Mitigating Estrangement Through Autofiction: Domestic Discord, War, and Exile in the Works of Hanan Al-Shaykh

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Abstract

This study portrays the theme of estrangement in the life and literary oeuvre of Hanan Al-Shaykh. It argues that her narrative technique of "autofiction," a hybrid of autobiography and fiction, is a potent platform for resisting estrangement. Al-Shaykh's heroines paint a reflective canvas embodying the broader story that resonates with countless women experiencing alienation away from shattered roots and homelands. The research explores various estrangement facets, beginning with family alienation involving maternal abandonment and patriarchal coercion in Al-Shaykh's life. A second alienation arises from the destructive role of war in Lebanon, which not only crushes women in general but also marginalizes women writers from the canon of war literature despite their nuanced viewpoint on caregiving. The study then delves into a third estrangement caused by expatriation: the fate of millions of Lebanese women like Al-Shaykh, who live a diasporic existence struggling with a deep identity crisis, accentuated by cultural and linguistic disconnections in their foreign milieus, while traditional patriarchal expectations haunt them to their exile. This exploration culminates in reflecting on the reciprocal relationship between Al-Shaykh's life and her literary creation, as her heroines exemplify the capacity of autofiction to articulate universal estrangements rooted in personal torment.

Keywords: Hanan Al-Shaykh, Arab women's life writing, autofiction, estrangement, diaspora, war literature

1. Introduction

1.1 About the Author and This Study

Hanan Al-Shaykh (b. 1945), a Lebanese/British writer, is a distinguished figure in contemporary Arab literature, acclaimed for her novels, short stories, plays, and journalism. Writing exclusively in Arabic, her work has been translated into over a dozen languages, highlighting her widespread influence.

Al-Shaykh's childhood was spent in Beirut, the war-torn capital of Lebanon, where the conflict outside the home mirrored the intense discord within her household, creating a dual battleground that shaped her early years. Severe family traumas marked her childhood memories, which impacted her deeply, weaving threads of conflict and resilience into the fabric of her identity. Her mother, Kamila, was forced into an arranged marriage with her sister's widower while still in her teenage years. The marriage was fraught with difficulties and ultimately ended when Kamila engaged in a scandalous affair and decided to depart. This left Al-Shaykh, who was exposed to societal stigma due to her mother's infidelity, with maternal rupture from age five. Raised under strict patriarchal control by her devout Shia Muslim father and brother, Al-Shaykh was deprived of freedom and affection. As Al-Shaykh asserts, her father was devoted to "religion and frugality: creating a home devoid of warmth: "we had no dialogue. He was religious 24 hours a day" (personal communication, July 7, 2001). This lack of parental affection intensified her sense of estrangement, profoundly shaping her literary pursuits. Her elopement to marry a Christian man further strained her relationship with her family. She remembers her father's reaction to the marriage reported in local newspapers: "my father cried, poor man" (personal communication, July 7, 2001).

Political and economic instability in Lebanon led Al-Shaykh and her husband to relocate to Saudi Arabia, an expatriation that further distanced her from her family and homeland but expanded her literary perspectives. Difficulties returning to Lebanon due to war trauma prompted the family's move to London in 1984, marking a crucial turning point in Al-Shaykh's personal and literary journey. Her narratives began to reflect the complexities of resilience in exile, exploring connections and survival amidst the Lebanese war.

Drawing from her firsthand encounters with familial estrangement, Al-Shaykh's narratives vividly depict the detrimental impact of fractured family structures on women. Similarly, her narratives are imbued with the harrowing repercussions of war and displacement, shedding light on the physical and emotional toll endured by women. Moreover, her exploration of exile reveals the intricate liminal experience of women, caught between the norms of their homeland and the unfamiliarity of their host country, leading to a pervasive sense of displacement and not fully belonging to either realm.

To address these modes of estrangement, Al-Shaykh employs autofiction as a tool of resistance and survival. Autofiction, which blurs the lines between autobiography and fiction, enables her to address sensitive and deeply personal issues related to estrangement. This

narrative form provides a unique freedom to subtly discuss controversial or harrowing experiences. Al-Shaykh's protagonists, often mirroring her own experiences, reflect similar traumas of alienation involving family, war, and exile. Irene Ceccarelli notes that in Al-Shaykh's work, "the line between literature and reality is blurred to the extent that seems obscure," allowing exploration of difficult matters (2000, p.14). Autofiction thus acts as a form of scriptotherapy, where psychoanalyst Laub asserts that survivors "did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive" (1995, p.61).

This study examines a range of Al-Shaykh's literary works to explore the theme of estrangement conveyed through autofictional techniques, affording her the agency to articulate narratives reflective of women's lived experiences. The selected works for analysis include Al-Shaykh's short story "Al-Sujjādah Al-ʿAjamīah" (2005) translated into English as "The Persian Carpet," (2006), and her novels: *Ḥikāyat Zahra* (1980) translated as *The Story of Zahra* (1986), and *Innaha London Yaʿazīzi* (2001), translated as *Only in London* (2001), and *ʿAzāra Londonstan* (2015) Translated into English as *The Occasional Virgin* (2010).

Exploring the connection between Hanan Al-Shaykh's life and her literature reveals significant research value. By examining her personal experiences of estrangement, we gain insight into the sensitive issues that shape her work. Her use of estrangement as a platform allows for the critique of topics often obscured by societal taboos, making autofiction a form of therapeutic writing.

This study expands the analysis of female autobiographical writing in Arabic literature, addressing a gap in scholarship. It highlights Al-Shaykh's role as a spokesperson for Lebanese women experiencing similar alienations due to conflict or political turmoil. The research fills a gap in understanding her oeuvre and establishes a methodological framework for future studies. It also provides a universal perspective on estrangement, resonating with women globally who face similar familial, wartime, or diasporic estrangement.

