized communities have access to: “Control over the ethnographic process and presentation of self and community is not

the preserve of the more powerful cultures who have tended to protect their rights to privacy and determine the way they choose to be presented” (Tucker 50). That is why *Year of the Elephant* is considered a powerful medium for representing one’s self and dreams. The voice given to Zahra, the protagonist, allows for an unfiltered representation of her dreams, hopes, and mishaps.

The emphasis on the study of culture through individuals helps better understand Muslim culture in specific and Arab culture as a whole. Crossing the bridge between two imaginatively constructed worlds is one of the many aims of writing the Arab World. Lila Abu-Lughod talks about that in her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* saying:

Pundits tell us that there is a clash of civilizations or cultures in our world. They tell us that there is an unbridgeable chasm between the west and the “Rest”. Muslims are presented as a special and threatening culture — the most homogenized and the most troubling of the rest. Muslim women, in this new common sense, symbolize just how alien this culture is. (Abu-Lughod 6)

Again, this constant reminder that there is a gap between the east and the west and that women are being used as emphasis for this gap is troubling. Firstly, because of the inaccuracy of such claims and, secondly, because of the consequences such claims have on the Arab world.

Lila Abu-Lughod talks about how women are grouped when represented to the west. One model of a woman cannot fit all. In her book, she presents real stories of Arab women that differ significantly from one another. She shows how these women are powerful individuals in their communities and how they shape a lot of people’s lives around them. Even though her take on the matter is anthropological, her book guides my idea of misrepresentation of the Arab woman. Abu-Lughod spends time with different women who have different backgrounds: the educated, the uneducated, the poor, the rich, and everything in between. A friend of Abu-Lughod

Zeynab is a village woman from southern Egypt who has a business of her own, has not been very lucky with marriage, is uneducated, yet has managed to talk about the situation of misreading and misrepresenting the Muslim Arab woman. Abu-Lughod comments on Zeynab's reaction to the subject of her book saying:

Her reaction to the subject of my book *The Muslim Woman* confirmed something I had seen across the Arab world. She lived with hardships, but she was always thinking about how to do the best for her family. She was keenly aware of the political circumstances that shaped her life and her possibilities ... Her shock at my suggestion that anyone would think that she was oppressed by her religion was significant. (Abu-Lughod 4)

Arab women's reactions to the image portrayed of them is a point not to miss. The fact that their experiences get disregarded and that they, as women, are being used to represent a whole nation or religion in a matter that is so distant from reality is what agitated Zeynab. Identifying culture with religion is a mistake. When discussing Zaynab's identity as a Muslim Abu-Lughod says: "Like so many women I have known across the Arab world —from University Professors to villagers — her identity as a Muslim is deeply meaningful to her, and her faith in God is integral to her sense of self and community" (Abu-Lughod 4).

Suha Sabbagh, another scholar who identifies such stereotypes tries to discuss the many aspects of an Arab woman's life. Her book *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*, collects essays aimed at breaking down the complexity of being an Arab woman. She discusses the history and the diversity of Arab women, their strength and weaknesses as active individuals in their communities and societies, as well as the social, political, and historical factors that pave the way for these women. Sabbagh revisits the idea of the western viewer, saying "The image that most Westerners have of Arab woman is a stereotypical image that has little to do with the

lives of real Arab women; no Arab woman I know recognizes herself in it” (Sabbagh xi). Here she adds her voice to Lila Abu-Lughod in shedding light on the alienation between the portrayed picture of the Arab woman and the actual reality of being one. It is indeed not hard to trace back the roots of such stereotypes. The early images that western male orientalist portrayed while visiting the Arab world in the early nineteenth century paved the way for these false portrayals. The stereotype has indeed evolved. Sabbagh also talks about the changes that happened to the image of the Arab woman and how it changed over time, saying:

The contemporary stereotype casts Arab women as quintessential victims of the beastliness and backwardness of Arab men. Whereas in past stereotypes Arab women lived only for sensual pleasure and were condemned for their wantonness, Arab women’s lives are now described as being devoid of the most simple pleasures or achievements. (Sabbagh xii)

The image portrayed in novels, magazines, and articles victimizes the Arab woman, taking away her individuality and her daily battles and achievements. Sabbagh comments on that saying: “They are depicted as existing on the margins of society, victimized to such extent that it defies credibility that such individuals could continue to wage the heroic daily battle that many Arab women in real life undertake to survive” (Sabbagh xiii). The fact that this stereotype erases the triumphs of these women within patriarchal regimes makes it a very weak image even to comprehend. In the modern day where the east and the west are closer in every way, it is hard to accept such allegations. Sabbagh further elaborates on that by saying:

In the past the mere mention of Arab women evoked images of sensuality and physical pleasure, the same mention now evokes images of women as the victims of Islamic tradition, presented as an unmitigated fountain of oppression against women. This

analysis suffers from the naiveté of perceiving another culture through the prism of western consciousness. (Sabbagh xiii)

Another point to discuss is the superiority of the western woman and scholars. The assumption that western thought holds a higher rank only emphasizes a colonial idea. It neglects the fact that amidst those Arab cultures are women of thought who excel in many fields. Sabbagh, when discussing the models of women in literature and novels, mentions that: “None of these titles reflects the resistance or strength of Arab women or their cultural institutions; rather they reflect a greater degree of domination than that actually exercised by men over women within Muslim culture” (Sabbagh xiii). The idea of shifting the attention to the oppression and acts of misery only serves a bigger purpose, which is to place Arab women in a more inferior position than that of the Western woman. Sabbagh elaborates on that very accurately by saying: “The unmistakable interest in focusing on what I call “culture of misery” serves only to establish the positional superiority of the writers and through them, by proxy, Western women” (Sabbagh xiii). The claim that western feminists writing about Arab women’s sufferings means that they are creating a bond is fictitious. According to Sabbagh titles of articles recently written about Arab women only provoke weakness under Muslim and patriarchal establishments. She says: “The result of such articles is not to form bonds of sisterhood across cultures, nor to depict the happy and unhappy realities of women’s lives, nor to liberate Arab women, but rather to establish the superiority of Western women’s lives and, through them, Western Culture” (Sabbagh xiii). The real intention, according to Sabbagh is that “This body of literature is clearly about establishing western domination and not about liberating Muslim women” (Sabbagh xiii).

Stating all of the above does not mean that we are overlooking the problems that face Arab women. What I am trying to do is look for evidence of strength and empowerment.

Sabbagh adds her voice and expresses: “Just because there is a stringent patriarchal system in the Arab world does not mean that women are docile non-entities. In fact, strong patriarchies often breed the opposite: strong women who work very hard to ensure the compliance of the system with their needs” (Sabbagh xvi). She further discusses oppression as an outcome of culture, that is in no way exclusive to the Arab world, saying:

Through non-formal education and through traditions, all cultures inculcate into the deepest recesses of every individual in young adulthood the role that he or she must perform in society. The result is that the individual becomes sensitized to the forms of oppression in which he or she lives, whether it is in Arab or Western Culture. (Sabbagh xviii)

Another concept I would like to discuss is that of the ‘Savior.’ Originally a colonial idea, it has been taken up by Western Women, or ‘western feminists.’ Sabbagh breaks it down by discussing its reasons and the misconceptions that lead to it. She talks about how putting the Arab woman in a position of the ‘other’ automatically allows for false superiority, saying: “It is a discourse that legitimizes racist views of the ‘Other’ and anyone who subscribes to this view is missing the point of the feminist motto ‘sisterhood is global.’” (Sabbagh xx). It is important to see the reasons behind the gap in feminist thought; there is a huge difference in the writing of Arab women and that of Western women. That is why studying the works at hand is crucial in trying to bridge that gap. Sabbagh talks about that gap, saying:

To a certain degree, the difference between Arab and Western women writing about Arab women is the difference between seeing the glass half full or half empty: Arab women focus on the strength and resistance shown by their illiterate and disenfranchised sisters,

while western reporters interpret such oppression as an unchallenged aspect of “Muslim” Culture. (Sabbagh xx-xxi)

The difference lies in how they choose to see and position the problems in a cultural context. Adding to what Lila Abu-Lughod is trying to say, one should compare how Arab women choose to see and write out their problems, aspirations, triumphs, and defeats. The commonality of experience between women of the east and women of the west is a better reason to call for more understanding representations. However, cultural and political biases have changed the writing scene greatly. Sabbagh mentions how that affected her as a feminist: “Cultural biases toward Arab women have forced Arab-American women like myself who hold feminist views, into a defensive position” (Sabbagh xxiii). Sabbagh believes that is a degradation of the term "feminism" when Arab women are dehumanized and “used as a stick to beat the Arab world” (Sabbagh xxvi). We need instead to analyze the conditions that affect the dynamics of Arab women's involvement in the development of their cultures (Sabbagh xxvii).

