

**The Story of Zahra Close Reading Activity 1 – Form, Epic, Deconstruction**

I. **Form:** *The overall structure or shape of a work, which frequently follows an established design. Forms may refer to a literary type (narrative form, short story form) or to patterns of meter, lines, and rhymes (stanza form, verse form).*

1) Look at how the novel is structured into two “books, with *Book One: The Scars of Peace*, consisting of five chapters and the second book, *Book 2: The Torrents of War*, consisting of no chapters. Discuss, what insights can we glean from the way the novel is structured? Consider if the story is structured according to chronology, cause/effect, comparison/contrast, problem/solution, or a hybrid of these organizational techniques. Consider the narrative perspective and consider the poetic quality of the language (both in its original Classical Arabic rendition and in the English translation rendition) What other observations about the novel’s format and form that you feel could be significant?

II. **Epic:** *A long narrative poem, told in a formal, elevated style, that focuses on a serious subject and chronicles heroic deeds and events important to a culture or nation. Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which attempts to “justify the ways of God to man,” is an epic. See also narrative poem.*

1) To what extent could we approach *The Story of Zahra* as an novel in the epic form?

**The Evidence Supporting the Case that The Story of Zahra is an epic:**

- a. The novel strongly alludes to and parallels with *The Thousand and One Nights*, which according to Wikipedia, “is usually placed in the genre of Arabic epic literature along with several other works. They are usually, like the Tales, collections of short stories or episodes strung together into a long tale...”
- b. The novel strongly alludes to and parallels with *Pyramus and Thisbe*, from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, which is widely considered a “mock epic” in the Greek poetic narrative tradition of *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*.
- c. Third, *The Story of Zahra* opens *In medias res*, which is the archetypical way epics open. *In medias res* translates to “into the midst of things,” so epics always begin in the middle of the story’s events. Thus, the ensuing story is understood to be a part of a much larger tapestry.
  - i. Read the introduction to *The Story of Zahra* and jot down all of the expository questions you have about the context of the memory Zahra is painting – the who’s, what’s, when’s, where’s, why’s, and how’s.

2) **Discuss:** is it acceptable to argue *The Story of Zahra* should be read and deconstructed as an epic poetic narrative?