Displacement, exile, and wartime diaspora are transnational themes in literature and postcolonial studies. Al-Shaykh's exploration of these themes reflects the collective struggles of women worldwide, positioning this study as an innovative contribution to both Arabic literary discourse and the broader conversation on female estrangement in literature. To offer a contextualization, a theoretical background on autofiction as a genre will precede the discussion of Al-Shaykh's works.

1.2 The Theoretical Framework

1.2.1 Life Writing / Life Narrative

Life writing encompasses a rich array of modes, including autobiography, fiction, memory, and history. Scholars like Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) differentiate between life writing and life narratives, with the former encompassing diverse forms focused on life as the subject, while the latter involves self-referential writing like an autobiography.

Hanan Al-Shaykh's works span and combine both categories. In *The Locust and the Bird* (2009), she inscribes her illiterate mother Kamila's life story, intertwining their narratives. Al-Shaykh's dual role as 'author' on the cover and subject, despite her mother narrating the story, highlights this complexity. *The Story of Zahra* fictionalizes their relationship, while "The Persian Carpet" combines factual and fictional elements. Encompassing this complexity, this study employs "Autofiction" as a theoretical lens, allowing the exploration of both autobiography and fiction within the text.

1.2.2 Autofiction as a Subgenre of Autobiography

The evolving theoretical framework for analyzing self-referential texts has broadened the scope of autobiographical studies, incorporating subcategories like autofiction. Coined by French writer Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, the term autofiction has gained global recognition. These shifts in studying self-referential texts, as Massoud highlights, stem from transformed demographics and the emergence of post-colonial, anti-Eurocentric/Imperialist trends, enabling greater fluidity and fragmentation in ideas, concepts, and writing styles (2020, p.179). The concept of fragmentation holds paramount significance in life writing, as its implications will be expounded upon subsequently.

Autofiction, a term coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, encompasses fiction rooted in autobiographical elements. Hywel Dix interprets Doubrovsky's definition as "fiction of strictly real events" (2018, p.2). Expanding on this, Karen Fererra-Meyers considers autofiction as narratives centered on strictly autobiographical subjects, where the author, narrator, and main character share a nominal identity, yet the narrative structure mirrors that of a novel (2018, p.28). As Karen Ferreira-Meyers argues, Lecarme and Eliane Lecarme-Tabone explain autofiction's properties, emphasizing its blending of real events within fictionalized narratives, merging imagination and memory (2008, p.29). Building on Doubrovsky's theory, Pätvi Koivisto outlines two key conditions for autofiction, which Mike Peake explains in his study: the author and narrator/protagonist sharing a name or being identified as the same person through textual cues, and the narrative being grounded in the author's real-life events (Peake, 2022). These conditions are met in "The Persian Carpet" where the unnamed narrator refers to herself as "I," and the storyline draws from the author's real-life experiences.

1.2.3 Why Autofiction?

Critics celebrated autofiction as a form offering a broader, more inclusive category of life-writing than the earlier types. To many scholars, including Koivisto, as Peake explains, autofiction creates a liberating, safe space of expression for subjugated, "marginalized" authors: "Autofiction allows them to write about intimate, sensitive, personal experiences, which may expose them to shaming and humiliating comments" (Peake, 2022). In this regard, autofiction offers Al-Shaykh and her mother liberty of expression in their patriarchal setting that stigmatizes straying from societal norms. Moore-Gilbert believes that self-referential writing can be used as a means to promote new

types of history "from below", which makes traditionally marginalized groups "more prominent as historical agents" (2009, p.77). Cooke argues that as late as the 1980s, Arab women were indoctrinated not to speak, not to have a voice, and "not to write" (1988, p. XV). Having a voice equals acquiring liberty, which patriarchal societies prohibit, and thus Arab women writers had to camouflage their life stories benefiting from autofiction as a compromising, defensible genre.

1.2.4 The Difference Between Autofiction and Autobiography

There is a continuous debate amongst scholars regarding the demarcation of generic borderlines relevant to life writing. Karen Fererra-Meyers sums up the distinction between autofiction and autobiography, based on Doubrovsky's theory: *"*Whereas traditional autobiography tries to describe a character which really existed in the most realistic and effective way possible, autofiction fictionalizes a character which really lived. That is the pragmatic point of view regarding autofiction raised by Doubrovsky in 1977" (2015, p.205). Since autofiction is a subdivision of autobiography, the features of autobiography are inherently encompassed within autofiction, and in this context, it is worthwhile to elaborate on autobiography.

1.2.5 Autobiography

According to Jean Starobinski, autobiography is defined as "a biography of a person written by himself" (1971, p.285). Initially, the autobiography reflected society, history, politics, religion, and culture as a confessional narrative (Smith and Watson, 2001, p.2). Georg Misch expands its scope by considering it a *document humain* - a hermeneutic study of human personality amidst cultural evolution symbolizing life's objectification (1950, p.6).

The complexity of autobiography "the most elusive of literary documents" (Olney, 1980, p.4), is attributed by Ariel Sheetrit to its interdisciplinary nature (2007, p.2). Sidonie Smith highlights the challenge of the narrative "I" assuming a fictive persona, hindering a comprehensive portrayal of subjectivity (1987, p.46). Mary Sue Carlock notes conflicting interpretations inherent in the genre (1970, pp.45-46), and Linda Anderson's pursuit of disciplinary boundaries shows the slippery nature of the term (2011, p.2).

Philippe Lejeune in his monumental study introduces the "autobiographical contract," aligning author, narrator, and protagonist (1982, p.3). Critics debate reading autobiographies centrifugally or centripetally, with Lejeune grounding the genre in extratextual reality and De Man focusing on its self-referential essence (1979, p.920). Roy Pascal emphasizes autobiography's earnest intent to represent truth, (1960, p.22), while Smith and Watson argue that "autobiography" fails to capture the breadth of life-narratives globally (2001, p.4).

