“Zahra’s Uncle, or Where Are Men in Women’s War Stories?”

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Abstract

Scholarship in modern Arabic literary studies has treated the literature of the Lebanese Civil War, particularly novels written by women, in some depth. One of the most important texts used in both scholarship and teaching about this war is Ḥanān al-Shaykh’s *Ḥikāyat Zahrah*, translated as *The Story of Zahra*. This article focuses specifically on the one chapter in the novel narrated from the point of view of the protagonist’s uncle in order to explore how the English translation dramatically changes a number of elements in the original text. It uses insights from translation studies to show how significant changes to the novel in translation produce a text that serves particular ideological functions in English, consistent with a horizon of expectations that constructs Arab women as oppressed and passive victims of war. The article analyzes specific translation choices—most notably the extensive editing out of words, sentences, and passages—to demonstrate how the character of Zahrah’s uncle is changed in English and depicted as an unsavory and abusive man with little background, context, or history that would help the reader to better understand the character’s actions and motivations. It also shows how cutting out elements of the uncle’s story serves to depoliticize the text in English, divesting it of its local political context and changing its meaning and function as a novel about the Lebanese Civil War. The article is grounded in postcolonial, feminist translation studies, especially those dealing with Arabic fiction, to argue that the English-language novel *The Story of Zahra* functions within an ideological field that recycles stereotypes and tropes about Arab women. It will propose that the translation changes here depict Arab men against Arab women, rather than in relation to them, and subordinate the analysis of politics and communal relations to a more individual and individualized story of one exceptional woman.

Keywords

politics of translation – Ḥanān al-Shaykh – *The Story of Zahra* – Arab women writers – translation studies – war literature – Lebanese Civil War – women and war

War stories are meant to be the dominion of men. The expression “war stories” in its literal meaning, which conjures up images of fighting and violence, and its figurative meaning of recounting a grueling experience, is coded as being by, for, and about men. Women are therefore explicitly left out of “war stories.” But of course women live through wars, fight in wars, fight against wars, survive wars, and often do tell their own war stories. These stories can be difficult to locate because so little of the already sparse documentation of war is focused on women, and this is as true of the Lebanese Civil War as others.¹ This article is part of a larger project that works with different kinds of women’s narrations of the Lebanese Civil War, exploring who tells war stories, what stories they tell, and how they tell them in order to offer a fuller and more complete picture of how war shapes people’s lives, through documenting, recording, reading, and analyzing women’s narratives of this war.²

Within this larger context, Arabic literary production about the Lebanese Civil War is one important location where women have recorded war stories in writing; moreover, a fair amount of scholarship on these narratives has been produced. This article probes some of the ways in which one novel—Ḥanān al-Shaykh’s *Hikāyat Zahrah*—is exemplary of the forces mediating the production and consumption of war stories about Lebanon in English.³ In translation, *The Story of Zahra* has become perhaps the best-known women’s war story in English about the Lebanese Civil War.⁴ Both the Arabic novel and its English translation have had an impact on research, criticism, and teaching about women and war, and specifically the Lebanese Civil War.⁵ This article analyzes

1 See for example Caroline Rooney and Rita Sakr, eds., *The Ethics of Representation in Literature, Art, and Journalism: Transnational Responses to the Siege of Beirut* (New York: Routledge, 2013) and miriam cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

2 Malek Abisaab and I have been involved in a five-year project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, called Women’s War Stories, Building an Archive of Women and the Lebanese Civil War. For more information see: <https://womenswarstories.wordpress.com/>.

3 Ḥanān al-Shaykh, *Hikāyat Zahrah* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1980).

4 Hanan al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, trans. Peter Ford (London: Quartet, 1986). A reprint edition of the translation was published by Anchor in 1995.

5 Scholarly studies of this novel alone include sections in, for example, Evelyne Accad’s *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York: New York University Press,

in some detail how *Hikāyat Zahrah* became *The Story of Zahra*. It argues that a close study of translation choices and changes is crucial to developing an ethical praxis of reading, critiquing, and teaching this novel in English. In addition, this reading method and analysis is crucial to using this novel as a way to teach the Lebanese Civil War in English-language contexts. Translation is a particularly apt lens through which to focus on the ways in which war stories are mediated in their narration and retelling because the problem of speaking for others, which is central to developing such an ethical praxis, is inherent to the process of translation. The translated text speaks for and takes the place of another text.⁶

Reading *Hikāyat Zahrah* alongside *The Story of Zahra* reveals how translation impacts how scholars and critics reproduce ideas that functionally shape knowledge about women and the Lebanese Civil War. As I demonstrate below, men go missing in *The Story of Zahra's* translational choices. I explore in detail how certain decisions of what to translate, what not to translate, and how to translate, de-emphasize and depersonalize male characters. I argue that these choices then reinforce limited understandings of what this Lebanese woman's war story is, facilitating the casting of it as a "feminist" novel.⁷ The aim of this

1990); Samira Aghacy's *Masculine Identities and the Fiction of the Arab East since 1967* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 43-54, and "Lebanese Women's Fiction: Urban Identity and the Tyranny of the Past," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33.4 (2001); Roger Allen's *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995); M.M. Badawi's edited volume, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); miriam cooke's *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Ghenwa Hayek's "Whitewashing Arabic for Global Consumption: Translating Race in *The Story of Zahra*," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 20.1 (2017), 91-104; Elizabeth Holt's "The Story of Zahra and its Critics," in *Arabic Literature for the Classroom: Teaching Methods, Theories, Themes, and Texts*, ed. Muhsin J. al-Musawi (London: Routledge, 2017); Elise Salem's *Constructing Lebanon: A Century of Literary Narratives* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Bouthaina Shaaban, *Voices Revealed: Arab Women Novelists 1989-2000* (Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 2009); Anastasia Valassopoulos's "The Legacy of Orientalism in Middle Eastern Feminism," in *After Orientalism: Critical Entanglements, Productive Looks*, ed. Inge E. Boer (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 183-199; and Joseph Zeidan's *Arab Women's Novels* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).

6 On speaking for others and war stories, see Caroline Rooney and Rita Sakr, "Introduction," 8-9; in the same volume see also the article by Sakr "War is Surrealism without Art," especially 24-25.

7 The ways in which this novel has been cast as feminist are multiple. It is referred to as such in most reviews and articles where it is addressed, both scholarly and those intended for a general audience. See for example the Kirkus review, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/hanan-al-shaykh/the-story-of-zahra/>. These readings are pervasive enough for al-Shaykh to be asked about or to comment upon her status and role as a feminist

article is not to prove the ways in which this translation is or is not “feminist.” I am not attempting to fix a meaning for feminism that is or is not based in a particular ideology. Rather, I spend time below showing how some of these translations moves dovetail with notions of what makes such a text feminist and how notions of feminism work together and change in translation. In doing this, I show how reading the contours of these two texts in conversation with each other helps us unpack some of the workings of ideologies about gendered dynamics between men and women, the roles of women in society, and the imposition of limited, individualist feminist visions onto such stories, particularly those visions that could be characterized as white, Western, and/or Orientalist.