In an attempt to try to read women through a cultural lens, one should understand one of the main pillars of the Arab World: family. Sabbagh offers a whole chapter just breaking down what it is, how it affects women and the dynamics behind it. She mentions the following:

Given the centrality of family, its patriarchal structure is crucial in understanding gender relationships in the Arab world. Family both supports and suppresses women. This paradox of support and oppression, love and power, generosity and competition compels both attachment to and struggle within families. (Sabbagh 201)

Knowing this makes reading or writing the Arab woman much more relatable and understandable. In many discourses, the woman is interpreted as inferior and oppressed only. In other instances, some readings fail to capture an accurate image of a woman's position in the

family. However, if intellectuals try to offer a more complex study of the culture that any woman inhabits, there will be a chance to understand many peculiar matters related to being an Arab woman. This is precisely what al-Shaykh and Abouzeid are offering in their works: an insight into these women's lives that show individuality and strengths that might not be seen or accounted for. That is what makes literature important. In her chapter on “Arab Women and Literature”, Sabbagh traces back the evolution of Arab women: "Most Arab women writers began by exploring the intricacies of their lives as women, of their families, and of family relations” (Sabbagh 236). Syrian novelist, Walid El Sakkakini, describes the concept of women’s literature as:

The literature in which a woman writer expresses her inner feelings and subtle sensitivity in female spheres which are out of men’s reach. Women’s literature describes female habits and modes of thinking which no man writer, however talented he might be, could reach. (qtd Sabbagh 236)

This puts Arab women writers in an elevated position. Doing something that no male writer can reach allows them to excel in that sector. That is in every way empowering; it offers new readings and forces the audience to look beyond the stereotype. Bouthaina Sha’aban*, author of the essay “Arab Women and Literature: An overview” ends her essay by saying that through the mishaps, occupation, and oppression a new Arab woman has emerged. She states that:

Under occupation emerges a new confident and creative Arab woman who breaks the stereotype of women’s weakness and inferiority. These Arab women authors are not only recording changes in challenged societies, but are the catalyst for this century’s dynamic response. (Sha’aban 237)

In the coming chapters, my aim will be using *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and *Year of the Elephant* as witnesses to the lives of Arab woman unknown to the public. I will be shedding light on how the protagonists alter the stereotypical image of the weak Arab woman. By understanding and acknowledging the limitations that face the women in these works, I will seek to portray an image, as close to reality as can be, of these women's daily battles and triumphs. Hanan Al-Shaykh offers the reader multiple protagonists in her book *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. I will only focus on one character, Suha while briefly referencing now and then other women protagonists when needed. While for Abouzeid 's shorter book *Year of the Elephant*, the protagonist Zahra will be our central focus.

Chapter One: A Woman's Journey to Self-fulfillment

Year of the Elephant:

I would like to start with Leila Abouzeid's character, Zahra, the protagonist in *Year of the Elephant*. Zahra's life is a journey from the day she was born: she never settled, beginning from the journey from her parents to her grandfather's house, to her journey of marriage, to another of resistance against the colonizer, and back to reality, life in the postcolonial world. The woman in this book is a symbol of many other women; her journey resembles a reality forgotten under dreams of a postcolonial world, a utopia never achieved. Leila Abouzeid depicts reality in its most delicate form; she gathers the silent struggles of many women and puts them in Zahra.

Abouzeid gives voice to these women and their struggles; she allows these women heroes to stand up, come to the foreground and speak their minds. She gives a platform for self-representation to a sector of society that was never given a voice. Salah Moukhlis, in his article "A History of Hopes Postponed": Women's Identity and the Postcolonial State in *Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence*," talks about how al-Shaykh adds her voice to many writers in defying the fact that 'oriental' women are 'passive sexual objects,' by seeking to "foreground and re-inscribe women's contribution to the resistance movement and the struggle for freedom" (Moukhlis 2003). Abouzeid's aim is to expose the objectification of women in independent Morocco amidst the social and economic platform as well as focus on their commodification by the male dominant ideology (Moukhlis 2003). This Novella is considered an 'authentic' description of Moroccan reality; in fact, it sheds light on how women were full agents in the war against the colonizer, but when it came to their war against patriarchy, this role has been taken away from them (Moukhlis 2003). The Moroccan culture has manipulated these women by giving them a role only when it was needed by the men

in power in an undercover political scene. It falsely gave them hope that life after defeating the colonizer would give them such roles and rights. In fact, that was the main trigger for the whole novella. This is when Zahra's real journey of self-discovery truly began, when she discovered her capabilities as a needed agent in society she discovered her worth. This is why when she returned to reality and realized that the patriarchal rhetoric would not allow her to practice more of this agency, she felt oppressed and in need of acting against that.

Abouzeid's Zahra is a model of an Arab woman that mostly goes unmentioned, a heroine and a vital part of achieving Moroccan independence. Many could read this model as a model of a woman who needs saving; however, Zahra's model is that of a woman who had played an important role in Moroccan independence and had gone through a journey of self-discovery. Zahra begins her story with the words: "I come back to my hometown feeling shattered and helpless" (Abouzeid 1). These words might automatically send signals that this is a weak and helpless woman. However, it is intriguing and exciting; it shows that there is a story to tell and experiences to reflect on. Abouzeid's portrayal of the character opens windows to many areas; this could be read as a feminist, political, or cultural narrative. She offers a literary work where politics is not secluded from culture and gender roles. Her reading of an independent Morocco gives attention to individuals who took part in the struggle. These are the individuals that history books referred to as 'demonstrators', without giving them names or lives – according to Elizabeth Warnock Fernea in her Introduction on *Year of the Elephant*. Abouzeid, however, offered a full picture where the struggle was a part of daily life and shaped a lot of people's lives; like our Zahra.

Zahra, a woman who joined the struggle to find her own self, loses many people in the process. Abouzeid begins the story with Zahra commenting on her journey to her hometown

after her husband divorces her, or in other words, discards her. The author invites us into Zahra's life when she is in her lowest emotional state. She feels like a stranger in a country she has fought for, saying: "And here I am home again, a stranger among strangers" (Abouzeid 1). Zahra compares herself to prisoners returning to prison after being freed, unable to find a place to fit in society. Those following harsh words keep coming up in many instances of the book: "Your Papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides" (Abouzeid 1). These are Zahra's husband's words to her. A divorce — completely unexpected — at a time when Moroccans thought that they would be flourishing in an independent Morocco. The shock and disappointment in a husband, a country, and a culture is a turning point in Zahra's life: "My papers? How worthless a woman is if she can be returned with a paper receipt like some store-bought object! How utterly worthless! Those few seconds destroyed the whole foundation of my being, annihilated everything I trusted." (Abouzeid 1). Zahra blames the law and the country which she has wholeheartedly fought for, saying: "Whatever the law provides!" And what is that? Expenses for a hundred days? That shows the extent of the law's regard for women, throw them out on the streets with a hundred days of expenses." (Abouzeid 11)

Abouzeid's critique of post-independence Morocco sheds light on forgotten aspects that directly touch people's lives. Apart from the economic and political changes that many history books discuss; the real depiction of people's lives is the scale that measures how 'independent' they have really become. Zahra is a woman who has risked her life and empowered many, men and women alike, against the colonizer. Little did she know that the colonizer has left his traces on the people of the struggle.