To resolve these complexities, autobiographical studies have enlarged their existing theoretical approaches by introducing autofiction, with Jacques Lecarme replacing the famous Lejeune's authenticity contract, with his "autofictional pact" (1993, p.242). Lecarme contends that his modification addresses two challenges: the difficulty of linking the author, protagonist/narrator to a defined entity, and the doubt that autobiography can accurately represent historical events without fictionalization. Establishing this new pact resolves the tension between presenting truth and narrating it in a fictional manner.

1.2.6 Truth, Memory, and Fragmentation

The "truth" in life writing is intricate, as memory is "creative" according to scholars like Misch (1950, p.11), and Naipaul (quoted in Moore-Gilbert, 2009, p.75). However, the naming of autobiography in French as *memory* "mémoire," reflects selectivity and omission, as noted by Linda Anderson (2011, p.113). This indicates the inherently fragmentary nature of autobiography. Sabry Hafez asserts this particularly in Arab women's autobiographies due to strict social taboos (2002). Amal Al-Tamimi (2005), and Joseph Zeidan (1995), assert this view.

Fragmentation is common among women's autobiographies, which is not restricted to Arab women writers. Mary Mason contends that women's autobiographies tend to identify with others, leading to diverse representation, unlike men's self-focused narratives (1980). Bakhtin's theory of polyphony highlights women's multiplicity in self-representation, a notion echoed by Sidonie Smith who underscores how autobiographies compose a "self" shaped "from the polyphonic forms of discourse" (1987, p.48).

Western theory on autobiography has been applied to Arabic autobiography studies by scholars like Tetz Rooke (1997), and Nabih Al-Qasim (2012). This study further explores Hanan Al-Shaykh's work through the lens of autofiction. Drawing from Al-Shaykh's life story, it substantiates how her texts erase the clear boundaries between genres to reside in the intersecting realm of these two narrative modes.

2. Analysis of Different Manifestations of Estrangement in Multiple Works by Al-Shaykh

2.1 Family Estrangement

Al-Shaykh's early family estrangement deeply influences her literary work, where she uses autofiction to address broader societal issues. Abudi (2010) posits that familial dysfunctions mirror societal issues, which Al-Shaykh reflects by symbolically linking dysfunctional parental figures in her narratives to political instability in Lebanon. Her autofiction critiques the regime's neglect and economic exploitation, mirroring the marginalization of women and girls in her texts.

Al-Shaykh's profound emotional wound—abandonment by her mother at age five—is central to her work. In the short story "The Persian Carpet," Al-Shaykh explores a troubled mother-daughter relationship, mirroring her own experiences of abandonment and deception. The story highlights oppressive family dynamics, depicting two girls (mirroring Al-Shaykh and her sister) subjected to patriarchal control. The mother's affair and subsequent departure lead the father to forbid any contact with her.

The narrative starts with the paternal aunt, Maryam, arranging a secret meeting for the girls to see their estranged mother, amidst a backdrop of patriarchal oppression. The house becomes a site of domestic noir, where fear pervades: "Our behavior was induced by fear, for today we would be seeing my mother for the first time since her separation by divorce from my father. He had sworn he would not let her see us" (Al-Shaykh, 2006, p.14). The sisters' fearful escape and the clandestine nature of their reunion highlight patriarchal suppression and the marginalization of women and children in Arab societies. Maryam's covert resistance underscores the pervasive threats faced by women and children, reflecting themes of repression and subjugation.

Al-Shaykh's narrative intricately blends fiction and reality, reflecting her personal experiences. Both the fictional and real-life fathers are devout, their lives immersed in prayer. The Persian carpet, a significant symbol from Al-Shaykh's childhood, bridges fiction and reality, embodying truths in the narrative. The protagonist's emotional conflict parallels Al-Shaykh's own: "As I stared down at the floor I froze. In confusion I looked at the Persian carpet spread on the floor, then gave my mother a long look" (Al-Shaykh, 2006, p.416). This moment, filled with "burning rage" (Al-Shaykh, 2006, p.417), reveals the mother's betrayal—she had stolen the carpet to use in her new home with her second husband, falsely accusing a blind worker of theft. This act of duplicity mirrors Lebanon's systemic corruption, where elites exploit national resources.

Al-Shaykh recounts a similar experience in an interview, describing a secret visit to her mother and seeing the missing carpet in her mother's new home: "my mother was back in Beirut …. Fatima and I hurried to visit her in secret and I froze as I stepped over the threshold of Muhammad's room and saw the missing Persian carpet that my father had accused the blind cane-mender of stealing. My mother had betrayed me" (personal communication, June 6, 2009). Despite this betrayal, Al-Shaykh profoundly suffers from her mother's absence, which she describes as leaving a lasting scar: "like a photograph that fell down and shattered into a million pieces, leaving its dusty contours etched forever on the wall where it had hung" (Al-Shaykh, 2009b, p.7). This imagery of a shattered photograph underscores the deep emotional impact of the mother's departure and the persistent void left in its wake.

Al-Shaykh depicts her mother, Kamila, as a victim of prolonged suffering, forced into marriage due to poverty: "her fate was sealed. Her father had already agreed to the marriage for a price of 10 gold coins" (personal communication, June 6, 2009a). This portrayal reveals how patriarchal structures exacerbate female suffering, illustrating the "mother wound," a cultural trauma passed from mothers to daughters. Kamila's experience mirrors the mother in "The Persian Carpet," highlighting the coercive nature of marriage and the emotional turmoil inflicted on women. Al-Shaykh recounts her mother's distress on her wedding day: "She describes the day of the white wedding dress. How she wailed, how she blackened her face with soot from the stove" (personal communication, June 6, 2009a).

In "The Persian Carpet" and *The Story of Zahra*, familial betrayal and abandonment are central themes. Zahra's mother, Fatmé, hides an affair and manipulates Zahra under the pretense of medical visits and family outings. Zahra reflects: "She actually needed my protection. She wanted us to be inseparable ... She wanted me to shield her" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.13). This deception deepens Zahra's neglect and anger, as she struggles with conflicting loyalties: "I no longer knew what my feelings were, to whom I owed loyalty" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.15).

