

Verbs As Drivers Of Action: A Stylistic Study Of Hanan Al-Shaykh's Novel The Story Of Zahra

¹Ehab S. , ²Ali Alshhre

¹Alnuzailli, English Language Department, College of Science and Arts. King Khalid University.

²English Language Department, College of Science and Arts. King Khalid University.

Abstract:

This paper examines the stylistic analysis of verbs as drivers of action in Hanan Al-Shaykh's novel *The Story of Zahra*. Verbs are described as 'action words'. Many verbs give the idea of action, of 'doing' something; for example, words like write, teach, sing and work convey some action. But some verbs do not give the idea of action; they give the idea of existence or a state of 'being'; for example, verbs like be, appear, exist, seem, feel and belong convey a state. A verb always has an explicit or implied subject. Verbs form the main part of the predicate of a sentence. Verbs are also the drivers of written and spoken discourse, carrying it forward between conversants. This study focuses on the stylistic analysis of the novel *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan al-Shaykh which was translated into English by Peter Ford in 1986 by Quartet. The novel is set in Beirut before and during the Lebanese Civil War, and tells the story of a woman named Zahra, whose struggles with her family and country lead to her suffering and eventual death. *The Story of Zahra* is analysed lexically with focus on verbs. During the analysis, it is revealed through by using specific verbs, how the writer imitated the real image of the war-torn society and the tragic life of a young girl Zahra. The use of lexical verbs in the

novel is enough to analyse the text and convey the central feelings of the particular novel.

Key words: Stylistics, verbs, types, action verbs, non-action verbs.

I- INTRODUCTION:

When we read literature, we also learn the grammatical features of the language in which it is written. Literature also brings linguistic experience. Literature cannot be completely separated from language. In fact, literature is formed in our imagination. Imagination plays a pivotal role in any piece of literary work. Language is the path to our imagination, through which a writer initiates imagination and makes characters and scenes more attractive and appealing. So, we initiate our imagination with the language we know, and soon forget the language and start performing the whole literary creation within ourselves.

The antiquity, richness and grammatical significance of a language are established by the literature created in that

language. A novelist understands the value of word choice in their writing. The word choice helps the novelist to develop the art to transform the ideas and impact the readers. During the course of writing, the authors use appropriate words and knit sentences to convey their imagination so that the readers comprehend the stories in a realistic manner.

Hanan al-Sheikh is a famous Arabic writer in the English-speaking world. She was born in 1945 in Beirut, Lebanon. She grew up in the conservative Shi'a Muslim neighbourhood of Ras al-Naba in the Lebanese capital. In 1963, al-Sheikh moved to Cairo, Egypt, where she attended the American College for Women for three years. During her stay in Cairo, she met the famous novelist Ihsan Abdul Qadoos, who

encouraged her to write her first novel, *Suicide of a Dead Man*, which was published in 1967. When she returned to Beirut, she became a full-time journalist, working for a women's magazine, "d-Hasna" and later for a Lebanese daily, "An-Nahar". She left Lebanon in 1976 and lived on the Arabian Peninsula for six years. Then she migrated to London in 1982, where she now lives.

Apart from six novels, Al-Shaykh has numerous short stories and a few Plays to her credit. Her writings primarily discuss how women fit into society during war. *The Story of Zahra*, her third book, which she wrote on the Arabian Peninsula, is a reflection of the violent environment she lived in for the first two years of the civil war.

Aim and scope of the study:

The aim of this paper is to discuss the stylistic references of verb analysis in the novel *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan

al-Shaykh. Stylistics plays a very significant role in the interpretation and appreciation of literature. The paper is an exercise in stylistics and verb analysis of Hanan al-Sheikh's novel *The Story of Zahra*, which will be of great help to the teachers, researchers and students of English literature in general and to those interested in the author in particular. This analysis will help researchers to appreciate and evaluate the creative use of language and the use of verbs in literary discourse.