The state of alienation Zahra is in, when put in comparison with the strong feeling of belonging she had at the time of the struggle is shocking. In such a culture, a divorced woman

would automatically be entitled to her parents, to living with them and to being financially dependent on them. When Zahra first gets divorced she says: “My family all lie in their graves in the town cemetery. What am I to do?” (Abouzeid 2). Zahra returns to her hometown, feeling alienated and in loss of contact with any family member. The buildings and the walls all look so different to her now. She says: “But now as I look beyond the town walls at the dilapidated rooms with their rows of arched windows lining the river bank, I feel nothing. Have I lost my own identity?” (Abouzeid 2). Her inability to connect with the place — her hometown — where her roots are makes her feel that she has lost her identity; the one she gained during the struggle. The only thing Zahra owns is a ‘room’ that her father has left her: “I realize now the importance of having kept this room” (Abouzeid 12). Keeping this room is a tradition for women in Morocco. It is a form of empowerment and security. Zahra comments on this saying:

No woman sells her property, so tradition dictates. I grew up among such words and deeds, and from my earliest consciousness I remember my grandmother’s constant admonition that a woman has nothing but her husband and her property, and that husbands cannot be trusted. (Abouzeid 13)

The previous words, coming from her grandmother and still resonating in her head decades later is an example of women’s empowerment of one another. The figure of a mother, or in this case a grandmother, is very powerful in the Arab world. This defies in every way how we see the Arab woman, stating clearly the need for a woman’s independence, in this case, having her own property, which is not only a tradition but one of the laws [Shari ‘a] of Islam.

However small, this room offers her security and a sense of belonging: a feeling that a husband and independence could not offer her. Zahra says: “I stand looking around my room, so desolate in its emptiness, so oppressively small. But at least its mine, and I praise God for that”

(Abouzeid 11). Zahra refers to Scheherazade, a metaphor for her entrapment and need of freeing herself. Doing whatever she can to survive, she says: “In my room, in my father’s house, I spend the second of my hundred nights, counting them as Scheherazade once counted her own”

(Abouzeid 11).

Zahra’s first awakening and major change in character happened when she joined the struggle. Zahra could be read as a metaphor for independence, or in other words, a hopeful dream of an independent Morocco, where rights are equally given. As we look more into the change she goes through, one cannot help but see the resemblance with dreams of the postcolonial world. Looking at the change in character that happens to her all along doesn’t necessarily show that she is a weak and oppressed woman. Indeed, she has had her moments of defeat and loss; however, she has many other instances of courage and great impact on the people around her. Abouzeid’s need to depict reality in its best form allows her to show the complexity of the character at hand. Had she not highlighted many moments of defeat, the reader might have not been able to connect with Zahra on an emotional level, witnessing her go through the cycle of life with all the good and bad it has to offer. The transition that takes place from being married, to joining the struggle, and to life after divorce makes reading such character a thrilling journey. The reader has witnessed Zahra’s awakening after seeing her hit rock bottom. It’s interesting to look at the model of the woman that she was during the struggle and the model she was supposed to mold into after independence. The expectations of modernity and independent Morocco has challenged the authentic Moroccan woman. In Zahra’s case, her true strength showed at the time of the struggle. Zahra talks about her interests before the struggle dominated her life, saying: “In those days I was the very model of elegance, the height of fashion, so said one of my mother’s friends upon each triumphant return I made to our town,

bedecked in rings and earrings” (Abouzeid 20). At the time she valued herself through her elegance and how much she could show off amidst her community. Later that changed, molding her into another woman that showed unexpected strength. When talking about the struggle, Zahra says:

Later, the struggle for independence began. That’s another story. I happily sold my olive trees, my jewels, everything worth selling for the cause. Resistance took the place of emeralds and rubies in my life, and today I feel only contempt for such trinkets. Thank God our whims and fancies change! (Abouzeid 20)

Zahra mentions a lot of her triumphs during the struggle, amazing the reader with her ability to fight and become not just an active but a highly important member of the struggle. Also, many of the stories she shares are of other women who assisted her as they formed an empowered community of women fighters, without whom independence would not have been achieved. An interesting thing to note is how patriarchal oppression almost vanished completely at the time of the struggle. Men and women alike were assisting one another with one goal in mind, an independent Morocco. The women of the struggle did everything they could to enlighten and empower each other, from learning to read and write to selling their own jewelry in support of the cause. Roukia is another example of an empowering woman who has worked hand in hand with Zahra. Zahra mentions her a lot when reminiscing about those days: “After that, Roukia and I organized strikes, collected donations, and learned to read and write. And on a day I’ll never forget, we burned Pinhas’s shop” (Abouzeid 36). Zahra’s sense of belief in herself truly peaked at the time of the struggle, referring to herself and saying: “I’m a guerilla fighter’ I told them” (Abouzeid 37). Again, when speaking about Rokaia, Zahra says: “What a woman! Much more capable than her husband, and by far more steady. God sent them both to me to start me on the

road to all I accomplished” (Abouzeid 38). The idea of having a supportive community is a point I discussed in the introduction, when mentioning the importance of culture and community in shaping a woman’s character and in empowering her. Also, the change in generations is also a point not to be missed. These women weren’t raised to be fighters in the struggle, although it was their own choice to be active participants. Zahra draws attention to this when she says:

After I helped burn Pinhas’s shop, missions came to me one after another, missions I carried out alone. If my grandmother had returned from the dead and seen me setting shops ablaze, delivering guns, and smuggling men across borders, she would have died in a second death” (Abouzeid 38)

She further elaborates on that when making comparisons between the traditional life she was supposed to have and the one she’s living which has a stronger meaning and significance to her. Zahra talks about how her parents and grandparents had a completely different plan for her, saying: “They prepared me for a different life, but fate made a mockery of their plans” (Abouzeid 38).

Another point to talk about is Islam’s empowerment to women. The misconception that Islam excludes women from taking part in any activities other than the house is false. Zahra draws clear comparisons of when she was taking part in some tasks at the time of the struggle and the stories that her grandfather repeatedly recited to her about the time of the prophet. She says:

I fastened my belt, slipped the pistols wrapped in cloth inside my blouse and recalled my grandfather speaking of Asma, who took food to the Prophet Mohammed and to her own father Abu Bakr, when they were hiding from their enemies in a cave during their flight from Mecca to Medina. (Abouzeid 39)

She realizes how empowering it is to make a connection with the daughter of Abu Bakr. She further states: "The comparison shook me and made me realize that the struggle has been the same down through the centuries, in that women, too, have always taken their part in it" (Abouzeid 39). Also, when talking about other women who joined the struggle, she says: "The women's questions went on and on, and we were stunned---they were more aware and knowledgeable about issues than we were" (Abouzeid 47). If anything, this shows how intelligent and enlightened the average Moroccan woman is. At the hardest times, they stood up for a cause and educated themselves at a time when every active member of the community was needed.

Zahra's relationship with her husband and the major change that happened to it after independence is a turning point in her life. Post-independent Morocco has disappointed Zahra as all the dreams and work that has been put into it slowly faded away by the greed of a flourishing life. Her husband, whom she stood by while in prison, has become a man of status with a position in the government. That position made him forget what he was truly fighting for. Some of the characters have been affected by the greed of a lavish life, but Zahra remained true to her beliefs and her identity which the struggle has shaped. The call for a 'modern woman' is something that Zahra could not cope with. Not because of her inability to cope with a more modernized world, but because it required losing her identity into becoming someone she was not. Recalling the fights with her husband, Zahra says: "You don't like me eating with my fingers? It doesn't please you that I sit with the servants? We fought colonialism in their name and now you think like the colonizers!" (Abouzeid 54). Her resilience to remain true to the struggle and to her beliefs shows that she refused to get affected or shaped by any other person, even if it was her husband. This also shows a great deal of agency and will into forming her own

belief system and standing up for her husband. While trying to make sense of her husband's sudden change in character and her endurance to this life and the divorce, she comments, saying: "Well disasters can weaken minds just as they can sharpen personalities and transform characters" (Abouzeid 60). For Zahra such disasters were stepping stones to her breaking free of all the false and fake relationships that she was part of. The strength that she shows in her character comes from her ability to overcome whatever mishaps life has to offer, while still remaining true to herself. On her last journey from her hometown she says: "A firm determination impels me to shake off the dust and start anew" (Abouzeid 61). Regardless of how weak she felt at that point, having only little amount of money and having no one instead of the Sheikh (a religious figure who recognized her at her hometown and offered guidance and a helping hand) by her side, she decides to leave and set off on another trip of finding herself and begin again from the lowest point. Zahra herself acknowledges that change and accepts it. She says: "I spent ten years there (the stages of my life, it seems, proceed by decades), ten years that molded me into a different woman, with both feet on the ground and my head held high" (Abouzeid 20).