Zahra's childhood is marked by shame and fear of exposure as an accomplice to her mother's infidelity, shattering her idealized view of motherhood. Her mother's focus on the affair diminishes Zahra's sense of importance: "The man became the center of her life, and around him was nothing but flying embers" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, pp.8-9). This trauma shapes Zahra's perception of adulthood and marriage, questioning their purpose in a deceitful and threatening world.

The mother in Al-Shaykh's narrative patronizes Zahra, questioning, "Isn't it enough that I have sold my gold bracelet to buy you your calcium injections? Don't you see how bow-legged you are?" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.4). She also shows preferential treatment to her son Ahmad, highlighting his privilege, as Zahra declares: "Everyday, as we sat in the kitchen to eat, her love would be declared: having filled my plate with soup, she serves my brother Ahmad, taking all her time, searching carefully for the best pieces of meat" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.11). Zahra, disillusioned by this false idealization of motherhood, refuses to write a school essay on mothers as nurturing figures, instead feigning illness to avoid the task. This rejection of conventional maternal idealization parallels Al-Shaykh's approach in The Locust and the Bird, where she openly discusses her mother's infidelity. Thus, Zahra functions as an autofictional representation of Al-Shaykh herself.

Consistent with family hostility, Zahra's father mistreats her, mocking her acne and viewing it as an impediment to her marriage, thus considering her a burden. Ann Adam notes that "Zahra's abject and acne-filled face not only makes visible the emotional scars this upbringing has had on the sensitive young girl, but also literalizes the ever-increasing gender conflict carried on in society" (2001, p.201). Zahra fears her father's violent temper and physical aggression: "All I knew was that I was afraid of my father, as afraid of the blows he dealt her as I was of those he dealt me" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.15). Abdul Jabbar and Deair (2002) metaphorically compare Zahra to Lebanon itself, alienated amid war's devastation: "Zahra who left Lebanon, is Lebanon that no longer knows her people in the war, and her people no longer know her for what they are doing" (p.494). Zahra's tragic life reflects cycles of rejection, betrayal, and suffering, illustrating her isolation and trauma both at home and in exile. Al-Shaykh's autofictional depiction of Zahra underscores the breakdowns in society and family during wartime, exploring themes of alienation and familial strife amidst conflict.

In "The Persian Carpet" and *The Story of Zahra*, Al-Shaykh explores themes of familial discord, betrayal, and oppression through her heroines. Her autofictional approach delves into taboo subjects such as sin, shame, underage marriage, and patriarchal dominance, drawing from personal experiences to authentically depict societal constraints. Symbolism, particularly the family as a microcosm of homeland and sovereignty, underscores themes of oppression, especially among women and children. Al-Shaykh's use of autofiction

challenges societal norms and reveals hidden struggles within familial and societal contexts, especially during times of conflict or war, leading us to the next topic: the estrangement triggered by war.

2.2 Estrangement Caused by War

Elias Khoury asserts that "the Lebanese novel was only born during the war" (2006, p.6), reflecting how prolonged conflict has deeply impacted Lebanese writers, who have found in the novel a suitable genre with its vast narrative space and emancipatory nature to encapsulate and document the longevity and complexity of war traumas. The term "postwar" in Lebanon is problematic, as violence persists beyond the official end of the conflict in 1990, including ongoing incidents such as assassinations, the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, and the 2020 Beirut explosion. This continuous violence means the Lebanese population endures ongoing conflict-related hardships.

Al-Shaykh's work documents how war transforms women's roles due to the loss or absence of male family members. Women are thrust into leadership roles and additional responsibilities but remain constrained by traditional social structures. They face severe burdens, with traditional gender roles redefined but not offering increased autonomy. The trauma is extensive, with approximately one million Lebanese fleeing post-war, and the Lebanese diaspora now totals 14 million, surpassing the internal population of 6 million (Aziz et al., 2020; Clausewitz, 2006; Cooke, 1988; Haddad, 2018).

The topoi of war as a generator of estrangement in Al-Shaykh's narrative extends beyond personal trauma to encompass her identity as a female writer. War literature is often seen as a male domain, traditionally marginalizing female perspectives (Reneed, 2019; Atieh and Mohammad, 2013). Al-Shaykh's female characters document the intricate political landscape of non-combatant women, enriching the male-dominated war literature and highlighting women's significant roles in shaping war narratives. Cooke (1988) classifies Al-Shaykh among the *Beirut Decnetrists*, underscoring the marginalization faced by Lebanese women writers and prejudice from Western feminism. Critics, as Salem observes, have pigeonholed Lebanese female writers as the "third-world female voice on war," simplifying their contributions (2003, p.112). Studies like the present one are imperative for addressing biases and recognizing the importance of Lebanese women's voices in war literature.

Since the Lebanese Civil War began in 1975, Lebanese writers have grappled with representing and narrating the conflict. Ragin highlights that this struggle is often explored through the "Lebanese body politic and the family unit in women's literature" (2019, p.1). As noted by Jaggi (2001), Al-Shaykh describes the conflict as a "men's war," focusing on women's roles in protecting their families and facing oppression. Unlike male writers who emphasize political or sectarian issues, Al-Shaykh examines the human impact of war on families, women, gender dynamics, societal changes, and economic decline, revealing unique challenges faced by women in conflict.

Al-Shaykh, along with her female contemporaries, diverges from the male-dominated literary tradition, as affirmed by Accad (1990). Ragin points out the autofictional nature of women's war writing, citing Ghada al-Samman's *Beirut Nightmares* as a "semi-autobiographical chronicle" of the 1975-1976 War (2019, p.2). Lebanese women authors, including Al-Shaykh, Hoda Barakat, Zeina Abirached, Iman Humaydan, and Darina Al-Joundi, frequently explore personal experiences of the conflict, blending memoir and fiction (Cooke, 1988). Al-Shaykh's use of autofiction challenges traditional female themes, condemning the madness and tragic outcomes of war (Ragin, 2019).