My analysis of *The Story of Zahra* asks how we can understand this English-language text within a literary field and horizon of expectations ideologically primed to encourage us to think in limited ways about the characters, actions, and settings of Arab women’s war stories. I suggest here that this is not just an English language readership at the time the translation was first published in the 1980s, but rather one that persists today for a global anglophone readership. *The Story of Zahra* is not a unique case and this translation is productively read in relation to other Arab women’s works that are similarly reshaped when they move into English. The small but active field of critical translation studies focused on Arabic literature moving into other languages has documented and analyzed the ways in which these processes work, particularly in literary works by women authors. More specifically, scholars have shown how women’s stories from the region often tend to erase positive male characters and hold up individual women as singular, exemplary figures in opposition rather than in relation to the men in their lives.⁸

To highlight and probe some of these dynamics, this article reads two versions of a single chapter from al-Shaykh’s novel in depth—what appears as Chapter Three in the Arabic text and as a chapter titled “Uncle” in the English translation. This chapter highlights the voice and perspective of Zahrah’s uncle, about which critic Rana Kabbani commented when the novel appeared

writer in almost every interview she gives, earning her the title of a “reluctant feminist.” See Charles R. Larson, “The Fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh, Reluctant Feminist,” *World Literature Today* 65.1 (1991), 14-17. I return to this argument in more detail below.

- 8 Of the many articles that deal with this issue, the two that treat how male characters are downplayed in the most detail are Amal Amireh, “Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World,” *Signs* 26 (2000), 215-249; and Mohja Kahf, “Packaging ‘Huda’: Sha’rawi’s Memoirs in the United States Reception Environment,” in *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, ed. Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj (New York: Garland, 2000), 148-172.

in Arabic, "One of the most successful sections of the novel is when Hanan Al-Shaykh uses as a narrator Zahra's uncle, the ex-politico, Hashem, now exiled in Africa where he leads a menial life among an émigré Lebanese *petit bourgeoisie*."⁹ In English translation, this chapter is hardly the most compelling or successful. I propose that the reader does not develop a good sense of Zahrah's uncle partly because of translation choices that reinforce the exclusion and downplaying of male characters, more specifically the culling of "repetition," the excision and suppression of both short and long passages, and the removal of "local" information—especially politics.¹⁰

In turn, these specific translation choices depersonalize this male character and lead to the familiar over-focus on one woman and her story to the detriment of the male characters, thereby constructing her as a singular, exemplary woman who is contrasted to her context and culture, especially the men within it. I argue that reading these changes together with structural changes to the original text shows how they work in tandem to produce this novel in translation as a specific kind of "woman's war story," and one commonly referred to as "feminist." Nevertheless, I show below how these alterations limit the novel's exploration of men and women, gender dynamics, and the complexity of women's lives in war time. What appear at first glance perhaps to be insignificant formal choices related to the translation's editing in fact produce flattening and limiting representations of the character of the Uncle—and men more generally in the novel—which domesticate it for an English-language audience as "feminist," at least in the sense of the word whereby feminism is white, Western, and Orientalist. This has the further effect of creating a text that leads to analyses, criticism, and teaching around issues of women and war—especially, but not only, the Lebanese Civil War—that are limited by narrowly ideological horizons of expectations.

Zahrah's Invisible Translator

In none of the versions of *The Story of Zahra* that I have been able to access does the name of the translator appear on the cover. While this absence is

9 Rana Kabbani, "Fatal Passivity: Women in Arab Fiction," *Third World Quarterly* 10.1 (1988), 340.

10 While not exactly the same, the changing and downplaying of the issue of race in translation is another very important translation change in both this chapter and also the book overall. This has been well documented by Ghenwa Hayek's recent article, "Whitewashing Arabic for Global Consumption: Translating Race in *The Story of Zahra*," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 20.1 (2017), 91-104.

not an unprecedented occurrence for translations, it is fairly unusual in translated Arabic fiction. The translator—Peter Ford—receives credit only inside the book, on the page containing copyright information after the title page. In this all-but-hidden location, Ford's work as a translator is acknowledged with the words, "The text of *The Story of Zahra* was rendered into English by Peter Ford with the author's cooperation."¹¹ Such a limited acknowledgment of the translator's work is consistent with the argument put forth by Lawrence Venuti in his now-classic study, *The Translator's Invisibility*, that the production of translated fiction in English has systematically effaced the work of translators. Venuti's book outlines the history of how translated texts have been undervalued in English-language environments across time and contexts. It further argues that there are serious ethical problems with making translators invisible, an effect accomplished by devaluing the labor of the translator while simultaneously severing the translation's connection to its original context and language. This can be done in a number of different ways, from not crediting the translator, by publishing so-called domesticated translations, by reviewing translations with a focus on content and not language, form, and style, as well as others.¹² These factors together reinforce the illusion that somehow the English-speaking reader is experiencing a text unmediated by the translation process. In the *Story of Zahra*, it becomes easy to ignore that the novel did and still does have a life in Arabic as *Ḥikāyat Zahrah*, which has continued to circulate in Lebanon and beyond. Marginalizing the translator and eliminating traces of the original text also downplays changes and transformations to the Arabic text as it moves into English.

Peter Ford, who worked on this translation "with the author's cooperation" as the acknowledgement indicates, has not, to my knowledge, translated any other works from Arabic to English. Ford's translation makes *The Story of Zahra* unlike al-Shaykh's other works, which have been translated by the well-known translators Roger Allen and Catherine Cobham. *The Story of Zahra* was Ḥanān al-Shaykh's first work to be translated and this may be why it was undertaken by a less well-known translator; the translator's relative obscurity may also explain why his name is not prominently displayed. It is also perhaps no accident, however, that this translated novel marginalizes the name of its translator so that this male figure's association with the text will not hinder its reception as

11 Al-Shaykh, *Ḥikāyat Zahrah*, 1991; Al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, 1986; Al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, 1995. See the publication information page facing the title page.

12 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1-42. For how this works in Arab women's writing more specifically, see Marilyn Booth, "'The Muslim Woman' as Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh Go on the Road," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6 (2010), 154.