II-SYNOPSIS OF HANAN AL-SHEIKH'S THE STORY OF ZAHRA:

The Story of Zahra revolves around a Shi'a family living in Beirut. The novel explores the relationships between parents and children and among young people in the city, before and after the outbreak of the civil war. The story runs on many levels and uses different voices, but at the centre is a disoriented young woman, Zahra, who finds an

opportunity to escape repression in the Lebanese civil war and tries to establish control over her life.

The Story of Zahra is divided into two books. The first book is entitled "The Scars of Peace". In it, Hanan al-Sheikh portrays Zahra as a physically unappealing woman. Zahra, who suffers from acne, constantly picks at her scarred pimples. She hides herself in the bathroom to escape from the male exploitation.

At the invitation of her uncle Hashim, Zahra travels to Africa, where Hashim has lived since the early 1960s. He was involved in a failed coup d'état and could not return to Lebanon for fear of being arrested. Zahra takes on a symbolic significance for her uncle, reminds him of Lebanon and he finally becomes Lebanese. Meanwhile, Hashim's desire for her reminds Zahra of another relative's unhealthy interest in her. Wherever Zahra returns, she seems to be at the mercy of

those who use her body for their own needs and pleasures. Zahra marries poor exiled Majid to avoid her uncle. Soon she realises that Majid, too, uses her to fulfil his desires. However, Majid feels very confident that he has a socially respectable wife, but he soon loses her.

She flees back to Beirut, where civil war has broken out. For the first time, Zahra imagines how to control her body and destiny. She feels more in command of her own life than ever before, attributing this newfound sense of power to the war: "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" (138). Zahra begins to lose her ugly pimples and there is an improvement in her appearance.

Zahra is an abused woman. The first half of the novel, is narrated by Zahra, her uncle Hashim and her husband Majid, who is pushed from one

awkward situation to another. Zahra is raped by peers, harassed by men in her family, and she is a witness to her mother's lust affair. Again, her only solution during such a crisis is to escape to a nearby bathroom and lock the door.

The second book is entitled "The Torrents of War". In the second part of the novel, Zahra is portrayed as a woman who breaks away from the patriarchy and rebuilds her life. Zahra does what she could not have imagined before the war. She volunteers to work at a hospital that treats war victims. She no longer focuses on herself alone. The relationship with her mother changes. Zahra, who had previously relied entirely on her mother, now sees her mother's deceit. By being a silent witness to her mother's illicit affairs, she understands the consequences of being ridiculed by her mother. Zahra's mother not only failed to love her; as a child she was also deprived of her maternal affection. But during the war, the situation

changes. The fearless, selfish mother is suddenly full of fear and her daughter Zahra is not afraid of anything about the war.

Zahra's confidence goes beyond relationships at home and with outsiders. She enters a field that is generally considered a male's domain. It is an armed struggle. Zahra steps into the battlefield. She dares to do what no woman, or even man, dares to do, and goes to meet a sniper. She not only creates a state of lull in his shooting; she also starts having a bodily relationship with him. Over time, with her gentle nature and love, she changes his personality and the violence in his heart. She wants to stop him shooting prisoners, because of her tenderness and friendliness. The sniper reveals some information about his past, although he does not reveal his political affiliation to her.

Due to her relationship with him, she becomes pregnant. So, she asks his name. It is only when Zahra insists that the

sniper says that his name is Sami. She hopes that she can get another identity. She begins to dream that he will marry her. In her view, the sniper Sami, becomes a family man, not really a symbol of the meaningless violent war he is in. So, Zahra refuses to abort her baby. He begins the affair with personal interest, but in terms of time and pregnancy, his thoughts turn to the possibility of a normal life outside the logic of war. Pretending to comply with her decision to have the baby, he lets Zahra go. But when she returns to the street, he shoots her.

The novel ends with Zahra speaking beyond her death: "He kills me with the bullets that lay at his elbow as he made love to me. He kills me, and the white sheets which covered me a little while ago are still crumpled from my presence.... Although I try, I can hear no sound from my own voice" (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 183). Her narration slips into that of the author, where she reveals her

death. Her lover, a sniper killed her. In this novel, Al-Shaykh exposes the ugly side of war and how it affects the social fabric in a disastrous way.