A prevalent theme in women's war literature is the integration of personal and historical narratives, as noted by Ragin: "the twinning of personal and historical narratives" (2019, p.3). Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* exemplifies this approach. Ragin highlights that the novel portrays both the protagonist's struggles with mental illness, rape, and war, and offers a critique of the impact of the 1958 and 1975 wars on Lebanon's social and emotional landscape. As the wars militarize Zahra's family, her home becomes "a battleground" against physical and emotional abuse (2019, p.3).

Zahra symbolizes Lebanon, reflecting the nation's betrayal and devastation. The novel illustrates how war obliterates personal aspirations, leading to hopelessness and emotional detachment. Zahra reflects: "War has swept everything away, for the rich and for the poor, for the beautiful and for the ugly. It has kneaded everything together into a common dough. My own looks have altered" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.184).

Like many of Al-Shaykh's heroines, Zahra endures a myriad of tragedies, including domestic violence, maternal alienation, paternal brutality, gender discrimination, war traumas, exile, and even molestation from those closest to her. As Van der Kolk (1989) contends, "traumatized people keep experiencing life as a continuation of the trauma and remain in a state of constant alert for its return" (1989, 389). Zahra's harrowing childhood experience of "trembling behind the door" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.3), evading a male pursuer, continues to haunt her, casting a shadow over her later life.

Zahra's youth was spent in Beirut which suffered bombardment and sniping, and newspapers published daily harrowing news:

> All those figures which listed the numbers killed, could they be possible? Were there truly these kidnappings? Did they actually check your identity card and then, on the basis of your religion, either kill you or set you free? Were the young people who fought in the war receiving orders from their leaders, and were they wearing combat clothes? Was it true that the Rivoli Cinema had been burnt down? Was it true about the fire in the Souk? …Had George, the hairdresser, our neighbor, turned against me? Had I turned against him? (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.129)

Zahra illustrates the severe impact of war, highlighting societal divisions along political, religious, and sectarian lines. George, a Christian hairdresser, becomes an "other" in Zahra's view, who is also marginalized as a Muslim woman. The destruction of Beirut's landmarks

exacerbates feelings of displacement and insecurity among residents.

The Lebanese social fabric is profoundly altered. Zahra's brother, Ahmad, shifts from being a promising student to a looter and property destroyer as a militiaman: “My father’s one dream was to save enough money to send my brother Ahmad to the United States to study electrical engineering” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.25). Ahmad engages in criminal activities, hiding stolen goods: “Ahmad had begun to return with other things apart from his rifle and his joints of hashish” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.169). He equates masculinity with violence, viewing the war as a source of power and wealth: “I don’t wish for the war to end... The war has structured my days and nights, my financial status, my very self” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.168).

War erodes moral values and destabilizes traditional institutions. Ahmad's acceptance of drug use, which he believes provides a filter to escape the war's horrors, exemplifies this moral decay: “Drugs have given the war a new dimension... They help you see the war through a filter that screens the eyes” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.168).

Fear pervaded every aspect of daily life, with individuals living in constant apprehension within their homes. This anxiety intensified during explosions or confrontations between Lebanese factions, as documented by Zahra: “My mother and I shouted out together … as we stood trembling behind the door... Now she moved across from one corner to the other room as the room was lit up by explosions. We crawled down to the basement, the noise all the while moving closer until it was as though it had its source inside my head” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.136). Zahra describes the overwhelming terror and helplessness she and her mother experienced, with the explosions causing a profound emotional impact: “Before I could cry out, an explosion had burst nearby and my heart had dropped between my feet... I lifted my head and saw my mother crying like a child, hiding her face in her hands, unable to move an inch” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.136).

Zahra witnesses the barbaric manifestations of war, she and her mother howled upon seeing newspaper photos featuring a whole family bombed while still playing cards; they were: “still clutching the cards in their hands, the shrapnel mingling with parts of their bodies, everything else looking normal, children’s underwear still hanging in the room” (1995, p.136). Fearing for his life, Zahra’s father and mother escaped to the family house in the south, leaving Zahra behind in Bierut. Although she was abandoned, living alone gave Zahra unprecedented freedom and she began to wish for the war to continue: “When I heard that the battles raged fiercely and every front was an inferno, I felt calm. It meant that my perimeters were fixed by these walls, that nothing which my mother hoped for me could find a place inside them” (1995, p.125). Zahra says: “It begins to occur to me that the war, with its miseries and destructiveness, has been necessary for me to start to return to being normal and human” (1995, p.161). While it may seem that the protagonist sees the war as a catalyst for her return to normalcy, trauma has impacted her perceptions, just like it did her brother’s. War often exacerbates existing wounds and creates new ones, leaving individuals vulnerable to manipulation and distortion of reality, which is proven by Zahra’s love story with the sniper who finally kills her. The protagonist's belief that the war has facilitated her journey to “normalcy” may reflect a desperate attempt to find meaning in the surrounding chaos. Yet the horrors of war only perpetuate cycles of violence and destruction, further complicating Zahra’s path to healing. Thus, the quote serves as a poignant reminder of the insidious nature of war and its devastating consequences on the human psyche.

Zahra's journey from war-torn Beirut to Africa presents a shift from one battleground to another, as she now grapples with her abusive uncle Hashem who knows her notorious past. Despite escaping war geographically, Zahra finds herself ensnared by fear. Estranged from her family and with no feasible return to her homeland amidst conflict, she contemplates her uncertain future: “What was I to do with my life after Africa? Where would I go? The day must come when I marry and my husband discovers that I am no longer a virgin, that I have undergone two abortions” (1995, p.29).