"women's fiction" or "feminist" in the English-language market. The front cover of the Anchor edition, for example, offers a citation from the *San Francisco Chronicle* where the translator's name might have otherwise appeared, touting the novel as "a work of enormous grace and grandeur that is sure to change any simple preconceptions about the Muslim women of today."¹³

Many scholars have documented the gendered dynamics of marketing translated Arabic fiction in English, particularly women's fiction. Marilyn Booth has analyzed in some depth the ways in which female authors' and translators' gender are used in marketing books by Arab and Muslim women writers to lend translations "authenticity."¹⁴ Moreover, Booth's own experience translating Saudi author Rajā' al-Šāni's *The Girls of Rīyadh* demonstrates how collaborations between authors and translators that are acknowledged inside book covers are not always seamless, positive experiences or without complex power dynamics within English-language reception environments.¹⁵ Differently to the erasure of Peter Ford, *The Girls of Rīyadh* credits Booth as the translator, while the author also thanks her in the author's note, but her own testimony and analysis of how this came to pass demonstrate that the published work is far from what she produced as a translator.¹⁶

In contrast, the translation of *Hikāyat Zahrah* as *The Story of Zahra* underplays Peter Ford's role as the translator, by not following the standard practice of acknowledging the novel's translator on its cover and/or title page. Making him invisible (or at least less visible) is consistent with other strategies of domesticating translation—those that try to make the text conform to the reception audience's expectations. This is a move that simultaneously subordinates the role of the translator and exceptionalizes the author, underlining her role as the sole producer of the text and making her travel beyond the Arabic language and her Arab reading audience's contexts. In a novel by a woman about a woman, this also reinforces what is often understood as a conflation of the

13 The marketing of Arab women's fiction in translation as feminist, as self-narrations, and focusing on women as singular individuals opposed to their communities is widespread. For some scholarship on this, see Diya M. Abdo, "Textual Migration: Self-Translation and Translation of the Self in Leila Abouzeid's *Return to Childhood: The Memoir of a Modern Moroccan Woman* and *Rujū' ilā al-ṭufūlah*," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 30 (2009), 1-42, especially 4-5 and 10-12 and "Chameleonic Text: Peritextual Transformation in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* and *Nisā' 'alā ajniḥat al-ḥilm*," *Life Writing* 7 (2010), 175-194, especially 180-183; Booth, "Muslim Woman," 154-156, 161, and Kahf, 149.

14 Marilyn Booth, "Muslim Woman," 149-182.

15 Marilyn Booth, "Translator v. author (2007) *Girls of Rīyadh* go to New York," *Translation Studies* 1 (2008), 197-211 and "Muslim Woman," 149-150.

16 Ibid.

author/narrator as biographical subject.¹⁷ The translator in this case then has even less agency in creating and working with the text, reinforcing the idea that he somehow simply provided words that transparently allowed the Arabic story to shine through. In the gender equation of a male translator and female author, this might be characterized as a superficially “feminist” move. As I will show, however, it is not. Or at most, it implies a hollow, limited notion of what feminism means. In what follows, I connect Ford’s marginalization to other domesticating elements of this translation that serve this same ideological horizon of expectations, one that purports to be “feminist” but which in fact limits the understanding of the text’s complexities as a woman’s war story.

Highlighting Women, Sidelining Men

Before discussing the more major structural changes to the work, it is worth noting that the title *The Story of Zahra* closely mirrors the original title of the novel, *Ḥikāyat Zahrāh*. As critic Roger Allen points out, however, it does not capture within it all of the “creative ambiguities” embedded in this deceptively simple Arabic title;¹⁸ to, for example, Allen renders the title “Zahra’s Tale” in his discussion of the book written before the translation appeared in order to better convey some of the nuances of the Shī‘ī undertones of the novel, as he claims.¹⁹ In its relative fidelity to the Arabic original, the title of the English novel runs counter to the other domesticating strategies used in the translation and presents a significant contrast to the drastic changes that characterize the titles given to the English translations of al-Shaykh’s other, later works: *Ḥikāyatī sharḥ yaṭūl* [My Story is too Long to Tell] becomes *The Locust and the Bird*²⁰ and *Misk al-ghazāl* [Gazelle’s Musk] is rendered *Women of Sand and Myrrh*.²¹ Mirroring the change in their titles, both of these translations significantly alter formal structures of the original texts, including the order and organization of chapters, the naming of characters, and changing the narrative voice in some chapters from that of the mother to that of the daughter. *The Story of Zahra* does not shift the order or narrative voice of the chapters vis-à-vis their presentation in *Ḥikāyat Zahrāh*; however, as in the translations of al-

17 Booth, “Muslim Woman,” 161.

18 Allen, 231n215.

19 Allen, 231.

20 Michelle Hartman, “My Tale is Too Long To Tell: *The Locust and the Bird* between New York City and South Lebanon,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 46.2-3 (2015), 168-192.

21 Michelle Hartman, “Gender, Genre and the (Missing) Gazelle: Arab Woman Writers and the Politics of Translation,” *Feminist Studies* 38 (2012), 17-49.

Shaykh's later novels some formal elements of the Arabic text are significantly transformed as it moves into English.

I emphasize here the comparison with al-Shaykh's other works, for several reasons. One is to shift the discussion from analyzing or critiquing a particular translator's choices. Three different translators produced these three texts; thus, this type of intervention goes beyond the specific decisions of any individual translator/s. Further, even though the changes made in *The Story of Zahra* may appear on the surface to be less dramatic than those in the other texts, they nonetheless work similarly. Moreover, the translational interventions here produce results consistent with those in other texts by Arab women authors translated into English, which show the authors to be exceptional and distant from their societies. Finally, these structural changes fit into patterns of translational choices that work in concert with the invisibility of the translator and other textual elements, including cutting and editing, to reinforce similar and limited ideas about Arab women, or "the Arab Woman."

Section Titles

The change in the translation that is most immediately visible is the significant structural intervention of renaming the book's two sections, "Part One" (*al-qism al-awwal*) and "Part Two" (*al-qism al-thānī*), as "The Scars of Peace" and "The Torrents of War." Names are also given to the subchapters that are simply numbered in *Hikāyat Zahrah*. Giving these titles to the two sections of the book is an ideological intervention in that they highlight and emphasize structurally that this is a book "about" war and violence. These section titles also underline chronology, marking the first section as occurring before the war and the second during the war. The original Arabic text, without these labels, does not so simply differentiate between time periods, though it does progress more or less chronologically.²² This ambiguity makes more sense in relation to the overall narration in the novel, as none of the chapters adheres to a strictly chronological development of events, instead moving back and forth across time periods in different narrative voices. The section labels in the English version serve to fix time periods and do not, strictly speaking, match

22 For a complex and nuanced discussion of narration and time in the novel see, Sabah Ghandour, "Hanan al-Shaykh's *Hikāyat Zahra*: A Counter-narrative and a Counter-History," in *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*, eds. Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman, and Therese Saliba (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 231-249.

the narration, as they are temporally more fixed than in the Arabic-language novel. In the original text, the chapters thus move more fluidly between what is meant to be peacetime and what is portrayed as war. The distinction is less neat, and without these titles, the concepts blend together. Arguably this motion between time periods and spillover between the chapters is part of the message of the book—life is not always neatly divided into peace/war, before/after, good/bad, and so on. This message goes missing in the translation.

