



# Hanan Al-Shaykh

## Biography

Hanan Al-Shaykh was born in 1945 in Beirut, Lebanon. She grew up in a conservative part of town called Ras al-naba where she went to a traditional Muslim primary school for girls. Al-Shaykh began writing at a young age and by sixteen had essays published in the newspaper she would eventually work for, *al-Nahar*. She attended the American College for Girls in Cairo, Egypt from 1963 to 1966. After her graduation she worked in television in Beirut and as a journalist for a women's magazine, *Al-Hasna*, before landing a job at *al-Nahar* in 1968. She worked at the newspaper until 1975.

It was during this time in Cairo that she wrote her first novel, *Intihar Rajul Mayyit*, later published in 1970. Like most of her novels, it examined relationships between the sexes, power struggles and patriarchal control. *Faras Al-shaitan*, published in 1971, contained more autobiographical elements, including her relationship with her religious father and her marriage. In 1976 she moved to Saudi Arabia because of the Lebanese Civil War, which undoubtedly influenced her next novel *Hikayat Zahrah (The Story of Zahra)*. She published it with money out of her own pocket in 1970, as no Lebanese publisher would touch it. The novel follows the harrowing story of a young girl named Zahra, who tries to escape oppression and war but upon leaving finds only more of the same. Banned in most Arab countries, the book garnered international acclaim for Al-Shaykh and was hailed as "original, moving, and powerfully written" by the *Boston Sunday Globe*.



### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1945
- \* Writes novels, short stories, and plays
- \* Lived in Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and England

This page was researched and submitted by Grant Tharaldson, Julie Kane, Laurel Winter, and Jill Shirley on 5/6/04 and edited and updated by Lauren Curtright on 8/18/04.



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## Biography continued

In 1982 Al-Shaykh moved to London, and in 1989 published *Misk al-ghazaal (Women of Sand and Myrrh)*. Also banned from many Middle Eastern countries, it follows the story of four women (two from an unnamed Arab country, one Lebanese, and one American) coping with life in a patriarchal society. It was named one of the 50 Best Books of 1992 by *Publishers Weekly*. That same year she published *Barid Bayrut (Beirut Blues)*, a novel consisting of ten “letters” written by a Muslim woman named Asmahan during the Lebanese Civil War. The letters are addressed to specific people both dead and living, as well as to certain places and events, such as “war.” Both *Women* and *Beirut* received great praise in the U.S. The latter is described as a “blues song” in reviews from *Ms.* magazine and *The Washington Post*. The *San Francisco Chronicle* described *Beirut Blues* as having “a Kafkaesque feel.” The *Chronicle* describes Al-Shaykh’s writing as “attempting to convey the kind of existential angst that is synonymous with war, and to an impressive degree it succeeds.” It also maintains that Al-Shaykh’s writing exemplifies the “pursuit of the pleasures of the quotidian on one hand, and their struggle against the vagaries of war on the other.”

In 1994, Al-Shaykh published a collection of short stories called *Aknus al-shams an al-sutuh (I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops)*. The novel was translated into English in 1998 by Catherine Cobham. *Only in London* followed in 2000 with generally positive response, being called an “exquisite perspective of estrangement and recognition” by the Guardian Review. *Only in London* details the lives of four people trying to find a balance between multiple cultures while living in England.

Al-Shaykh has also written two plays, *Dark Afternoon Tea* in 1995 and *Paper Husband* in 1997. Though she speaks English fluently, Al-Shaykh continues to write solely in Arabic. She still resides in London.



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## Biography continued

In considering the positive reception Al-Shaykh's books have received in Great Britain and the U.S. , it is important to consider literary and postcolonial theorists' responses to their popularity. Reviews of translated writing of "others" (such as Egyptian feminist Nawal el Saadawi or Al-Shaykh) by readers in the West can result in an Orientalist or unexamined affirmation of their works. Amal Amireh claims that "the West's interest in Arab women is part of its interest in and hostility to Islam" -- a hostility that "was central to the colonialist project." This is problematic for Amireh and others who argue that "the West welcomes her feminist critique of Arab culture because it confirms the existing stereotypes of Arabs and Muslim [men] as backward, misogynist, and violently oppressive." Thus, although Amireh claims it would be foolish "to assume that Arab women writers are just pawns" or that their books may mislead and misrepresent, more must be done to translate critical response to such texts.

Al-Shaykh's complex and vivid texts have provoked strong responses wherever they have been published. Her work demands that we think carefully about the relationships between culture, gender, race, nation, and empire.

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

*Intihar Rajul Mayyit (Suicide of a Dead Man)* (Dar al-Nahar, 1970)

*Faras al-Shaitan (The Praying Mantis)* (1971)

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*Dark Afternoon Tea* (1995)

*Beirut Blues* (Anchor, 1996)

*Paper Husband* (1997)

*I Sweep the Sun Off Rooftops* (Anchor, 1998)

*Only In London* (Pantheon, 2002)



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