It seems that Zahra's empowerment will end when her life is over. The end of her story says that the Lebanese civil war did not promote the conditions for healthy survival or sustainable power for women. In most ways, women in post-war Lebanon, as in many other post-war societies, have returned to the pre-war status quo. But Zahra's situation is different. She goes down to the battlefield to stop a sniper, which is so extraordinary that her imagination turns him into something he is not. She gains personal strength by standing up against a sniper, but only temporarily.

Zahra begins this relationship by trespassing into a place where only men, in fact, only militarised men go. Her transgression is remarkable. It creates a counter-story to the standard

‘war story’ of the twentieth century, a story that generally focuses on the experience of men and firmly distinguishes the places of men and women. In most historical writings, women have been excluded from the armed conflict zone of the battlefield, which has long been considered as man’s place. The Story of Zahra shows how incomplete a typical war story is and how much truth it destroys if told in a consistent style.

III-TYPES OF VERBS:

1. Action Verbs – These verbs express actions (walk, eat, give), or possession (own, have, etc.). Action verbs are of two types:

Transitive Verbs – According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a transitive verb is a verb “having or needing an object”. The Collins Dictionary defines a transitive verb as “a verb accompanied by a direct object and from which a passive can be formed, as ‘deny’, ‘rectify’, ‘elect’”. The Merriam-Webster

Dictionary gives a similar definition. According to them, a transitive verb is “characterised by having or containing a direct object”.

Intransitive Verbs – The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines an intransitive verb as a verb that is “characterised by not having or containing a direct object”. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, an intransitive verb is a verb “having or needing no object”. “A verb that indicates a complete action without being accompanied by a direct object, as sit or lie, and, in English, that does not form a passive” is defined as an intransitive verb according to the Collins Dictionary.

2. Linking Verbs – These verbs do not show action. Rather, they link a subject to a noun or an adjective that describes or renames the subject. This adjective or noun is called a “subject complement.”

3. Helping Verbs – These verbs are known as “auxiliary verbs,” and come

before linking verbs, or action of the subject, and convey additional information about a possibility, such as “can” and “could,” and about time, such as “has,” “have,” “was,” “were,” and “did,” etc.

4. Modal Verbs – These verbs are types of helping or auxiliary verbs that express possibility, ability, obligation, or permission. These include may/might, shall/should, can/could, will/would, must/have.

5. Static and Dynamic Verbs – These verbs do not show action, but a state of being. For instance, “Emily feels ill today,” or “She has a fever.” However, dynamic verbs, contrary to static verbs, show an action, a process, or a sensation. For example, “He is chasing a bus.”

6. Regular and Irregular Verbs – Regular verbs express past tense or past participle by adding -d, -ed, or -t at the end of the verb. They are also known as “weak verbs.” Irregular verbs, on the

other hand, do not use common rules for verb forms. Usually, they do not have a predictable -ed ending.

7. Phrasal Verbs – These verbs do not exist as single words. They instead use combinations of two or more words intended to create a different meaning than the original meaning of the verb. For instance, “Jane handed in her homework on time.”

A gerund is a word ending with ‘ing’ and has the force of a noun and verb. It is also known as verbal noun. Ex. Writing is my profession. I enjoy teaching English poetry. Here “Writing” and “enjoying” are gerunds.

An infinitive is the basic, or simplest form of the verb. Sometimes it has the word “to” in front of it. In the sentence “I wish to become a poet,” “To err is human” the words “to become”, “to err” is an infinitive.