The use of unnamed chapters is not particularly unusual in English or Arabic, and so the adding of titles is hardly a domesticating strategy in an English-language translation, when based on a theory of difference in style or genre between the two novelistic traditions. Rather, this domesticating strategy, I propose here, is based on making what is deemed to be a “foreign” text about a faraway land and situation intelligible to a Western reader on the assumption that such a novel must be explained to the reader beyond what the original text provides. The translation adds supplementary information through these added titles, based on an underlying presumption that English-language readers need this because of the change in narrators, or because the sections of the narration are not explicitly announced. This begs the question of what is being explained through the section and chapter titles provided in the translation and what meanings become fixed through them.²³

The section titles in English suggest and emphasize the ways in which Zahrah had a difficult life before the war, the “scars” of peace show on her literally pockmarked face, and also the way in which war and violence descend upon her life in Beirut afterwards. We know, however, from this book that the crushing and devastating war also allows Zahrah certain freedoms, which are not reflected in such simplistic section titles. The different chapters in the original Arabic text do divide the text and suggest motion, shifts, changes, and at times different narrative voices and temporal divisions. But the division of the book into sections labeled “before” and “during” war further suggests that this book should be read in relation mainly to war, making the sociological and anthropological meanings of the text more important than others. No doubt violence and war is central to understanding this literary text. But the insistence on further underlining this violence privileges one way of interpreting the text and undermines other important aspects.²⁴ Moreover as feminist translators

23 Though I do not introduce this line of analysis here, we might also question who makes decisions about such changes in the translation. Is this a decision of the translator, the translator and author, the editorial team, the publisher, or some combination of these?

24 This privileging of violence and war as important over other meanings is an argument advanced by critics including, Anne Marie Adams, “Writing Self, Writing Nation: Imagined Geographies in the Fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh,” *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*

and translation scholars have pointed out, the practice of translating "third-world" women, or women from the global South, into English by Western women was one imbued with white liberal feminist values. As Gayatri Spivak points out in her seminal article, "The Politics of Translation," the impetus of so many translation projects sidelined aesthetic and literary concerns in favor of sociological readings that flattened them.²⁵

Chapter Titles

The labeling of the chapter titles, in addition to the section titles, is another even more visible and dramatic intervention. In the original text, there are five numbered chapters in the first section only; each chapter ranges from between twelve to thirty-nine pages in Arabic. The second section is not divided and is just over one hundred pages long. In the translation, the chapters in the first section are all given titles: Zahra Remembers; Zahra in Africa; Uncle; Husband; Zahra in Wedlock. As in titling the sections, labeling the chapters fixes their meanings. In the case of the chapter titles, this move also identifies the narrator of each section: the first two chapters are narrated by Zahrah, the third by her Uncle Hāshim, and the fourth by her husband, Mājid. Zahrah returns as the narrator in the fifth chapter.

The contrast between chapters that are simply numbered—as in *Ḥikāyat Zahrah*—and those that are labeled with words—as in *The Story of Zahra*—is significant in both overcoding these chapters with meanings, and also fixing what those meanings are. Unnamed chapters allow readers to imagine and create their own meanings and explore the text on different, more open, terms. It also provides challenges and suspense: the reader must discover the narrative voice of each chapter of *Ḥikāyat Zahrah* and identify it while reading the novel in Arabic. All that we know from the title of the novel is that it is a story about a girl called Zahrah. After this, we confront a text written in a literary style that shifts and changes narrative voices between chapters. Similarly this challenges us as readers to focus, demanding that we shift our thinking as we read and identify the disconcerting change in voice.

20.2 (2001), 201-216 and Anastasia Valassopoulos, "The Legacy of Orientalism in Middle Eastern Feminism." They both critique the earlier scholarship of the two best-known critics of this novel, miram cooke and Evelyne Accad, to argue against a focus on war rather than nationhood in the former and sexuality in the latter. They also critique this over-focus on war as Orientalist as it also claims a particular kind of victimhood for women.

25 Gayatri Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," In *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 179-200. London: Routledge, 1993.

The use of multiple, shifting narrative voices is one of the frequently noted and praised elements of al-Shaykh's style in this novel.²⁶ We do not just hear "Zahra's Story" from her point of view but also through two other voices, both men who are close to her, as well as through omniscient narration. In the original Arabic text, you discover this as you are reading—the shift in voice is unexpected and startles you as you read.²⁷ This process of discovery is a challenge to the novel's readers; the use of more than one narrative voice and voices of more than one gender of people is not unprecedented, but the surprising changes in narrative voice is part of what makes it innovative.

This process of literary discovery is lost on the English reader who is deprived of the opportunity to be challenged. Reading the English translation, the shifts in narrative voice are obvious and easy to discern because they are indicated in the chapter title. Though here I have emphasized literary discovery, it is not so very difficult to identify the shift in voice without a title. The effect of this labeling is more than just that of enhancing the reader's ease of comprehension. Adding these titles overcodes each chapter, making the work once again read more like a sociological document than a novel. It announces to the reader: this is Mājid's view of things, this is Hāshim's perspective, and so on. This intervention offers readers a guided tour through the text, rather than allowing them to explore and discover it on their own. The pleasure of discovery, and the *jouissance* that comes from it, is gone in the simplified, explanatory, documentary-style English version.

All of these points about violence, women and war, and the sociological versus literary importance of the text, are reinforced by the way in which the particular chapters devoted to Zahrah's uncle, Hāshim, and husband, Mājid, are depicted through an English translation that substantively changes the Arabic original in numerous ways. How this works in *The Story of Zahra* resonates strongly with the argument made by Mohja Kahf's analysis of the translation of Egyptian feminist Hudā al-Sha'rāwī's memoir. Kahf demonstrates how the male characters in the translated version of this work, *Harem Years*, are minimized or eliminated in specific techniques used to transform this book into an English-language text.²⁸ In *The Story of Zahra*, the two main male characters—and Zahrah's uncle Hāshim in particular—are similarly depersonalized and

26 Critics who comment on this include: Evelyne Accad, 47; Adams, 205-206; Allen, 232-233, miriam cooke, *War's Other Voices*, 60; Ghandour, 236, 241-242; Kabbani, 340.

27 Allen has suggested that adding the chapter titles detracts from this compelling element of the text (Allen, 233n 219).

28 Kahf, see especially 154-155 on the diminished role of al-Sha'rāwī's father and brother. Albeit briefly and in passing, Hartman also deals with the way male characters are downplayed in *The Locust and the Bird*, "My Tale," 174.

divested of their complex relationships to women. Such a depersonalization of male characters props up an Orientalist and colonial view of Arab men as uncivilized and anti-progressive, simultaneously reinforcing the notion that Arab women are by definition oppressed.