In Africa, Zahra marries a modest Lebanese man, Majed, to escape Hashem, but Majed treats the union as transactional. When he discovers her non-virgin status, he mistreats her like Hashem. Both her uncle and husband fail to recognize her autonomy, reducing her to “a pawn” in their agendas (Adams, 2001, p.201). Zahra's homesick uncle sees her as a homeland symbol, while Majed views her as a means to access her uncle's wealth, reflecting war's impact on relationships and perspectives. Shihada (2008) argues that Zahra encounters the same patriarchal oppression in Africa as in Lebanon, with societal norms continuing to subjugate women in exile. More destroyed than ever, Zahra returns to Beirut, resorting to a symbolic act of offering herself to the sniper, in a bid to end the war, reflecting her readiness to sacrifice for peace. She envisions a future with the sniper, excited about her new pregnancy, anticipating discussions on marriage and family once the war ends: “Tomorrow, when I see him again, I will speak frankly. We will discuss everything concerning sniping and marriage. Tomorrow will decide my future. …Tomorrow will decide my life” (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.174).

“Tomorrow” indeed decided her life, but in a tragic way. Upon learning of Zahra's pregnancy, the sniper shouted: “My God, Zahra. You must get an abortion!” (1995, p.203). The discussion ends dramatically with a gunshot:

> The pain is terrible, but I grow accustomed to it, and to the darkness. As I close
> my eyes for an instant, I see the stars of pain. Then there are rainbows arching
> across white skies. He kills me. He kills me with bullets that lay at his elbow as he
> makes love to me. He kills me, and the white sheets that covered me a little while
> ago are still crumpled from my presence. Does he kill me because I'm pregnant?
> Or is it because I asked him whether he was a sniper? It's as if someone tugs at

my limbs. Should I call out one more time, 'Please help!' (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.214)

The protagonist's tragic death at the hands of her man, while pregnant with his child, symbolizes the loss of hope and betrayal of trust in a war-torn country under oppressive domination. Her reliance on this male figure for affection and stability amid chaos reflects the desperation of the times, but his betrayal during their romantic encounter underscores the war's brutal, treacherous nature. Pregnancy and abortion represent the continuation of life amidst destruction and the cruel interruption of potential futures. In the context of autofiction, the protagonist's demise serves as a metaphor for collective disillusionment under oppressive regimes, highlighting Al-Shaykh's grim assessment of the country's future under current headship. Adams corroborates this view saying: "Lebanon is never at "peace" in this text, at least not for women" (2001, p.204).

The conclusion of Zahra's narrative unveils a lifetime marred by estrangement and abandonment. Ironically, Zahra, a name meaning flower in Arabic, symbolically represents fragility and beauty. Left to wither and die, she becomes emblematic of war's destructive path. Rather than flourishing in nurturing soil, Zahra is ravaged by the sniper, depicted as "lying on dusty floor tiles in an abandoned building" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.154), underscoring the futility of their union amidst the havoc of war, extinguishing all prospects for a tranquil existence.

Through Zahra, Al-Shaykh articulates sentiments and critiques that would otherwise remain unsaid, particularly regarding régime corruption and the bleak outlook for Lebanon's future with a population that shifted its moral principles. Employing autofiction, Al-Shaykh deftly conveys taboo notions of corruption and horror, particularly as experienced by women who find themselves unable to escape regardless of their circumstances—be it within Lebanon or in exile, amid family or in relationships, or even when alone. This narrative device enables Al-Shaykh to confront societal issues head-on, shedding light on the myriad ways in which war and corruption permeate every aspect of Zahra's existence, ultimately resonating with broader themes of suffering and resilience.

Al-Shaykh, belonging to a cadre of writers who explore Lebanon's war from exile, offers a unique perspective. According to Ragin (2019), these novels approach war through the prism of diasporic memory, with characters struggling to reconcile nationally rooted memories with their present-day transnational identity. This study, therefore, delves into the marginalized scholarship on wartime trauma by women writers in the Arab world. Through Zahra's story, Al-Shaykh contributes to this discourse, offering a nuanced exploration of the experiences of women amid conflict and how this relates to their feelings of estrangement, especially living in displacement, which leads to the next part of this study.

2.3 Estrangement Caused by Exile

In Al-Shaykh's literary corpus, exile, diaspora, and banishment are central topoi; her protagonists often undergo displacement to escape warzone consequences. Al-Shaykh involvedly examines the intricate dilemmas confronting émigrés torn between the desire to return to their native land and the imperative to assimilate into the customs of their adopted nation. According to Irene Ceccarelli (2020), diaspora literature comprises both autofictional and non-autofictional narratives, often blurring genre boundaries and incorporating elements of both history and fiction. Ceccarelli highlights the role of writing as a form of "resistance", countering stereotypical depictions of immigrants propagated in political discourse (2000, p.10). In the realm of migrant literature, writing serves as a potent tool for migrant authors to assert autonomy over their subjective experiences. The literature of exile explores diverse dimensions, encompassing the adaptation to a new cultural milieu and identity in the host country, along with themes of solitude, cultural disparity, and alienation. Nazmi Abdul Bade Mohammed (2013) emphasizes the significance of "memory" as a vital link to one's past, serving as a means of self-preservation. Gallen (2018) underscores the role of refugee literature in challenging marginalization and the enduring legacy of colonialism, even in the ostensibly "post-colonial" era. Judith Butler (2016) explores vulnerability within resistance, emphasizing the importance of engaging directly with refugee authors' narratives to prevent misrepresentation in media and political discourse. The postcolonial framework emphasizes self-representation, enabling marginalized individuals to reclaim agency over their migration narratives and acknowledge their multifaceted experiences, as articulated by Nazmi Abdul Bade Mohammed (2013).