IV-AN ANALYSIS OF VERBS IN HANAN AL-SHEIKH’S THE STORY

**OF ZAHRA, THE
ENGLISH
TRANSLATION BY
PETER FORD WHICH
WAS FIRST PUBLISHED
IN 1986 BY QUARTET:**

When speaking and writing, we construct our discourse according to specific patterns appropriate to what we want to express. Different types of metaphorical languages are used for a variety of reasons, and this type of figurative language is considered unique to higher literature. Eagleton in his Introduction: What is Literature? says “Perhaps one needs a different kind of approach altogether. Perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or ‘imaginative’, but because it uses language in peculiar ways. On this theory, literature is a kind of writing which, in the words of the Russian critic Roman Jakobson, represents an ‘organized violence committed on ordinary speech’. Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary

language, deviates systematically from everyday speech.” (Eagleton, 2003 p. 2)

Verbs are words used to describe an action, occurrence, or state of being. They form the main part of the predicate of a sentence. Verbs are also the drivers of written and spoken English, since they animate the conversation or article. All sentences must have a verb, otherwise they don't communicate much to the reader. A verb tells us what a person or thing does, what is done to a person or thing, what a person or thing is, or what a state of being or existence is described by. It may also tell us about possession. We cannot make a sentence without a verb. Unlike other parts of speech, it changes its form according to the given time and situation. This is because they are used to show a specific action that has happened, or which will happen, or is about to happen. The most important role of a verb is that it provides a relationship with time. It describes something that has

happened, is happening, or will happen, in the past, present or future respectively. Thus, it puts a subject into action, and gives clarification about the subject and its meaning. It is always found in the predicate of a sentence.

Verbs are divided into action verbs and non-action verbs. An action verb is used to describe an action that is performed. Action verbs can be used in simple, perfect and progressive (continuous) tenses. Most of the verbs we use are action verbs. For example: read, write, cook, drive, make, do, create, listen and watch. Non-action verbs are used to describe states, senses, desires, possessions, emotions and opinions. Non-action verbs are not usually used in continuous tenses. For example: like, love, want, need, believe, remember, belong, seem, own, see, taste, hear. Kinetic verbs reveal physical movement and outward actions, while verbs of perception imply movement inwards, i.e., action becomes mental.

The verb is used as an auxiliary verb, and it can also be used as a main verb. The verb "be" is irregular. It has eight different forms: be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been. The present simple and past simple tenses make more changes than those of other verbs.

Many action verbs are used extensively in the novel that carry forward the story by Hanan al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zohra*: "Stood, trembling, mingled, stayed, pressed, wished, drew, streamed, glued, died down, head peered, attempted, , warned, appeared..."

"My mother still sang on. Her voice still murmured, "Oh, my sleeping love." And always I was ignored." (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 9)

'Ignored' word brings out the contrast between Zahra and the other two characters' feelings. While they were engrossed in feelings of longing and care, the protagonist is emotionally and physically ignored. The

dramatic end of the line shows sadness.

“I heard the door slam.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 41)

“Majed got out without saying a word, slamming the door in a way that spoke many words.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 110)

“Fear commingles with pain, strikes into panic.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 213)

“Their hands would go to their guns the moment a tamarind seller crashed his cymbals in the street.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 44)

“We managed to snatch a few small Persian rugs from the walls, and what we couldn't take we smashed.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 170)

“He stood on the steps, banging at the door, ringing the bell.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 89)

“It suspended me between sky and land like a bolt of lightning, and when we touched the ground again I felt as if my legs were dropping off and rolling away from under me. (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 13)

“...who had made his escape through a hail of bullets after a shoot-out with the military, remained.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 68)

“There were in the darkness, however, voices charged with anger which asked, ...” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 58)

“The night before I had forced my heart, ...” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 136)

“...as they crawled on to my fingers and hands, spreading all over my flesh.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 108)

“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, 1986, p. 136)

“Taking a sheet from his drawer, the doctor nodded.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 191)

“I nodded.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 40)

“As I mounted the flights of stairs they seemed to stretch up for ever, ...” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 182)

“I dug my nails into the palms of my hands, trying to

summon the courage to face all these people in distress.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 180)

“My mother had arrived from the south as if some inner voice had summoned her to be at my side, ...” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 181)

“My sleep became disturbed and fitful as I agitated, waiting” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 70)

“I began to go faster, hurling insults over my shoulder...” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 118)

“I will no longer sit and ruminate.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 72)

lock the door securely and fling myself on the bed.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 151)