These men's family roles reinforce both their depersonalization and also their structural familial relationship to the protagonist. Through the chapters we see that they do have names and are real and complex people. But the addition of the chapter titles to the translation is reductive and situates them through their link to Zahrah, again reinforcing the sociological/anthropological feel of the novel. These points are further reinforced by the other chapter titles, all of which include Zahrah's name. The first and most obvious way she is centered is that her name is repeated three times in three chapter titles. The next is that her given name is used. This contrasts with the generic familial relationship that identifies the narrators of the other chapters in relation to her. She stands out even further against the anonymity of "Uncle" and "Husband," descriptors that do not even have personal names attached to them—Uncle as opposed to Uncle Hāshim, for example. Further, Zahrah has a verb and two prepositional phrases attached to her name: she is depicted as a vibrant person connected to things in the world, whereas their titles appear simply as labels. This reinforces not only their general depersonalization but also that they function solely within their familial roles and in relation to Zahrah.

The existence of chapter and section titles in English is not only a translational intervention, but also shapes the production of knowledge around the novel itself. Though they are not referred to in every single book or article written on *The Story of Zahra* in English, these titles are naturalized within English-language criticism on the novel, thereby producing and reinforcing analyses that incorporate them. One reason for this is that in much literary criticism of Arabic fiction, critics do not always make explicit when they work with the original and when the translation. One would assume, for example, that a work of criticism that refers to the section or chapter titles must be analyzing the translation and not the original. Few critical works on this novel refer to or discuss this and at times may even imply they are working on the Arabic-language text.²⁹ Not taking into account that the text being analyzed is a translation—or conflating multiple versions without acknowledging

29 For example, Accad uses the chapter distinctions in her discussion, *Sexuality*, 45; Joseph Zeidan does as well, in *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*, 211 and 214. Most critics writing in English refer to the text in English language translation but do not make clear which text they are working from.

this—leads to confusing and problematic scholarship.³⁰ An exception is Elizabeth Holt's excellent discussion of the scholarship on one particular scene in *The Story of Zahra*. She briefly mentions missing words in the translation of the key scene her essay analyzes and goes on to give Sabah Ghandour's analysis of this—clearly based on the Arabic original text. I bring this up because both her work and Ghandour's rely on the Arabic original text, rather than the translation, and also because although the translation differences are not central to her argument, she takes this into account albeit briefly. Her piece, however, does not use the enormous changes between the original and translation and the conflation of them in scholarship as explanatory of some of the problematic dynamics in the scholarship that she so rightly points out and critiques.³¹ This is a methodological difference between Holt's work and my own. What I am presenting here is also a different—though complementary—argument.

Adding to Holt's critique of a relatively large amount of scholarly attention to this novel, which calls for ways to read the character Zahrah as other than merely a victim or resistor of patriarchy, I suggest that we must attend to the issues raised by the text's translation choices. In thinking about how to treat *The Story of Zahra* and *Hikāyat Zahrah* relationally this means a focus on the question of what the actual differences produce in a new text. Thus I propose that the problems and issues created by the translation produce readings, analyses, and criticism based on very different versions of the text being discussed as though they were the same. The question here is therefore not about how to understand Zahrah's character in one way or another in relation to patriarchy, for example, but rather how the structure of the translation advances a different novel, domesticated for an English-language readership. I identify the discourses they promote: Zahrah being the central focus and main narrator, the devaluing and depersonalization of the male narrators, the sociological and anthropological thrust of the book implied by the "Scars of Peace" and "Torrents of War" section titles, and so on.

30 An exception to this is Anne Marie Adams, who explicitly states she is working only with the translation. It is interesting that, given this, her article also notes in passing—though it is not her main argument—a similar point to that presented here, that the nuanced and complex portraits of the men in the novel are downplayed in the received criticism (205-206). As I have noted above, Allen remarks on textual differences in his footnotes, without analyzing them. Hayek analyzes the translation itself in relation to the specific question of translating race. Other criticism largely leaves any critique or comment unspoken, or mentions it briefly and moves on, as Ghandour, 239, 242.

31 Holt, "The Story of Zahra and its Critics," 257-258.

In His Own Words: the Gendered Politics of Self-Censorship

Downplaying the male translator of the book, coupled with the marginalization and depersonalization of male characters—especially those who narrate full chapters—in favor of Zahrah herself underlines the notion that she is a lone figure, whether oppressed, empowered, or otherwise, as different critics have read her. It is not surprising that she is the focus of the book—it is her "Story" or "Tale," after all. I am emphasizing this, however, because her role as the protagonist/narrator is reinforced differently in the English and Arabic texts. To delve more fully into the dynamics of what is created by these shifts, this section maps in some detail what is cut from the third chapter of the book, titled "Uncle" in the English translation.

I propose that this chapter is exemplary of the choices made that impact the characterization of men in the novel, in this case mostly Uncle Hāshim. The most noticeable and quantifiable change is the amount of the chapter that is simply not translated and therefore left out of the English version. It is a concentrated example of what Roger Allen meant when he stated, "Indeed this translation, undertaken 'with the author's cooperation,' must be considered a heavily abridged version of the original text. It differs from the original in quite significant and unfortunate ways ..." ³² Later in his analysis, in fact, Allen follows up with another footnote about the extensive cuts to this particular chapter, "large sections of Hāshim's reflections about his homeland (and its songs) and about his political views are omitted from the English translation." ³³ Of the five short chapters in the first section, this one is by far the longest; at thirty-nine pages, it is a good nine pages longer than the next longest chapter; the shortest chapter is twelve pages long. Normally a translated chapter would be longer—even if only slightly than the original—without extensive editing, because of the extra words added in translation. In this case, however, so much has been cut that the chapter is thirty pages (twenty-seven in another edition) in the English translation. ³⁴

32 Allen, 231n215. He repeats this again in his more recent reflection on his long career as a scholar and translator of Arabic literature. See Roger Allen, "The Happy Traitor: Tales of Translation," *Comparative Literature Studies* 47 (2010), 478: "Readers of Hanan al-Shaykh's *Hikayat Zahrah* in both its original and English versions will soon become aware that much of the material of the original text that is local to Lebanon has been omitted from the translation."

33 Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 241n245.

34 Al-Shaykh, *Story* (London: Quartet), 34-60 and Al-Shaykh, *Story* (New York: Anchor), 42-72.

Allen's general comment about reflections, songs, and political views being omitted is accurate, but a closer look helps to reveal how the omission of what might seem to be mere details significantly alters Uncle Hāshim's character, impacting the gender dynamics of the novel. I propose that the translation's cutting of long sections of reflections on politics make him a more marginal and less sympathetic character within the overall novel, because his devotion and commitment to political activism—the centerpiece of his character development—does not shine through clearly in English. He is divested of his role as a political actor deserving of sympathy by the removing of what may be called “local details,” but which are indeed more important than this because they serve to contextualize and give life to the character of the Uncle. This worked well enough in Arabic for critic Rana Kabbani to consider this chapter the novel's most compelling one.³⁵ The extensive cuts, however, make this difficult to recognize in translation.