Paul Tyambe Zeleza, like many scholars, downplays distinctions between exile, émigré, expatriate, emigrant, and refugee, recognizing their distinct moral and legal implications. Exile involves a persistent sense of displacement influenced by various factors beyond geography. Zeleza argues that these distinctions blur in practice, as causes and outcomes of displacement cannot be neatly compartmentalized:

> In reality, the distinctions may be more abstract than real for the causes and consequences of displacement embodied in each nomenclature cannot be separated into neat boxes of exclusive biography; all are forms of exile or rather exile is a metonymy for various forms of dislocation from a physical and psychic homeland. (2005, p.9)

Al-Shaykh realizing this fluidity in defining exile, revisits the Lebanese diaspora from a female viewpoint, problematizing the debatable questions of the instability related to living in exile, and the challenges of assimilation and identity preservation. Her narratives depict the emotional turmoil of Arabs, especially women living in exile, grappling with sentiments of nostalgic memories of their homeland, juxtaposed with the pressures exerted by both the diasporic community and Arab society to maintain traditional customs often incompatible with their new surroundings.

Al-Shaykh maintains her identity in the diaspora by writing exclusively in Arabic, despite decades in London: "I don't write in English at all... My language. If I lose it, *khalas*, finish. No Hanan, no writing. So I will never write except in Arabic" (personal communication,

September 1, 2003). Her translated works surpass the originals in popularity, but her themes remain rooted in Arabic heritage. Discussing her novel *Only in London*, Al-Shaykh acknowledges, "it took me so long to write about London... because I didn't feel that I was engaging with this place" (personal communication, September 1, 2003). Writing about London signified a step towards integrating and accepting her surroundings: "to write about London was a big step... it's as if I'm saying to myself, in a way, these things mean something to me" (personal communication, September 1, 2003). Her novel's central characters, like her, are Arabs struggling with exile, deeply connected to their memories, and grappling with language and cultural barriers.

In *Only in London* (2001), Al-Shaykh explores themes of migration and displacement through characters on a flight from Dubai to London, symbolizing cultural shifts and loss (Schlote, 2003). Lamis, Amira, and Samir, marginalized for their backgrounds or gender inclinations, face societal stigmatization, while Nicholas, a British character, connects to the Middle East through work. London the metropolis is depicted as both welcoming and alienating, emphasizing displacement. Edgware Road's signs, such as "We speak Arabic," mask the immigrant struggles (Al-Shaykh, 2001c, p.23).

In *The Occasional Virgin* (2018), Lebanese women Huda and Yvonne experience racism at Hyde Park's Speaker's Corner where:

> A woman … addresses the crowd: God created people in vast numbers of races in order that each race should stay where they are and not stray from their roots. If they emigrate … they disobey the Creator and rebel against His just will. (Al-Shaykh, 2018, p.81)

Huda is further insulted by Hisham, who criticizes her for wearing "un-Islamic clothes" and tells her, "Your place is in the kitchen, not here" (Al-Shaykh, 2018, p.104). Huda faces rejection both from Westerners who view her as an outsider and from Arabs who condemn her for her differences, leaving her without a place to call home.

In *Only in London*, Lamis reflects on her uprooted past, stating she had to "grow up without roots … and without a bed for [her own]" (Al-Shaykh, 2001c, p.28). Escaping Iraq under Saddam Hussein, she faced poverty and discrimination in Syria and Lebanon and was coerced into an abusive marriage in London. After divorcing and leaving London, her return symbolizes liberation and the hope of reuniting with her son, highlighting the theme of maternal abandonment present in Al-Shaykh's work. Lamis views her arrival in London as a return to freedom, describing her action of collapsing on the floor as if "an exile returning home" (Al-Shaykh, 2001c, p.7). She is determined to integrate into Western life, idealizing and aspiring to "become like the other" (El-Enany, 2006), expressing a desire to assimilate (Al-Shaykh, 2001c, p.53). To sever ties with her past, she embraces English culture by following her teacher's advice: "turn on the TV go to the theatre or the cinema every day if you can, and talk to your English friends, keep away from anything Arab, even in your mind, you should stop eating Arab dishes because subconsciously you'll be saying their names"(Al-Shaykh, 2001c, p.54).

Lamis experiences the isolation of exile, noting, "I don't know a single English person to invite for a cup of tea" (Al-Shaykh, 2001c, p.13). Despite her efforts to integrate through a relationship with Nicholas, she feels culturally excluded, describing English society as "like a private club" (155). Her lack of cultural knowledge and unfamiliarity with large English social settings further accentuate her estrangement (pp.151, 153). Nicholas also identifies this as an "invisible barrier" (p.46), making London another site of alienation for her.

Like Lamis, Amira seeks freedom from her past marked by poverty and abuse. He rejected her, wishing she were a boy (Al-Shaykh, 2001c, p.68). Amira also experienced molestation and consequent trauma (p.69). She fled Morocco for a better life in London but faced exploitation by her employer. Tired of being undervalued, she became a high-end escort for affluent Arab tourists. She fantasizes about showing her wealth to her ashamed brothers: "The water seller's daughter is now a princess" (p.141). Inspired by an Arab princess, Amira disguised herself to attract wealthy clients but was caught and prosecuted. She realizes that even in the West, "escorts are not part of society" (p.255). An Arab VIP reported her, enforcing patriarchal Arabic norms. Cherif (2003) quotes Fatema Mernissi who notes that adhering to traditions in host countries reinforces male supremacy over women, imposing Arabic traditions is a way that males rearrange things back into "order" (p.215).

Al-Shaykh reflects on her own persistent sense of estrangement (*ghurba)*, which she feels even when returning to her native Lebanon: "there was always a sense of alienation, when I went to [Lebanon], or returned, or went to visit my mother, or came back. My husband is the same; he likes to move all the time. All of us are looking, all of us have this ghurba, this otherness (personal communication, November 11-17, 1999).