“When I think of that small picture which stimulated me so effectively, it certainly makes me wonder.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 81)

“The words would pour out of me, propelled by my saliva.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 49)

“Fear loomed and intensified as the voices outside grew louder.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 128)

The verbs here give the reader a visual of the action or of a character’s motions as well as reveal the character’s emotions: “It became a haunted citadel. The thunder of artillery reverberated off the walls, the shriek of rockets pierced our ears and reached our very core, and our peaceful refuge came to be filled with phantoms of fear and the sound of bullets.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 128)

“Our street, once ruled by the spirit of life, now has death for its overlord” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 132). “Silence reigned in our house. Silence reigned everywhere” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 135). “I knew I would go to pieces the moment the rockets’ noise dwindled.” (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 127).

Hanan al-Shaykh uses verbs to move the story and characters, both literally and emotionally. Without verbs, the characters and the story go nowhere. Without the right verbs at the right time, the characters and the story go to the wrong places or get there in

the wrong way, lacking impact or being overwhelmed by unnecessary actions.

In the story, the novelist has used different types of emotional verbs that can indicate anger, fear, joy, love, sadness and surprise. For example, she has used pain, agony and hurt to denote suffering; guilt, regret, remorse for shame; astonishment, amazement to indicate surprise; pride, triumph, contentment, pleasure, pity, sympathy, affection, attraction, care, affection, love and longing.

Yet, even so, life did go on. I would sit at meetings with my head bowed before giving angry cries as tears choked me. (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 48)

Yet I was still struggling with my Qarina, which seemed about to strangle me and not to be departing, as it usually did. (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 98)

And perhaps they did slaughter them, too, for I never saw them emerge again into the street. (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 167)

Such contradictions became a torture to me, as did those concerning my relationship with the sniper high up on the building down the street. (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 146)

My father was always brutal. (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 24)

All at once I would be filled with disgust and contempt . . . the same feelings that had come over me during the abortion. (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 33)

Fear on the verge of hysteria would distort her face, her hands make wild gestures in the air. (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 196)

Al-Shaykh skilfully employs the verbs to show action, both physical and mental, and to show the state of being: "When I heard that the battles raged fiercely and every front was an inferno, I felt calm." (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 125) "My silence was a sickness." (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 126)

In The Story of Zahra, many direct speeches are used with

dialogue and reporting verbs in conversations. "I am at my wits' end and am annoyed with myself and hate myself because I stay silent. When will my soul cry out like a woman surrendering to a redeeming love?" (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 34). "Suddenly I shudder as it seems clear to me that everything in our lives is on the verge of disintegration... war pervades the whole of Lebanon" (Al-Shaykh, 1986, p. 130).

V-CONCLUSION:

Hanan Al-Shaykh employs various figurative devices in order to vividly describe the scenes. The conversations among the characters enhance the story's realism and drama. She uses effective adjectives and verbs to depict the complicated relationship between the characters.

Thus, the rhetoric, verbs and phrase structure in *The Story of Zahra* unfold scenes, characters, relationships, and war scenes before our minds precisely. Hence, *The Story of*

Zahra is the best expression of language in which the novelist employs action verbs as a stylistic device to tell the story exactly as she wishes.

WORKS CITED:

1. Al-Shaykh, Hanan. *The Story of Zahra*. New York: Anchor Books, 1986.
2. Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory An Introduction*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2003.
3. Halliday, M.A.K. and Matthiessen, M.I.M. Christian. *Holliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Routledge, New York, 2017.
4. Halliday, M.A.K. Ed. Webster, Jonathan. *On Language and Linguistics*, Continuum Publishers, New York, 2003.
5. Jackendoff, Ray S. *Semantic Structures*,

- MIT Press,
Cambridge, 1990.
6. Joseph K.V., A Textbook of English Grammar, Vijay Nicole Imprints Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 2010.
 7. Thomson A.J. and Martinet A.V., A Practical English Grammar, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997.
 8. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/story-zahra>
 9. <https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/>
 10. <https://pivot.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/pivot/article/view/40275/35278>