There are numerous specific examples of words, short phrases, and place names that have been removed from the text. Therefore, even when sentences and sections may not be changed, the actual names of places are often simply missing in English. One example is the village Ḍhūr Shwayr—so prominent in Uncle Hāshim's narrative because of its symbolism in relation to the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP), to which he devoted his life. It does not appear in the English narration, whereas it does in Arabic.³⁶ Similarly, the village of al-Fūqā in al-Nabaṭiyyah is missing from the Uncle's chapter in English though it is mentioned specifically in Arabic,³⁷ and although mentions of al-Nabaṭiyyah appear elsewhere in *The Story of Zahra*, many place names in Southern Lebanon are removed so that the book feels less firmly rooted in the experiences of a particular Southern Lebanese community that is central to understanding its context.

The missing cultural information about Southern Lebanon is further reinforced by other kinds of specific references being cut. A good example of how these things work together appears on page eighty to eighty-one of the Arabic text. In this section of the chapter, seventeen lines of the Arabic text are simply not translated at all. This passage is one in which we see an interior monologue by Hāshim, where he is thinking about Lebanon and his estrangement and exile. He also compares Lebanese and African women, in racist ways that Ghenwa Hayek has pointed out. Hayek suggests that the removal of racist passages is done consciously to frame the text differently, “whitewashing it” for

35 Kabbani, “Fatal Passivity,” 340.

36 Al-Shaykh, *Hikāyat*, 49.

37 Al-Shaykh, *Hikāyat*, 51.

an English-language readership.³⁸ Concurring with Hayek's point, my analysis here also suggests that not translating further specific references and cultural information giving us a fuller picture of Hāshim and his setting, and that these choices not only flatten the text but also the character himself as well as his context. More precisely, when he is thinking nostalgically about his homeland (the word *al-waṭan* is repeated many times in these seventeen lines), he mentions three specific songs of the era by Fayrūz, Ṣabāḥ, and Wadī' al- Ṣāfi,³⁹ all of which are iconic and easily recognizable to Arab readerships; this helps to reinforce the portrait al-Shaykh draws of his emotional state. Taking such references out of a text on the basis that they are too foreign or unrecognizable to an English-readership ideologically shapes not only the new novel in translation, but also asserts a limited view of who its intended audience is—what of English-speaking Arabs, for example, who would recognize these references?

The removal of place names, titles of songs, and the names of singers powerfully recalls some of the processes that Marilyn Booth documents in her analysis of how her translation of Rajā' al-Ṣāni's *The Girls of Riyadh* was altered between her submission of the manuscript and its eventual publication. According to Booth, place names and other Saudi-specific references were intentionally removed by the work's English-language publisher, as was the language play between different kinds of Arabic that Booth's original translation had aimed to capture. Rajā' al-Ṣāni' herself explains these changes in an author's note preceding the text, writing that these elements were altered because "... none of this would make sense to the non-Arab reader."⁴⁰ Booth argues against this assumption on several bases, one of which is that her version preserved the fun and complexity of the original text by showing Saudi society to be more complex than stereotypes would have it.⁴¹ She also questions what effect is created by censoring certain details (the names of Arab singers, recalling their removal from *The Story of Zahra*), compared to retaining others (the names of Egyptian designers).⁴² In producing, reproducing, and circulating a novel about the Lebanese Civil War, often used for teaching and knowledge production of women's lives in the war, this removal of context-specific details—for example, the importance of the South geographically,

38 Hayek, 97.

39 Al-Shaykh, 81.

40 Rajaa Alsanea. *Girls of Riyadh*, translated by Rajaa Alsanea and Marilyn Booth (New York: Penguin, 2007), vii-viii.

41 Booth, "Translator v. Author," 200-201, for the discussion of language/s of the text see 204-205.

42 Booth, "Translator v. Author," 208.

culturally, and politically, and the nostalgia invoked by iconic popular musical figures—is troubling.

Removing information from these longer passages works in tandem with cutting out shorter items, like place names, details, and repeated words and phrases (the example of the word *waṭan* is exemplary). Editing words and passages containing repetition can be understood as a domesticating technique of moving works from Arabic to English, which is common and frequent. Elegant Arabic style demands the use of the same or similar words and in English style the opposite is true. This can be seen in the negative valence of the word “repetition” that is commonly used in English writing and editing contexts, rather than another word that could translate this idea, like “parallelism.” Such domestication is often expected or required in translations of Arabic fiction. In this chapter from *The Story of Zahra*, for example, the names of the specific games children play on the playground are cut, but immediately preceding this is a long scene where children repeat the political slogans of the SSNP that Hāshim teaches them.⁴³ No doubt some of these passages can feel long, repetitious, and/or ideologically heavy. But this is part of how al-Shaykh demonstrates the politically pedantic character of Zahrah’s uncle Hāshim. His ramblings about his political platform and what he calls “natural Syria” (also cut from page 80–81 of the translation) help to contextualize why he is so lonely, socially awkward, and perhaps inappropriately attached to his sister’s daughter. This cutting is a kind of self-censorship as it impacts the political thrust, impact, and ideological message of the entire book and this chapter in particular.

Such self-censorship or suppression by cutting out words and passages can reinforce gender hierarchies and other ideological messages about the role of women and society, in particular in relation to men, as Mohja Kahf has shown in detail. This can operate subtly, for example in paring down “unnecessary” material, local knowledge may also be sidelined, as in the way that certain female characters are propped up and male characters diminished or removed altogether, in Hudā al-Sha‘rāwī’s translated memoir *Harem Years*.⁴⁴ Repetition may not be a favored rhetorical or literary style in English, but it can convey useful details about characters, plot, and in the case of *The Story of Zahra*,

43 Al-Shaykh, *Hikāyat*, 52; 49–50. The SSNP is the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (*al-Ḥizb al-sūrī al-qawmī al-ijtimāʿī*) which seeks to establish a unified state in historical, greater, or as the party would say “natural” Syria. The English version of the book does not cut out all details about the SSNP, but leaves some and not others, making the politics of the text even more difficult to understand. The Arabic version does not explain, but rather simply invokes such details but has the effect of making the leftist political involvement of Uncle Hāshim more obvious and the ways he is implicated clearer.

44 Kahf, 157–160.

politics. Hāshim's political involvement is central to his character development and these changes and cuts which may seem insignificant or "merely" stylistic, when taken together and read in conjunction with other translation choices, drastically change the politics of the novel.