Similarly, in *The Story of Zahra*, *ghurba* is a central theme demonstrated through the polyphony of voices. The first part of the novel entitled "The Scars of Peace" recounts Zahra's painful background story in her hometown Beirut, which led her to flee to Africa. The second part "The Torrents of War" is about Zahra's return to war-torn Beirut, still feeling alienated, and her murder at the novel's final diegesis. Other characters, like Hashem and Majed, both living in Africa, remain attached to Lebanon through constant memories, living in what Edward Said calls: "the crippling sorrow of estrangement" a result of the "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (2000, p.173). The spectrum of their exilic existence is negative; they lament a lost Edenic life in Lebanon, sharing what Svetlana Boym describes as a "utopian nostalgia" (1998, p.241). Their standing theme is repatriation, as Hashem asserts: "Tomorrow I will return to my homeland, to no other place but my homeland. Life will come to an end and will resume there" (Al-Shaykh, 1980, p.8).[i] Reading on, Hashem's attachment to his homeland and the dejection caused by his exilic life is unjustified and seem irrational, as he constantly envisions Lebanon as a person "weeping": crying of war, corruption, poverty, and instability. Hashem laments both, the loss of a homeland and the loss of his space therein:

> My name is still engraved on a tree trunk in *Dhour el-Choueir* … but nothing else remains after all these years. My bed isn't mine anymore. The sheets no longer hold my scent. What else? School books? I doubt they kept those. Maybe the dumbbells I used to lift are still behind the bathroom heater. Everything else must have been swept away, like the smell of cooking, with the passage of time. (Al-Shaykh, 1980, p.81)

Hashem likens life in exile to being "in a train station without boundaries or walls" (Al-Shaykh,1980, p.77). Al-Shaykh uses the same metaphor to describe her liminal existence in London, yearning for her homeland: "eating tabbouleh with other Lebanese, asking, 'are we going back?'. It's as if you're in a train station, in transit" (personal communication, July 7, 2001a). She poignantly depicts this sense of displacement, clinging to national dishes and residing in perpetual suspension between departure and arrival, never feeling at home. Edward Said concurs, noting that exile's limbo can lead to a detachment from all connections, resulting in "petulant cynicism" and "querulous lovelessness" (2000, p.183), reminiscent of the emotional and psychological effects of exile described by Al-Shaykh and her characters. Hashem embodies the fate that is shared by many of al Shaykh's characters living in the Lebanese diaspora, as Zahra recounts:

> Here, in Africa, he carried in his mind a symbolic image of his homeland, believing this to be the actual homeland, the everyday homeland. Here, … [he] wondered why he couldn't be back in his own country. He thought constantly of his country, its mountains and valleys, the sea there. Again and again, his conversation returned to the same point. He remembered his homeland with remarkable vividness. (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.20)

When Zahra lives with Hashem, he fails to treat her as a niece and instead views her as a representation of his homeland. He remarks that her presence allows him to "scent and even touch the smell of family," connecting physically with his country through her (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.69). This explains his pathological infatuation, as he desires "to touch [Zahra's] hands and face and the hem of her dress," seeking to experience Lebanon through her body. His obsessive advances terrify Zahra, driving her to seek refuge in the bathroom. Zahra's husband, Majed, supports Hashem's view, lamenting life in exile and cursing its estrangement: "Here, each person lives alone, like a solitary standing tree, uprooted from one's past" (Al-Shaykh, 1980, p.104).

Zahra feels doubly estranged—both from her homeland and from her uncle's house. She spends her days in the bathroom, which becomes her retreat from the chaos: "There is no parting from you, bathroom. You are the only thing I have loved in Africa" (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p.27). It is her sole space of safety: "What is there outside this house except for anxiety, worry, and sorrow? Here I am [in the bathroom] totally relaxed" (Al-Shaykh, 1980, p.124). The novel's polyphonic voices celebrate Lebanon while confronting its atrocities, reflecting the fluidity of the homeland as an imagined entity. Homi Bhabha contends that exile and nationalism embody conflicting emotions, balancing personal rejection with collective celebration of one's homeland (1990, p.61).

In short, Al-Shaykh's writings depict characters, including herself, navigating the complexities of forging a new homeland while carrying poignant memories of their origins, illustrating the fluidity of home. Despite her extended stay in the West, Al-Shaykh remains connected to her characters' struggles with assimilation and finds solace and purpose in writing, resisting estrangement. She embraces London's artistic community as a newfound home, affirming her belonging amidst transcultural experiences, as Ghazaleh (1999) argues. Al-Shaykh acknowledges her dual cultural identity, affirming her place in the world of the émigré and emphasizing the transformative power of migration, according to Sunderman (1992). Through autofiction, Al-Shaykh explores the emotional and thematic impacts of cultural displacement, offering insights into the challenges faced by diasporic individuals, particularly women navigating identity crises and yearning for a homeland tainted by societal complexities. Her narratives provide a poignant exploration of exile's nuances, from linguistic barriers to social and economic struggles, contributing significantly to our understanding of displacement and belonging.

3. Conclusion

By exploring Al-Shaykh's oeuvre, this study illuminates her pivotal role in reshaping literary boundaries and theoretical frameworks within Arab women's autobiographical writing. Through the lens of autofiction, Al-Shaykh intertwines personal and societal realms, subtly amplifying silenced narratives. Her strategic use of fiction to frame autobiography confronts the theme of estrangement with its three large manifestations related to family, war, and exile, with a particular focus on women's experiences within these turbulent landscapes. This narrative approach not only serves as a historical and social testament of female resilience but also challenges patriarchal hegemony over historical representation, offering marginalized women a creative avenue for expression, dialogue, and healing.

In short, Hanan Al-Shaykh's employment of autofiction enables her to confront personal experiences of estrangement by candidly reshaping her life story through fiction. Through her protagonists, who grapple with similar estrangement, Al-Shaykh finds solace and resolution in shared catharsis, fostering empathy and addressing collective alienation. Her heroines serve as therapeutic conduits, aiding in her healing process by providing avenues to confront and reconfigure experiences of estrangement, ultimately leading to a profound sense of personal empowerment and reconciliation.

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[i] All translations from this Arabic source are my own. In instances where certain meanings were lost in translation in *The Story of Zahra*, I have referred to the original Arabic text to highlight the author's intentions.