

The Interactive Oral for *Hikayat Zahrah (The Story of Zahra)*, by Hanan Al Shaykh

The following is the 1993 Kirkus Review synopsis of the novel, *Hikayat Zahrah (The Story of Zahra)*: “Arab writer al-Shaykh details a cool, almost clinical journey to the heart of a young woman imprisoned within herself by family deceit--and liberated finally amidst the violence of war-torn Beirut. The story this time--reflecting the author's feminist sympathies, as well as her preoccupation with the contemporary Arab world--concerns Lebanese Zahra, who as a child had been used as cover for her mother's liaisons with another man. After a severe beating from her brutal father, who suspects Zahra's role in his wife's deceit, the formerly bright student retreats into herself, obsessively scratches her pimple-laden face, and embarks on a meaningless affair with a married man. She has two abortions and a nervous breakdown before her family sends her off to West Africa, where an uncle once active in Lebanese politics now lives in exile. The homesick uncle is delighted to see her, but Zahra, frightened by the intensity of his attentions, hides out in the bathroom (“the only thing I have loved in Africa”) and in desperation accepts the marriage proposal of a local Lebanese man. The marriage is a disaster: Zahra becomes even more withdrawn, then returns to a Beirut devastated by war. As the war intensifies, her parents move to their native village, and Zahra, struggling to survive, falls in love for the first time. But her lover is almost certainly the lone sniper--“the only god of death, the only threat in their locality”--who shoots innocent passersby from a nearby apartment roof. As the two make love, little is said, and for the first time Zahra wants a normal life. But it's too late, as she--left only with “promise of menace”--becomes a victim of the city's mindless violence, personified by the sniper. A powerfully haunting portrait of innocence destroyed by violence both at home and in the larger world. More than just a novel about the contemporary Middle East

Students need to understand the historical significance of the Lebanese Civil War and the rich cultural, religious, and political tapestry of Lebanese society that has served to be Lebanon’s greatest strength and the source of its deepest woes since Lebanese independence of 1943, especially in light of the country’s French colonial background, the impact of the founding of the State of Israel and its ripple effects throughout the Middle East-Mediterranean region, and Lebanon’s internal own secular and religious rivalries that have been in play for centuries. Concepts that students would need to explore in this interactive oral include a discussion on the following topics:

1. Extensively research and discuss author Hanan Al Shaykh’s biography and *generally detailed* list of her published works, including those published only in Arabic, such as *Mail from Beirut*, as well as those that have been translated into English, such as *Women of Sand and Myrrh*.
2. “By looking at a novel *contrapuntally*, we take into account intertwined histories and perspectives. Specifically, Contrapuntal Analysis – a theory developed by Edward W. Said – is used in interpreting colonial texts by considering the perspectives of both the colonizer and the colonized” (<http://academics.hamilton.edu/english/ggane/contrapuntal.html>).
 - Explain in detail the critical theory of Contrapuntal Analysis.
 - Discuss Edward W. Said and his theories on Orientalism (i.e the conceptualization of the “self” versus “other” binary as manifested through cultural impressions).
 - Explain how a Contrapuntal Analysis of Shaykh’s *Hikayat Zahrah* better informs our thematic insights on the work.
3. Present a geography lesson, complete with maps and basic demographic and economic data that one would expect from a Human Geography class that focuses on the “Fertile Crescent” area of the Middle East, which is also sometimes politically referred to as “Greater Syria” by some.
4. Present on what racism in the Arab world looks like, in general, and against those of black African origin, specifically. How does the understanding of these social dynamics provide context for the attitudes of the some characters in the novel regarding their exile in Africa?
5. Research and discuss what Cantons are, then provide an general overview of the different political groups and militias as they have played a role in Lebanese society:
 - Maronite groups
 - Palestinians
 - Druze groups
 - Shi'a Muslim groups
 - Sunni Muslim groups
 - Armenian groups
6. Research and discuss the attempted 1949 coup d’état of the Lebanese government of the time by the PPS, and present on the PPS’s “Red Storm” symbol and its meaning.
7. Provide an overview of the Lebanese Civil War along with a general timeline. Then, provide a focused account of the second and third phase of the war, specifically to provide detailed context to the second book of *The Story of Zahra, The Torrents of War*.
8. Present on *qarinah* (djinn) in Arab mythology. Also consider the following question: is there any literary allusion to draw between Zahra’s Qarina and the story of ‘Ala-ed-Din and his djinns from *A Thousand and One Nights*, even the allusion is an inverted one? And, if so, what is the thematic effect of this allusion?
9. In his cultural studies publication, *After Theory* (2004), famed contemporary social critic Terry Eagleton states, “There is an ancient tragic faith that strength flows from the very depths of abjection. Those who fall to the bottom of the system are in a sense free of it, and thus at liberty to build an alternative. If you can fall no further you can only move upwards, plucking new

life from the jaws of defeat. To have nothing to lose is to be formidably powerful.” **Be a critic** and lead a discussion on the extent to which Shaykh demonstrates Eagleton’s theory in play within the pages of *Hikayat Zahrah*. For this prompt, consider if Shaykh narratively explores this idea within a credible degree of verisimilitude (or not), especially with the use of a 1st-person narrator to convey Zahra’s voice from her own perspective.

Interactive Orals are a group effort in which each individual member of the group is responsible for the significant facilitation of at least one activity or lecture on any of the above prompts*. The manner in which the group addresses each prompt above is up to the group.

Consider which prompts address the most insightful aspects into our understanding of the work and prioritize how you address each prompt and the order with which you address prompts. See which prompts connect to each other by the nature of the topic, how they relate to the novel, or by requisite order. Some prompts may lend themselves to expository purposes best dealt with through a traditional lecture while other prompts may build on those more expository prompts by allowing for exploration and discussion best dealt with through classroom activities.

You and your group will have two full class periods to fill with information and activities that address to some extent each of the above 10 prompts. You and your group are the teachers, so provide good and relevant information in engaging ways. This is your opportunity to teach the way you want to be taught.

All students in class will write a reflection regarding the Interactive Oral Presentations for each novel, so not only do you need to fully participate, you need to keep notes on all information and analysis covered in these presentations/seminars on your Major Works Data Sheet.

* Each student is responsible the significant facilitation of at least one activity or lecture on any of the above prompts, ideally and generally speaking for a total of 8-10 minutes within the group presentation of the interactive oral presentations.