There are many further examples of such self-censorship and suppression. Details are cut throughout the first pages of the chapter on Uncle Hāshim's class and regional background as a member of the Southern Shī'ah working poor in Beirut and how he overcame this by becoming politically active as a leftist and SSNP member.⁴⁵ He ponders his previous zealotry as a political actor in the SSNP party structure, the hypocrisy of politics, and also how his party let him down when the stakes were high. His life, his relationship to his comrades, his feelings of transience socially and how he cannot settle well in his new West African home are all explored in great depth, giving us some sense of who he is. Though the broad outline of his exile is traced in the translation, this interior work and long passages of thoughts are cut extensively. So, for example, in *The Story of Zahra* when he contemplates his role as "Hāshim the hero" even while feeling increasingly marginalized, the larger story is missing and the passages fall somewhat flat. All of this story, with its full detail and obsessive ramblings, helps to make more sense of why he was so desperate to see Zahrah and bring her to West Africa, but also why he acted so strangely and awkwardly—even inappropriately—toward her when she came.

I am arguing therefore that what superficially may seem to be simple cuts for clarity and brevity of English style, in fact reinforce particular ideologies in complex ways, in relation to other translation choices. A specific example of this comes further along in the chapter on page eighty-two in the original text and sixty-nine in the translation, in one of the passages where Zahrah rejects her uncle's attentions.⁴⁶ Here, Hāshim questions why his feelings for Zahrah have become so intense. In English, he ponders why they "reached the pitch they did"; in Arabic, the phrase is "*ilā dhālika al-ḥadd*." The passage then continues in Arabic, but in English a new paragraph begins, after the cutting of two and a half lines. Rhetorical questions are edited out here from the translation, where he ponders why he came to Africa and what he is doing with his life there. When Hāshim thinks about Zahrah, it is not just about her, but also about how she fits into the overall picture of his life as an exile, and how she serves as a representation of his homeland. Perhaps the addition of a rhetorical question and interior monologue sounds more "florid" in English, or is seen as adding extra, unnecessary words to the narration. This style of

45 Al-Shaykh, *Hikāyat*, 77, 78, 79.

46 Al-Shaykh, *Story* (New York: Anchor).

extended interior monologue points up some of the differences in prose fiction in Arabic and English. But this domesticating strategy of translation, favoring an economy of phrasing to remove “extra” words in English, comes at the expense of not demonstrating that Hāshim’s attachment to Zahrah is not just a sexual question.

This becomes much clearer in a second, smaller, two-word omission that dramatically changes the way this passage reads in the two texts. In Arabic the passage immediately preceding the cut questions translates literally as, “I pulled her close to my heart [*ilā qalbi*] powerfully.”⁴⁷ In English the omission of two short words “*ilā qalbi*” (to my heart), and replacing “powerfully,” produces the English translation, “I embraced her as tightly as I could,”⁴⁸ evoking a completely different understanding of his intentions. Reinforced by the missing rhetorical questions, which connect his feelings to estrangement, homesickness, and missing family, his embrace sounds merely physically inappropriate, rather than also sentimental and nostalgic. Hāshim describes Zahrah’s physical features in this passage in relation to thinking about his homeland that he pines and yearns for. Though the reader in Arabic is left with the impression that his attachment to his niece is somewhat ambiguous and perhaps exaggerated or not entirely appropriate, the idea that he is molesting her or somehow crossing a line of sexual misconduct is by no means clear in Arabic. The missing words and passage make it sexually suggestive in the English version where fewer details about the uncle, his feelings, and his motivations are offered.

This is further reinforced as the chapter comes to an end. Close to the end of the chapter in Arabic, about eight lines—in two sections of four each—are left untranslated from a scene where Hāshim contemplates his relationship with Zahrah.⁴⁹ As in other sections, the omission of single words or short phrases is also found in this scene—for example, immediately preceding the longer cut, the words “except in my thoughts” (*siwā bi-l-tafkūr*) are left out of a line. Setting up the final contemplation of his relationship with his niece, Hāshim reflects in English, “You are the only one with whom I have a relationship.”⁵⁰ This line might have been more accurately translated as “you are the only one with whom I have a real relationship,” or “you are the only one with whom I have a relationship, except in my own head,” or similar. Leaving off these qualifying words does not change the meaning of the sentence on the one hand, but on the other, it does place more emphasis on the relationship between Zahrah

47 Al-Shaykh, *Hikāyat*, 82.

48 Al-Shaykh, *Story*, 69.

49 Al-Shaykh, *Hikāyat*, 85.

50 Al-Shaykh, *Story* (New York: Anchor), 72; *Hikāyat*, 85.

and Hāshim, suggesting that there is something more singular or special about this "relationship" versus others.

The eight lines that are cut below this are Hāshim's narration to himself—and thus to us as readers—of his understanding of their relationship. The passage in English moves from him questioning whether Zahrah can understand his feelings of alienation and reflecting that she is the only person with whom he has a lived, daily relationship, to the lines, "You are family. A person without family is a lost soul. Why do you tremble? Why don't you let me cling to you and help me to forget this time in limbo? I will no longer sit and ruminate. My hope is reborn that I will return."⁵¹ He then observes that Zahrah is upset and remarks on how she locks herself into the bathroom. In Arabic, the passage reads as follows; the lines that are cut from the English translation are enclosed between brackets:

[علاقتي بك بدأت عندما أخذت رسائلك تصلني وأنا أجيئك عليها وأنا أعرض عليك
المجيء وأنت تقبلين. علاقتي بك كإنسان يربطني بالوطن وبنفسي] لأنك أنت العائلة
والإنسان بلا عائلة هو بلا نفس. لماذا ترتجفين، لماذا لا تدعيني ألتصق بك وأنسى الحالة
المؤقتة، [وأقول بجيتك جاءت بطاقة السلام وها أنا سأعود إلى الوطن؟ هناك شعاع،
امتدّ منك ودخلني وشجعني على العودة إلى الوطن. أليس هذا بحدث، أن تعيدي لي ثقتي
واشتياقي الفعلي إلى الوطن]. ولا أعود جالساً أفكر فيه، وأتمنى وأنا أحاول شيئاً للعودة
إليه؟⁵²

Alternatively, the lines removed here might literally be translated as, "My relationship with you began when your letters started arriving. I responded to them, invited you to come, and you accepted. My relationship to you as a human being connects me to the homeland, as well as to myself" and "I would say that your arrival was like a ticket to/guarantee of peace, returning me to the homeland. There is a ray of sunshine emanating from you and entering me, encouraging me to go back to the homeland. Isn't this because you brought confidence back to me and reminded me of my true longing for the homeland?"

The omission of these lines is crucial, because without them Hāshim's attachment to Zahra is decontextualized. The symbolic connection between Zahra and the homeland, and his feeling that she is the family member who connects him to it, idealizes women and projects a nationalism onto the

⁵¹ Al-Shaykh, *Story* (New York: Anchor), 72.