The change that happened in her character was indeed a product of her downfalls. But the individual that she has become knows her worth more than ever before. When talking about what other women of the community think and might say of her, she makes it clear that she now accepts no humiliation or control from any other person, saying: "I'm no longer capable of flattering or showing deference or blushing at the appropriate time, but this inability has given me an amazing strength. If only my tribulations had come earlier in life!" (Abouzeid 16). Her tolerance of other people's opinions has now become very limited, men and women alike. The

strength that her mishaps had instilled upon her have made a strong, willing, and independent woman out of Zahra.

Chapter Two: Individual Stories of Defeat and Triumph

Women of Sand and Myrrh:

The journeys in this book are diverse and complicated; marriage seems to be a common trigger in all of the characters' lives. They all happen to share the same place at the same time at that point in their life. Hanan Al-Shaykh has managed to put together four complex women — with different backgrounds — who have to conform to a society that not only limits their freedom but belittles their basic human rights.

I have mentioned that all of these women's journeys are universal. The fact that their stories are very much relatable to any woman around the world makes this book an interesting work. It not only defies the stereotype of what an Arab woman should look like, but also introduces a daring image of how an Arab female author could write and be perceived. In his book review of *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, Christopher Dickey dwells on this idea of the universality of the work, saying:

It is not surprising that many Arab men resent al-Shaykh 's depiction, but western women, one suspects, will see more than Arab society in this novel. The details of purdah, mutilation and polygamy are literal truths so alien to western experiences that they may be read as metaphor. However, the frustration of living in a society where men do not acknowledge a woman's sense, understand her sensibilities or credit her intelligence is surely nothing rare in the west. al-Shaykh 's book succeeds, not least, as a collection of parables about any woman's experience. (Dickey 68)

This book was banned from many Arab countries for many years, which only makes it more intriguing. It defies, in so many ways, the image of how Arabs would like to be perceived. In a

culture that puts too much weight and importance on norms, traditions, and religion that it suppresses any societal deformities, it becomes hard to accept such sudden daring uncovering of its hidden dis-functionalities.

This novel was originally written in Arabic as *Misk Al-Ghazal* then later translated into the English version which I am referring to: *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. Even though the difference in translation is not my main focus, it requires some attention. Many critics have discussed the importance of translation to a foreign audience and what the novel loses in the process. Without delving into the technical aspects of translation, I will discuss the significant differences from the original texts. Writing to a foreign audience – or the west – shows in the translated work; most important is the reordering of the chapters, which happen to change the direction of the novel. This shifts the reader's attention to a certain idea instead of focusing on what the author originally had in mind in *Misk Al-Ghazal*. Michelle Hartman talks about how the English version has flattened Hanan al-Shaykh 's characters:

This is how her point can be reconciled with Edward Said's suggestion that *Women of Sand and Myrrh* is the kind of book that "western feminists should read". Said is looking at this novel as one of the local female empowerment and diverse female characters in which Arab women are portrayed in a variety of ways. These are elements that get flattened in the translation. (Hartman 34)

Beginning and ending with the character Suha gives her more power in the novel by letting her moderate. Instead of giving her equal space in the novel, a chapter like all the other characters, the translation ended with another chapter named Suha. The model of an educated Lebanese woman who flees and escapes the oppressing Arab community omits the fact that she could have survived had she had any agency or will. In the original *Misk Al-Ghazal*: Hanan al-

Shaykh ends with the character Tamr, who manages to work her way around the oppressing community she was born in. That in itself shows a great deal of women empowerment, although this changed while having a western/foreign audience in mind. Hartman talks about that in her article:

Misk Al-Ghazal ends with the poorest and most disadvantaged character, Tamr, coming into her own as an independent woman in her own country and indigenous environment. She mounts a successful challenge to her society and opens a shop. Her first step to living on her own as an unmarried woman, financially beholden to no one. (Hartman 38)

That specific model of an Arab woman is not very popular in the west. Surprisingly, it gets lost in the translation instead of being emphasized. Tamr is an example of a determined woman, along with being a traditional one. The difference in meaning from the original to the translated work emphasizes the need for the Arab woman to flee from the traditional society, while *Misk Al Ghazal* emphasized a strong woman who worked within the parameters of that traditional society to make it her own (Hartman 38).

The slight changes in the ordering of the chapters show how powerful, simple changes can affect the work. As Hartman states: "Because the novel does not have a linear plot, and the characters' stories are connected by subtle narrative threads showing how their lives touch each other, reordering the chapters in this way does not 'spoil the story', no major elements of the plot are rendered senseless and the major storyline is still intact" (Hartman 35). However, the message behind the book changes drastically. The misrepresentation of Arab women's will and agency is what draws one's attention making it hard to tell whether the translated work has changed the intention of the author according to audience preference or not. This questions the authenticity of the author's and translator's intent, as well as their degree of faithfulness to the

original work. The meanings and intentions lost in translation are one thing, and the politics of translation are another, according to Hartman: “It is not only the responsibility of the translation theorists and practitioners, however, but also that of readers, critics, and consumers of Arabic Literature, to challenge and rethink the representation of Arab women both within literary circles and mainstream culture” (Hartman 45). Hartman also adds that the goal of feminist writing is to work against the notion that Arab women should always be freed from an oppressed society (Hartman 45). She finally adds that: “This can then allow for the possibility that Arab women become complex and contradictory figures “in English” rather than circumscribed by the overwhelming power of the discursive space into which they are translated” (Hartman 45).

Suha

Hanan al-Shaykh started the novel with the character Suha: an educated Lebanese woman, married with a son, who finds herself in an unnamed Gulf country. Feeling so distant from the community she has found herself in because of her husband's work, Suha goes through a journey of self-discovery, or better said, a journey of getting to know herself and her potential. Suha feels misplaced since her first day in the desert; the reader feels Suha's suffocation in her house, her place of work, even on the streets. Her inability to find work, drive, walk down the street, even go to the supermarket was limiting to her freedom, as it would be to any human being. Her shift in place is the first trigger of her restlessness. Al-Shaykh invites us to understand the psyche of this woman living under newly constructed constraints. The first-person narration personalizes the story; it creates a relationship between the reader and the characters. Al-Shaykh starts and ends the novel with a canary in a cage that Suha owns, a metaphor for Suha's state of mind. It introduces early on the idea of being caged and also of escape. Suha's character has undergone many changes from the beginning, middle, to end of the novel. Even though she was not very content about moving to the desert, the fighter in her was willing to get past the laws and regulations that limited or belittled her existence and her status as a woman. She started working in a department store, even though that was way below her educational status. She said: "I had a degree in Management studies from the American University in Beirut, but nobody else had wanted to employ me. They were all scared of the law, the raids and the reprisals" (Al-Shaykh 5).