⁵² Al-Shaykh, *Hikāyat*, 85.

woman's body, but it also desexualizes a scene that in English translation reads as implicitly sexual. In this translation, there is lack of more extensive cushioning indicating where Uncle Hāshim is coming from. This means that the English translation moves rapidly from him thinking about her, to him "clinging" to her. This has the impact of making him sound more ambiguously like someone who might be wanting to molest or take advantage of her, rather than like an uncle overinvested in his niece because she is his one last connection to his home—his sister, his ancestral land in South Lebanon, and his political homeland of "natural Syria." Even if sexual innuendo is not entirely absent in the Arabic novel, the cuts to this final passage in the chapter leave gaps that lead to further ambiguity around Zahrah's uncle's behavior. These cuts oversexualize a scene in the translation. This, in turn, is a domesticating move, as it reinforces the image of Arab men as over-sexed and uncivilized once again.

Conclusions

All of the translational choices detailed above stigmatize, depersonalize, and render invisible men in *The Story of Zahra*. From the marginalization of the male translator by moving him off of the cover and title page, to the addition of chapter and section titles that relegate men to their familial roles rather than as named narrators, to the elimination of details that humanize and flesh out the character of Uncle Hāshim through editing and cutting words and passages, men are deemphasized and invisibilized in the English translation. Above, I have demonstrated how these effects are condensed and on display in Chapter Three, titled "Uncle" in the English version, and how translational interventions reshape its eponymous narrator. These changes emphasize unsavory elements of the character's personality while omitting details that might explain his actions. This article proposes that translation choices made in *The Story of Zahra* attempt to reinforce its reading within limited ideological fields, producing it as a certain kind of "feminist text" for an allegedly feminist Western readership. This can be seen in the way that it overnarrates the role/s of women, removes men from their central roles, downplays politics that are not gender-focused, and shows women's empowerment as being in relation to individual exceptionalism rather than being embedded within their society.

This erasure of men, and the complexity of male characters, is reproduced in criticism of the novel, which often appears to conflate the original and translation and/or rely solely on the English version. This is particularly relevant to how it is deemed significant as a feminist text and one that explores the life of Zahra, as a singular, exceptional woman. This raises the question of whether

the translation's shifts in the representation of how men and women relate in the work, depicting them as opposed rather than relational, is reproduced in criticism as a result.

Given the translation choices and changes I have documented here and the processes I have argued they are related to, how can we read *The Story of Zahra* as a woman's war story ethically? Domesticating translation does a disservice to the text and transforms it in ways to make it palatable to a target audience; these changes can be subtle or obvious, gentle or more violent. The translational choices in which gender roles are transformed in this text, making it difficult to see the roles of women and men in the context of the Lebanese Civil War relationally, certainly fit in with a more violent rupture, as described by Issa Boullata in his call for resistant translation from Arabic to English.⁵³ These translation choices, which marginalize men, undermine feminism/s that might shine through in a more resistant translation. For example, it is possible to read challenges to local gendered ideologies and male dominance, and women's particular resistance to these, in the text. *Hikāyat Zahrah* challenges accepted narratives of what it means to be a young woman living through war as well as prescribed notions of how to be a woman. Simple ideas and paradigms of women being pro-peace, anti-violence, disempowered by men, or unable to have agency in a time of war do not obtain in this novel.⁵⁴

Subtly or explicitly casting men and women's interactions as opposed rather than relational is one feature of the translational changes that have permeated much translation of Arabic fiction into English. In the case of Ḥanān al-Shaykh's oeuvre, this has been complicated by a number of factors. One is that she has taken up the "exceptional woman" role and is cast and seen as a singularly successful Arab woman writer in English-language environments in ways that echo Edward Said's early call for her to replace Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī in this position.⁵⁵ Rather than challenge the underlying premise that there need not be only one Arab woman or Arab feminist representing all the others, al-Shaykh can simply step in and replace her. But at the same time that she has taken up this exceptional role, al-Shaykh has also puzzled over it and questioned why

53 Issa J. Boullata, "The Case for Resistant Translation from Arabic to English," *Translation Review* 65 (2003), 29-33.

54 This kind of a reading is perhaps what Holt is suggesting when she argues we need not read this text as only empowering of women or only showing women as victims; it may not be about patriarchy at all (Holt, 261).

55 See his comment in Edward Said, "Embargoed Literature," *The Nation* 17 (1990), 280: "Would that more Western feminists attended to writers like Shaykh and not just to the overexposed (and overcited) Nawal el-Saadawi."

her works have more purchase in the West than in the Arab World.⁵⁶ This perhaps is partly what has led to al-Shaykh being labeled a “reluctant feminist” because these kinds of moves certainly limit the ways in which someone like al-Shaykh or the characters in her novels can be or might be interpreted and analyzed as feminist/s.⁵⁷

One way of reading this seeming contradiction, I propose, is that her works in translation speak to an ideological field that undermines some of the complex work her texts are doing. When al-Shaykh says she is “not a feminist,” it is perhaps that she is rejecting this false role of a woman who is seen as fighting against her society, rather than working within it to reveal the contours of gendered experience.⁵⁸ The particular feminist figure she refuses, but that her English-language works speak to, is one that reflects limited, Orientalist, and neo-colonial visions of Arab women. As critics like Valassopoulos and Holt have pointed out, early reception and criticism of *The Story of Zahra* emphasize it as feminist in a way that limits its possibilities because the feminism they claim is alienating for many Arab women. Whether or not *Hikāyat Zahrah* is or is not a feminist text in Arabic—with all this implies in Arab contexts—it is certainly being produced and read as one in English. Its parallels with other works similarly constructed like this push us to think about what varieties of feminism/s might be usefully read into the text. It also leads us to question not just how but also why this woman’s war story must be produced and read as “feminist” in this way in English.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the reading of this novel together with its translation might offer paths toward resisting these problematic readings, even if *The Story of Zahra* itself is not a resistant translation. The comparison of the domesticated translation that we do have together with the original Arabic text, as I have shown in the examples from Chapter Three, or “Uncle,” can expose where interventions were made in the text and how seemingly innocuous edits and cuts become ideological. The changes that I have detailed combine and engage with larger ideological fields and horizons of expectation in English-language translations of Arab women’s fiction. In this particular case, I have shown how this technique can produce what might be considered a resistant reading of the translation. Though the translation that is produced effaces and downplays the role of men, recovering the complexity of how men and women engage each other in women’s war stories is central to narratives of

56 Al-Shaykh has made such comments repeatedly, for an example, see Paula Sunderman, “Interview with Hanan al-Shaykh,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 31.4 (1992), 625–636.

57 Larson, “The Fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh”.

58 On al-Shaykh’s disavowal of the “feminist” label, see Larson.

the Lebanese Civil War, and *The Story of Zahra* is no exception. Ethical studies of women's war stories are and should be connected to ethical reading, writing, and translational practices. When we highlight, emphasize, and amplify the voices of women in war stories, therefore, it is crucial that this not be done in a way that de facto places them in opposition to men, either consciously or subconsciously. Men need not be erased from women's stories and/or lives in order for such stories to be written, read, shared, valued, and seen as feminist.