The decision of leaving this first job was because of how being a woman made her feel; Suha mentions that in saying; "I was hiding because I was a woman and I was working" (Al-Shaykh 4). Fear invigorated her when men came to inspect, and made her realize how an act as

simple as being a working woman in this country could put her into such a state of fear. Suha's character showed strength and agency early on in the novel; she had control over her emotions and actions. Her awareness of the state of women in that place made her conscious of her decisions and choices. After leaving work, she made it clear that she will not allow herself to be miserable. She says:

Even then I desperately resisted the torpor that enveloped this place, resisted being sucked down by the swamp whose waters never grew deeper but never completely dried up. Like the other women, I'd thrown myself into the life here so that I wouldn't feel sorry for myself. I'd given up following the news, local or international, and occupied myself with cake recipes.... I'd congratulated myself when I'd prepared dinner for five businessmen in an hour. (Al-Shaykh 5)

It is clear that her interests have started to change; she decided to work around the system and make the best out of the situation at hand. Still, there was this feeling of discontent and resentment to the place. Suha looked at life in the desert as: "time lost out of my life" (Al-Shaykh 7). It is interesting to read this in parallel with the things she chose to occupy herself with during this 'lost time'. She makes clear that whatever happens during that period would not count. Suha is portrayed as distanced from the community she was living amongst. Al-Shaykh made us feel she was untouchable, that her critical eye and education would not let her get sucked into life in the desert. Suha's character is as an observer, analyst, critic and an inspector of all that was wrong with the lives behind closed doors. She had access to the deepest secrets of the desert, and that made her stand out as superior. Al-Shaykh though could not elevate her further since we are dealing with the human psyche; it is quite normal for such a character to get dragged into the cycle of life connected with that place. The limitations on her only left her with

a limited amount of things that she could actually do freely. However, a part of the old and conscious Suha was still aware that she was wasting her energy on the wrong things and in the wrong places. She says:

Things didn't progress as I had convinced myself they would when I was forcing myself to attend classes. When the women at the exercise classes began to look like birds and animals...when I began to drink coffee and eat biscuits instead of discussing books (Al-Shaykh 12)

Al-Shaykh started to introduce the reader to a change in perspective; Suha took the position of one of those women she was observing and criticizing. However, she is still in control of her emotional wellbeing: "This time I knew that I wasn't going to visit anyone. My desert experience had to be related to the place, not just the people: I determined to try and communicate with my surroundings" (Al-Shaykh 14). These were Suha's words in an attempt to find some connection with the place, acknowledging all the other women's seclusion from their surroundings. She had it in her to still give the place a chance, and discover a world beyond her enclosed community:

I was a little disconnected: the feeling I started out with of losing my sensitivity to the life going on around me was growing stronger, as was my awareness of the complete absence of women, at least from the world outside. Most of the houses seemed to be devoted to men and their affairs...None of the houses had balconies, and everything was enclosed by high walls. (Al-Shaykh 16)

This enclosure that al-Shaykh shed light on in her book allowed the critical eye to look into the effects of disconnect and isolation on the human psyche, a matter often overlooked by societies,

especially wealthy ones. Al-Shaykh 's critique of the importance of the emotional wellbeing of these women goes far beyond the importance of money and servants.

Suha's struggle with work and her existence in the outside world occupies a big part of her story, but her relationship with other women is even more important. Suha's relationship with the women in the desert frames her story. Women in al al-Shaykh 's novel both empower and oppress one another, and al-Shaykh foregrounds power relations amongst the different models of women in the desert. The oppressor is not always a male; in fact, a character like Nur and her mother are examples of manipulative and oppressive women.

'Nur' is the definition of a rich and spoiled woman with too much power in her hand. She projects many of her insecurities on the people around her. Her power comes from her mother, who supports her irrational and destructive needs to please her. Nur acts out of boredom; she believes that she has the right to manipulate and play with other people's lives. Her encounter with Suha is the most striking. At the beginning of this relationship, Nur was a form of amusement to Suha. Suha said: "she awakened my curiosity, but only for a short time" (Al-Shaykh 39). The strange world that Nur introduced to Suha is what kept her interested for a while. Through Suha, Nur discovered a world behind walls, a secret life that Nur created for herself. However, this friendship was starting to suffocate Suha, who says: "I also used to say to Basem that I couldn't break off relations with Nur as I had done with the rest because she found an answer to every excuse I gave...I began to feel annoyed by her and her persistence and complained about it to Basem"(Al-Shaykh 41). Suha could not free herself from Nur; in fact, she got dragged more and more into Nur's mess. Suha started helping Nur with her illicit encounters with different men; she started meeting them at her house, in her room, and on her bed. Suha started to feel the change in her character, and the things that she was doing now: "I went into the

bathroom and turned on the tap as hard as it is would go looking at myself in the mirror, asking my reflection how long I would be in Nur's life" (Al-Shaykh 46). Suha was conscious of the life she was being dragged into, that Nur and she "were playing with fire" (Al-Shaykh 47).

Al-Shaykh 's characters are diverse, complex, and real. She empowers them by giving them a voice, but still shows the many weak sides that an ordinary strong woman would have. Suha seemed to be the strongest of the characters at the beginning — given her education, background and awake conscious — yet al-Shaykh highlighted her flaws and mishaps. Suha's journey started early on when she left Lebanon, got married to Basem, and moved to the desert. That was the point where her life completely changed. The comfort of leading a life that one drew for herself is different from being out in an alien place where one is expected to still live a normal life. Suha experiences many emotional and mental stages in the desert; her encounter with all these women who have their share of problems affected her in some way. She discovered a new curious Suha, and that curiosity drove her to get involved with certain mindsets that she would have never come in contact with otherwise. The fact that a 'place' has brought them all together allowed for al-Shaykh to let their lives intersect in very complex ways that brought out the best and worst of their personalities.

I wanted to turn to her and tell her that I had no connection with the woman who had been panting with her a little while before. But I just went on standing there, quivering silently, not daring to move, while Nur sat at her dressing table and reached for her hairbrush, loosened her plaits, brushed her hair...she didn't look at me but smiled in the mirror as she saw me leaving, and said goodbye. I couldn't distance myself from what had happened. I went to the car and sat in it, my face almost touching the window, and

saw nothing until I reached my front door. I heard Basem and Umar talking together and longed to be sitting between them feeling bored (Al-Shaykh 51).

That is the first encounter between Nur and Suha; it is the beginning of their illicit relationship. That striking experience automatically alienates Suha from herself. She wishes to step away and choose to believe that this was not her and will not be her. That dramatic twist in her life made her uncomfortable and alienated from the Suha she knew. It made her wish that she could undo and erase from her memory what just happened. Suha was missing feeling normal, feeling 'bored'.

That in itself is the feeling of comfort that comes from one's emotional and mental stability; feeling normal again is what she was longing for at the moment. It cannot be said that Nur was the only one to blame for the relationship; in fact, Suha's lack of resistance at the time played a role. Suha has changed from a woman with a clear mindset of what she is and what she is not, to a confused woman who would easily get dragged into another woman's life. The desert bored her and left her with nothing to do except delve into other women's problems and stories:

The heart and mind opened their two chambers, allowing me to steal a glance into them. I'm indifferent now to Suhail, Maurice, Adnan, Adil, and I understand that time takes a huge eraser and rubs out names and then writes others in and renews feelings and emotions. I'd got to know Basem and fallen in love with him, and my heart had leapt for joy when he asked me to marry him. Now I didn't want to look into either chamber. I chased away all the images and questions and misgivings and convinced myself that I'd forgotten what had happened in Nur's room. But the heart and mind were faithful and searched virtuously through their records, unearthing causes and explanations which

might supply them with adequate justification for eradicating the event. (Al-Shaykh 53, 54)

Suha is a very conscious character; she is completely aware of her situation, it is difficult to believe that she is the one involved in that event. That is why the more involved she gets, the more alienated she feels from herself. A counterpoint to this would be her choice to distance herself, to have two separate lives at once. She started to get addicted; Nur became a habit. What elevates al-Shaykh's style of writing is that she is extremely sensitive to the inner self of these women. She introduces how they change while giving the reader plausible reasons for such change in behavior:

Our relationship wove itself together from day to day. I was like a fisherman who casts his line into water where he knows there are no fish, or even weeds, but feels a sense of calm and a release from the boredom of his routine every time he does it, and prefers it at least to doing nothing, although every day when he comes back to fish again he feels a little restless and disgruntled. (Al-Shaykh 57)

Even though she resented who she has become, it still felt better than doing nothing. Also, Nur's presence made her feel little and powerless. Nur has no guilt in pursuing her pleasures, whether it was with other men or with Suha. As long as she was fulfilling her needs, other people's lives were of little importance to her:

In the days that followed, I plucked up enough courage to kiss Nur, when I'd shut my eyes and opened them fifty times...I couldn't open my eyes again easily; it was as if I was standing beside a large firework that might go off at any minute, or was dazzled in the presence of Nur the imperious queen bee. This was no longer an experiment; I'd tried a

new fruit which I'd thought would be inedible and instead, I found it intoxicatingly sweet;
I could just spit out the stone and go on my way. (Al-Shaykh 57)

Suha was intoxicated by tasting the forbidden fruit; she has been living her life according to many rules and regulations in the desert, but Nur was breaking all those rules. Manipulative as she is, she placed herself in Suha's life and slowly intoxicated her with her courage, boldness, and hunger for more. These were feelings that Suha almost forgot about in the desert.

"Whatever plant it was I tasted had drugged me and made me lose my memory. I no longer noticed how slowly time crawled by in the desert ...Feelings of agitation and rage no longer crept up on me as they had done before"(Al-Shaykh 58). Unable to feel certain things is a sign of losing meaning to life. Being able to feel full, whether sadness or happiness, is a result of a balanced life. The imbalance that happened to Suha was a result of a change in place, ideology, and surrounding people. She fulfilled the need to feel and live again through Nur, through living a double life. She can block out her son and husband as long as she is with Nur and then get back to her normal life, guilt-free. That did not last for long though: "But I felt irritated when one day Nur came to me in my house; only then did our relationship seem a reality"(Al-Shaykh 58). It hit Suha here that her life was watching her; it was becoming a witness to what she was doing. Her son's drawings and her husband's clothes made her feel the reality of her act with Nur.

I mentioned before how important the mother figure is in the Arab family. Nur's character was accompanied by her mother. Her presence and support were destructive to Nur's upbringing and Suha's life. Suha's encounter with Nur's mother was like a wake-up call; Suha slowly started to realize Nur's influence on her. She also started to feel trapped and incapable of getting out of the relationship. The juxtaposition of being trapped in Nur's life was like her being trapped in the

desert. The feelings of anger, resentment, and suffocation were equally evoked as her will was being taken away from her. The following are Nur's mother's words to Suha:

You and Nur are sisters, best friends, and yet you don't come and see her anymore. Her tone changed and scolding down she said harshly, 'she told me that you're heartless. You leave the phone off the hook and when she comes to see you, you don't open the door to her. And your driver tells lies and says you're not in. You ought to be ashamed!

Ashamed! (Al-Shaykh 69)

Nur's mother gave herself the right to enter Suha's life uninvited, affecting her decisions and life choices. She put herself in an elevated position where she can manipulate Suha in order to please her daughter. "I looked down at my fingers, trying to stop myself shaking. I hadn't known that I could be so weak " (Al-Shaykh 69). Feelings of weakness, panic, and anger took over. Suha no longer felt excited or passionate about the relationship. Entrapment is the state she found herself in. Another Suha started to arise, the one that al-Shaykh introduced at the beginning of the novel: "Suddenly I said, 'Now I understand why Saleh left you. You're spoilt and thoughtless"(Al-Shaykh 73). Nur's reply was:

"I don't understand. You're the one I want and yet you behave so coldly, I'm ready to live with you and leave Saleh and my family for you, and you're even worried that the dogs and the gazelles might come in and see us! I really don't understand your nature. If somebody loves you, you run away from them and torture yourself about it"(Al-Shaykh 73).

That is Nur's common sense; she disregarded the fact that the relationship was illicit or forbidden and the fact that Suha has a son and a life. Instead, she wanted to manipulate her into thinking that she was insensitive and throwing away a love of a lifetime. Nur made her feel that she can

make a sacrifice for Suha, while Suha was incapable of doing the same. Al-Shaykh always invites the reader into the mind of the characters, making the work more complex and more intriguing. She makes the reader feel that one is taking part in the decision making process. Suha is still confused and unable to accept the reality of the situation and she questions herself:

I stared at my reflection in the mirror and thought, is this really happening to me with a woman? I'd asked myself this question hundreds of times and rediscovered each time that this experience with Nur was deeply shocking to me. (Al-Shaykh 73)

Suha's relationship with Nur and her mother got even more complicated when Nur's mother started threatening Suha with her family if she does not make her daughter happy: "So Nur, you sent your mother after me, did you?"(Al-Shaykh 74). Suha now knows the kind of people she is dealing with, and she refuses to give in. Nur's mother made it clear to Suha when she said: "Only God Almighty can make my daughter suffer! "(Al-Shaykh 74). To make it even more clear, she said: "Now you realize what Nur means to me? So one word from me to Saleh and you and your husband and family are out, Deported" (Al-Shaykh 74). Suha realized that these women were not going anywhere and that she has fallen under their mercy: "Nur and her mother are vampires, I thought, and I'm their prey"(Al-Shaykh 74). Suha still, after all of this, thought that maybe Nur's mother does not quite know what exactly is going on between them: "I thought she doesn't know what's between me and her daughter... 'what Nur and I do together is forbidden. We have an illicit relationship'" (Al-Shaykh 74). Strikingly the mother is still persistent, and instead of talking her daughter out of it, she decides to convince Suha to go on with it saying; "That's wrong my daughter. Wrong. But adultery with a man is worse"(Al-Shaykh 75). As striking as that may be, al-Shaykh depicts a new model of an Arab mother: a highly unexpected behavior and mindset, yet it exists. The introduction of that kind of mother makes

Nur's character more understandable. She has been brought up by a mother who never says no nor disciplines her spoiled daughter; leaving her with maids the whole time, and giving affection in the form of gifts sheds light on the impact of the mother figure on the family's future.

The study of family dynamics and the impacts of the Arab family on the Arab woman helps to understand Hanan al-Shaykh 's various characters. Judith E. Tucker's book talks about the Arab family in history: "The neglect of family as the object of serious research can be traced to two rather different sets of perceptions, one belonging to the field of history of the family and one to the field of women history "(Tucker 95). She states that the family has always been depicted as the birth of women's oppression in literature, "as the instrument of women's oppression, the mediator of values and customs that circumscribe women's activities and perpetuate an unequal distribution of power between genders"(Tucker 196). Tucker also accuses the study of family of victimizing the woman: "Study of the family reduces the woman to victim and obscures the multiplicity of ways in which she did participate in her society" (Tucker 196). Although not ignoring the oppression women get subjected to, I aim to show that there can be a balance amongst inequality and that women show strength and rebelliousness against the system and each other.

Al-Shaykh provides us with many turning points in each of the characters' lives. Even though Suha's relationship with Nur seems like a major change, Suha's encounter with the mother plays a greater role. Al-Shaykh 's introduction of the mother played the role of the catalyst in breaking this illicit relationship. The feelings of abuse, entrapment, and inability to leave at one's own choice made Suha realize that Nur's mother was exerting power over her, a power that she did not have in the first place. One of Suha's main reasons for wanting to leave the desert was the amount of false authority that she found herself consenting to. People at the

desert gave themselves the right to exert power over one another: men over women, women over men, women over women, mothers over daughters, husbands over wives, wives over husbands, and the list goes on. What al-Shaykh is trying to show is an unequal distribution of power amongst the community. Through the depiction of a character like Nur's mother, we can see the portrayal of such a model: "The mother cleared her throat and moved her fiery eyes off me for a moment and I thought, quickly now I can get out the door and forget this house, tear it out of my memory, whatever it takes"(Al-Shaykh 74). The encounter between Nur's mother and Suha shows a great deal of intellectual and cultural difference. We already witnessed a great deal of intellectual detachment between Suha and many of the women in the desert, but the intellectual space between the young and the old is even more striking. While talking about Nur's mother, Suha says; "I could only resolve this situation by talking to Nur. Going on talking to her mother was like banging my head against a brick wall: she was a creature from another world."(Al-Shaykh 75). The distance that is between Suha and Nur's mother is too big for a conversation even to be held. This was when Suha decided: "I had to get away, to imagine myself in an aeroplane"(Al-Shaykh 75). In order to be able to leave, Suha completely distanced herself from the Suha of the desert, saying: "I saw myself exchanging the impossible with her. It was as if it had happened, but to somebody else, and hadn't left its mark on me"(Al-Shaykh 75). She threw away fear, weakness, and regret. In order to feel empowered Suha had to let go of the burdens of an unwanted part of herself:

I stood up and it was as if all the power in the world was spreading along my veins and arriving in my brain. I could do nothing to control it; I just knew how lucky I was because I would never live in this house, and I wasn't lonely and didn't suffer from emotional impoverishment, and because I knew what I wanted and I was about to go

through the door and out of the house and garden and I would never see them again even if every hair in my head was pulled out one by one and they tried to drag me back in by force. (Al-Shaykh 76)

Having the ability and freedom to make choices is something not all of al-Shaykh 's women are aware of. Agency and will are traits that Suha has, despite taking the time to emerge. This only adds to the realness and rawness of the work. The proximity of the characters' minds to the reader allows for empathy and understanding. As mentioned before, the reader places himself in the mind of the character, aiding with the decision making by empathizing with the character's situation. There is a feeling of freshness and empowerment that the reader feels when Suha decides to leave: "I saw the mother sitting on the floor...and she beckoned me to come over to her. But I walked like a sleepwalker, a big smile on my lips, past her, out of the door, through the garden and into the fresh air"(Al-Shaykh 76). The fact that there was a sense of fear and entrapment taking over a big part of the text made this encounter very liberating. Also Suha mentioning how lucky she is that she does not live in that house is a powerful and liberating thought, the fact that she is aware of her needs, her capabilities, and her ability to make a decision for herself without taking anybody's consent shows that only she is responsible for her happiness, sanity, and emotional stability.

Description of physical appearance and effects of the psyche on how one looks plays a vital role in helping the reader imagine the intensity of the situations. After Suha returns to her own house, she says: "I threw Bassem's shirt back in the dirty clothes basket and stood close to the mirror, examining my face. I was struck by the way it hadn't changed; my turbulent emotions, my confusion, my resolve didn't show on it "(Al-Shaykh 77). The strength that appears in this phrase shows how controlling Suha is of her emotions. Being able to separate, in such

strong manner, between her confusion and her will to move forward and act normally for the sake of her son and husband shows a great deal of mental and physical strength. Suha chooses war and political turbulence over living in the desert: "'That's it. I'm leaving this country, whatever happens. I'm no better off than the people living in Lebanon"(Al-Shaykh 77). This shows that it's easier to live in a country where the enemy is known and is just one than to live in a place where everyone could be an enemy in disguise and exert unauthorized power over you. When giving reasons to her husband, Bassem, of why she is committed to leaving this time she says; "I was like a prisoner who couldn't give convincing reasons why he should be released"(Al-Shaykh 77), even though in her head there were a million reasons why she should. Reference to 'prisoners' comes up while describing many of al-Shaykh 's characters: Suha used it to describe the women at the party; it was a state of being that Suha felt surrounded by women in the desert.

Another critical point to talk about is al-Shaykh 's focus on the difference among women of the region. There are many references to Cairo, Lebanon, and other places where women are drastically different from those in the desert. This in itself is breaking the stereotype of what an Arab woman is like. The diversity and uniqueness of the women who come from different countries defy how all the Arab women are being portrayed by being grouped into 'one woman' who is victimized and portrayed as oppressed and passive. Suha's words here manage to draw attention to this:

'I can't tell myself this is just an experience which I have to go through. I'm an Arab. I'm supposed to feel that I have some connection with the culture here, but I feel none at all. I'm completely detached from it. I'm getting older. I'm wasting my time.'(Al-Shaykh 77)

The fact that an Arab woman feels so distant from Arab culture opposes the false representation of women of the region. Suha breaks through the pressure put on her to conform and feel some connection with the culture. She does not feel that she should accommodate and accept whatever comes her way.

The need to lead a normal life where she can do the simplest things without feeling constrained or doing something against any law is mostly what Suha was seeking. She says:

My words were unconvincing. They were words that the heroine had learned by heart. I tried again: 'Let me go. I want to live a normal life. I want to walk about, not go in the car all the time, and I want to dress how I like. Yes, I've got a small mind. I don't want to feel afraid when I send a film to be developed if my arms aren't covered in the photos. I don't want to be afraid. I don't want to tell lies. (Al-Shaykh 78)

The urge for leading a normal life were not just simple things to be taken for granted. In fact, in these little acts, one experiences freedom. The freedom to be, without controls or constant need for assistance, is a feeling Suha, as a woman, has lost.

As mentioned earlier, in the translated work, the chapter on Suha was split using its ending as an epilogue to end the novel with. This epilogue discusses the day she departs. The chapter starts with her saying, "I marked the sixteenth of June, the day of my departure, with lipstick on the wall calendar"(Al-Shaykh 275). It feels like al-Shaykh is putting an end to a chapter of Suha's life, promising a new beginning that is in every way empowering. As she left the house and was on her way to the airport Suha took one final look at the 'monotonous' desert, as she calls it. She started observing the houses, connecting them with people, the women who inhabited them and the life behind walls. Asking herself, "How had I been able to put up with listening to their conversation, thought of inviting them to my house, or remembered

engagements with them with some interest and enthusiasm?"(Al-Shaykh 275). She looked back, questioning even her emotional state, and regrets feeling interested or enthusiastic about these women: "At that moment as I looked down I seemed to see nothing, and I felt regret building up inside me because I'd lived here for so long. So long"(Al-Shaykh 276). Stressing the amount of time spent in the desert is al-Shaykh 's way of emphasizing the relationship between place, time, emotional and intellectual growth. The constant feeling of misplacement and detachment changed how Suha thought of herself. Al-Shaykh allows Suha to reflect on her lost time at the desert:

I compared myself to the empty cover of a once full book of cinema tickets: the leaves torn off and handed through the ticket-office window were the times I had wasted at tea parties, and coffee mornings. . .or the years I had spent revolving in a circle of people who didn't change from one day to the next as if they'd been put in a pot with a tightly-fitted lid and drew life from the steam which rose within the confines of the pot, breathing in only their own heat, while a low fire burnt underneath them. (Al-Shaykh 277)

Being forced to live in a place where life is stagnant could be suffocating to a character so full like Suha. For an educated woman, who once experienced a life of freedom and endless possibilities, the desert life, with all its wealth could not give such a woman the satisfaction she yearned for. The desert emptied Suha, not because of the place, physically, but because of the confinement, walls, and the power such women had falsely given to themselves over one another. As she left the house she was definite that she would cut all connections with such a poisonous place:

‘I pulled out a lot of bits of paper with addresses written on them. I tore them up into tiny pieces and dropped them on the floor.

‘Why did you tear them up mama?’

‘We're not going to see anyone from here ever again.’(Al-Shaykh 77)

Suha's words to Bassem were also of great significance. She says; "‘Do you know what annoyed me the most here? ‘Nur? Suzanne? Tamr? No. The Walls, constricting everybody'"(Al-Shaykh 278). This final comment on the main reason behind her sadness and utter discontent with the place is not all because of the women; it is in the constrictions, the isolation, and seclusion.

Those are feelings that al-Shaykh projected skillfully through each one of her characters, feelings that resulted in emotional impoverishment that led to unexpected behavior. The tension that al-Shaykh has been building up throughout the text finally started to fade the minute Suha stepped in the airport:

I sighed contentedly, feeling as if I'd left all my thoughts and tensions behind outside the airport building and was a normal person again, no longer split between Suha of the desert and Suha the city dweller. (Al-Shaykh 278,279)

The fact that she acknowledges the split in her character is the first step to breaking out of the walls of what is expected from each of the ‘Suhas’. The place has forced her to acquire multiple personalities in order to fit in or to blend with the new surroundings; now the place is no longer a part of the equation, she has managed to break free of it: "For the first time here I was dressed as I wanted to be, in clashing colours that suited my figure and face and personality"(Al-Shaykh 279). The confidence in her voice has started to show, knowing her true self and defining her personality: Suha is now in sync. Her figure, face, personality, and mental stability are all in one

line. She is no longer distancing herself from any part of who she is, and the determination to recover from the time lost in the desert was her primary target.

Tamr:

The strength that al-Shaykh put in Suha in order to leave the desert in the translated work might take away from the strength of other models of women of the desert. Tamr is another character that is read as even more empowering. Her real empowerment comes with her determination to work within a traditional system to suit her needs. A character like Tamr shows how diverse Arab women are. She is a true example of agency and will. Being an Arab woman, who got married off before puberty, survived three divorces with a son to raise, yet remained willing and determined emphasizes that not all women who live under traditional constraints are always oppressed. Tamr's will to get educated and open up a business in a community where only a few and selected roles are given to women; makes this character come out as the strongest of al-Shaykh's protagonists.

The relationships between the women of the same community shows a great deal of women empowerment to one another. Tamr showed agency early on, before getting introduced to Suha at the institute. However, this relationship has introduced Tamr to a whole new way of life and array of possibilities. While saying goodbye to Suha, Tamr says:

But what I was really grateful to her for was introducing me to another way of life in the desert which I'd known nothing of, starting with colours and furnishings and ending up with civilization. I thanked God that I'd gone to the Institute, had Suha as my teacher...It was all new and my mind had picked it up and recorded it. (Al-Shaykh 97)

This relationship shows how women support one another. Their strength and agency shows in creating a supportive community within the bigger community. Suha's presence in the desert made a difference in Tamr's life as she had immediate impact on her. Tamr needed guidance and a role model, and this is what Suha provided.

Another example to mention is Batul, Tamr's sister-in-law. When Rashid, her brother, refused to send her to the institute and Tamr starved herself for days, Batul was the one who stepped in and stood up against her husband for the sake of his sister. With so much pride, Tamr recalls: "Batul's voice called out, 'Listen to me, Rashid. I swear to God you won't come near me and you're not my lawful husband unless you personally take Tamr to the institute. Can you hear me, everybody?'"(Al-Shaykh 87). As mentioned before, the family dynamics in the Arab world is hardly ever clearly portrayed. The above is a clear example of the kind of power a woman has in the household. Batul is an example of a compassionate and supportive woman, a model that exists but hardly ever discussed in foreign works. In a patriarchal community that gives all the authority to the man of the house, Batul stood up for Tamr and put her marital life at stake. She further reasons with her husband, saying: "Forgive your sister, Rashid; God is forgiving. Knowledge is light. Fatima the prophet's daughter could express herself eloquently and read and write"(Al-Shaykh 88). In the Arab community where religion matters greatly, Batul smartly makes reference to how Islam empowers women, knowledge, and forgiveness. Again images that do not always come in accordance with representing Islam and its empowerment to women.

Referring back to the concept of escape, that the translated work encourages, a conversation between Suha and Tamr emerges. The following are Suha's words to Tamr:

'Why don't you go abroad to live and be free of all of this?'

'How can I?' ... 'Come on, Suha. What are you thinking of? Do you want me to go away and never come back? Leave my country and live in London? What would I do in London? A person away from his country and his nearest and his dearest isn't worth a

stick of incense... And what would they say about me? That I'd run away. For what reason? "(Al-Shaykh 95, 96)

Tamr is a rebellious character, who ran away before. She ran away from her first husband with her son in her arms, and did it again to go to the institute without her brother's consent. Yet, she did not run away from her problems; she ran towards fixing her problems. Regardless of all the mishaps and the unconsented marriages that she went through, Tamr still appreciated the desert and her culture. Her resilience in making a life for herself under the authority of traditions, customs and constraints shows a brilliant Arab woman.

Her strength wasn't only evident in relation to her family. She resisted the system and the government. The following is her description of applying for a permit for her business, saying: "I realized that by coming into a government building I had made another big mistake. But it wasn't forbidden, and why should it be? The black cover was on my face, the black wrap around me decorously hiding my charms"(Al-Shaykh 105). Al-Shaykh here is using the rules and regulations put by the system as a way of mocking the system. The image of the dress here actually empowers Tamr, and pushes her to pursue what no other woman has pursued. She further mentions:

I knew that Rashid would be furious. He'd kill me. Too bad.... The dejection which had taken hold of me was transformed into a kind of daredevil courage. My name is Tamr daughter of Al-Tawi,' I declared, not caring if anyone heard me or not. ' I want to open a dressmaking business and a ladies' hairdresser's.'(Al-Shaykh 105)

The strength and power in these lines not only show a courageous side of a woman working around the system and the rules, but also defy a stereotypical image of the weak and helpless Arab woman.

Lastly, I would like to mention the impact and change in perspective that Tamr; a single woman/mother has offered. In a scene in her shop she describes how proudly she is walking amongst other women, saying: “I got up from the table and walked proudly around, at ease with every step I took now among the women waiting to be called...I’d felt that I had to open up a place like this to establish my independence”(Al-Shaykh 129,130). Tamr has not only achieved independence. In fact, she paved the way for generations to come to seek and be the change. Moreover, al-Shaykh mentioned the concept of validation and how much of a difference it makes to a person. The Arab family highly acknowledges the elderly, and amongst the community of women, validation of elder women means that one has truly accomplished something. Tamr’s remark of the old women in her shop elaborates more on this point. She says: “The old women who accompanied their daughters, just to watch, made me pleased because the fact that they came and sat there in my shop meant that they trusted me and gave my venture their blessing”(Al-Shaykh 130). This means that Tamr has had an impact on a generation that does not accept change easily and that is the higher form of agency.

Conclusion:

Different models of the Arab woman have been discussed: some were weak and fell prey to the power struggle in the Arab world, while others have shown a great deal of resilience and wittiness. The aim of this thesis is to present a diverse range of Arab women by showing individual stories of loss, defeat, happiness, and strength. Some people might say that these books are simply a representation of the oppression of women, and indeed Arab societies are generally more patriarchal than the west. But I would say that Arab women should be studied individually, to each a journey, and through that journey an immense amount of love, support, and strength is shown.

Women of Sand and Myrrh is a greatly debatable work: the complexity of the characters, the explicit exposure of an enclosed society at the time this novel was written makes this work strikingly unique, real, and problematic. The *Year of the Elephant*, more politically inclined, has managed to shed light on a humane side of the struggle, showing a great deal of empowerment and strength in Moroccan women, but also, exposing a great deal of disappointment in life post-independence.

Referring back to the image of the 'Arab Woman' in Robert J.C. Young's book *Postcolonialism A very short introduction*, it's only fair to mention that that nameless image of a woman portrayed as helpless and with no story to tell should only prove how the artist had naively done his job. He failed to capture the complexity and meaning of what it means to be an Arab woman. Through works like *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and *Year of the Elephant*, writing the Arab woman should speak more of the reality of their experiences rather than falling into the same pattern of portraying Arab women as helpless and pleading for a savior.

Works Cited

Al-Shaykh, Hanan. *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. Translated by Catherine Cobham, Quartet, 1989.

Abouzeid, Leila. "Year of the Elephant" in "A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence, and Other Stories". Translated by Barbara Parmenter, University of Texas at Austin Press, 1989.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press, 2013.

Bouachrine, Ibtissam. *Women and Islam: Myths, Apologies, and the Limits of Feminist Critique*. Lexington Books, 2014.

Dickey, Christopher. "Women of Sand and Myrrh". vol. 120, Newsweek LLC, 1992.

Golley, Nawar A. *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity through Writing*. Syracuse University Press, 2007.

Hartman, Michelle. "Gender, Genre, and the (Missing) Gazelle: Arab Women Writers and the Politics of Translation." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2012, pp. 17-49.

Moukhlis, Salah. "A History of Hopes Postponed": Women's Identity and the Postcolonial State in Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence. "Research in African Literatures", vol. 34, no. 3, 2003, pp. 66-83.

Shaaban, Bouthaina. "Arab Women and Literature: an overview." *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*, edited by Suha Sabbagh. Olive Branch Press, 1996, pp.235-237.

Sabbagh, Suha. *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*. Olive Branch Press, 1996.

Tucker, Judith E. *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*. Indiana University Press, 1993.

Valassopoulos, Anastasia. *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context*. Taylor and Francis, 2007;2008.

Young, Robert. *Postcolonialism A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2003.