

Écriture Feminine: Feminism and Nationalism in Seyyedeh Zahra Hosseini's 'One Woman's War: Da'

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, the tradition of veiling and public silence repressed the Iranian women both physically and verbally. These conventions stipulated that women's physique should be concealed and their voice, emotion and concern remain unexpressed. Although Iranian women have always played crucial and representative roles in various political and historical eras, the tendency to trivialize and neglect their roles and movements has been rife. This affected Persian literature as well; women were either totally excluded or were marginalized and mentioned very briefly in literature. The Iranian women had challenged these conventions, ventured into the public, and voiced their thoughts and concerns through literature but they were again marginalized and their literature was overlooked due to possessing traditional masculine styles of writing. This sentiment gradually disappeared with the emergence of women authors whose literary works had a different style than men's writings. These writings brought women from the periphery to the center as well. Since then, Iranian women authors have been producing literature to protest against patriarchy and traditional discriminatory policies. They have also been active writers in what now can be regarded as the formerly male-dominated genres that deal with nationalism such as war literature. 'One Woman's War: Da' (2014) is one such work. Drawing upon and reviving Cixous' notion of écriture feminine, this paper explores how Da, a state-sponsored war memoir, constructs feminine writing that challenges patrilineal culture and highlights women's roles in nation-building projects like the Iran-Iraq war.

Keywords: écriture feminine; masculine writing; feminine writing; patrilineal culture; feminism

INTRODUCTION

For over thirty years since a decade after the 1979 Revolution, Iranian women writers in Iran have been creating a literature engaged with women's issue and gender relations. This literature modified the course of literature in Iran decisively. Men's poetry and prose writing, after centuries of literary dominance, yielded to women's. In the Iran of post-1979 Revolution, women not only established themselves as prolific writers but also dominated the best-selling fiction list. Hasan Mirabedini, a scholar of contemporary Iranian literature, notes in 2004 that the number of women who had published novels reached 370 which is '13 times as many as a decade ago' and 'about equal to the number of men.' Furthermore, women produced books that outsold the men's by far. Through these books Iranian women writers are consciously challenging, transforming, reconstructing and negotiating histories demonstrating their own identities, rights, experiences and desired futures. Iranian women authors have also produced significant literature in what is now regarded as formerly male-dominated genres that deal with nationalism such as war literature or 'Sacred Defense Literature' which refers to the literature about Iran-Iraq war. Women were not given any significant roles other than a mother, sister, and faithful housewife of a martyred in the male-produced war literature. Breaking the exclusive grips that men had in the literary production of 'Sacred Defense,' women are now narrating their sagas of endurance and sacrifices, and confrontations with Iraqi soldiers in the front. This literature could be read through the feminist lens of *écriture feminine* by questioning and interpolating the master discourse of

patriarchy. *One Woman's War: Da* (2014) (hereafter *Da*) is one such literary work told by Seyyedeh Zahra Hosseini about her experiences during the Iran-Iraq war as recorded by Seyyedeh Azam Hosseini. This memoir contains three parts: the first part details the narrator's childhood in Iraq and her migration to Iran; the second part which is the core part of this memoir is a depiction of the seventeen-year-old Hosseini's volunteered activities such as nursing the wound, washing the corpses of the dead, and her role as a combatant in defending Khorramshahr; and the last part details the narrator's recovery from shrapnel injury she received from the battlefield and her married life. In what follows I bring to the surface Iranian women's journey from absence to presence and authorship, and I reveal how *Da* (2014) constructs a feminine style of writing that defends women's rights and highlights women's roles in nation-building projects like the Iran-Iraq war.

FROM ABSENCE TO PRESENCE AND AUTHORSHIP

The tradition of veiling and public silence kept women in Iran repressed for centuries. Their physique was mostly concealed and their voice, emotions, and concerns remained unexpressed. This imposed invisibility and enforced reticence in a patriarchal society turned women into a social non-existence figure. However, there were always outspoken women who voiced their concerns about women's condition. Tahereh Quorratol'Ayn (1817-1852) is one such woman who unveiled herself in an assemblage of men and challenged the patriarchal system of the time. She spoke against the veil, polygamy and marital relations. Iran has also witnessed women's movements, associations and organizations in support of the nationalistic and anti-imperialist projects. One prime example dates back to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 when women took part in the battle against foreign forces, initiated street riots and strikes, boycotted the importation of foreign goods, and raised fund for the establishment of the National Bank. Despite all these initiations, movements and participation, Iranian women were denied the voting rights on the grounds that they lack political and social insights. Iranian women's significant roles as nationalists—liberating the country from despotism and imperialism, and feminists—challenging patriarchy and questioning the conditions of their lives—are undeniable but the masculine inclination to trivialize and neglect their roles and movements, and the subsequent disregarding of women's rights has been prevalent. The cloak of imposed invisibility and enforced silence affected the Persian literature as well. Women were either totally absent or they were marginalized and mentioned in passing in different genres of literature. When they appeared as the subject of men's books, they were oftentimes portrayed as mothers, wives or queens who were bit players in politics and society.

During the Pahlavi era, when Iranian women were forced to unveil and then free to veil or unveil again, women poets and authors such as Parvin E'tessami (1907-1941) emerged. E'tessami kept venturing into the public through her poetry but the society seemed to find it hard to listen to her. Parvin E'tessami corroborates this sentiment through bemoaning of a hen in her poem entitled 'The Reproach of Uncouth,' who is "a captive in man's trap." "Why tell our story? Nobody will listen/ Why recount our life? Nobody will read it anyhow" (1935, p. 58). Now that the Iranian woman had the chance to express herself through poetry, her voice was still unheard. To further exacerbate the marginalization of women and to accentuate the role of patriarchy, Parvin E'tessami has been "repeatedly stereotyped as a traditional recluse in the shadow of an overprotective, equally traditional father" who has "merely and passively reflected the ideas and ideals of her father" (Milani, 1992, 112). Thus, women authors were marginalized and their literature was overlooked due to possessing traditional manly styles of writing. This position reaffirmed women's passivity

and domesticity in the public and perpetuated women's absence in literature. This sentiment gradually faded away with the appearance of Simin Daneshvar (1921-2012) and Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967). Known as the pioneer of Iranian female literature, Daneshvar's feminist and nationalist tendencies appear regularly in her fictions, especially *Savushun* (1969). As the first novel in Persian written by a female author, *Savushun* concentrates on a woman's experience and brings to the fore her perspectives of Iran's political unrest, anti-imperialism and anti-monarchy in Reza Shah's reign. This unveiling of the woman's views comes at a time when Iranian women had to go through the state's discriminatory laws and gender inequality policies. Daneshvar moves away from the patriarchal literary styles and establishes her own style, themes, motifs and symbols by including garden allegory, animal imagery, and Persian myths and anecdotes intended for women readers. *Ecriture feminine*—women's writing as opposed to men's writing style—in prose within the contemporary era in Iran appears to have been started with Daneshvar's *Savushun*.

Equally well-known, Forough Farrokhzad is another author of this era who writes about taboo subjects such as love, women's emotions and sexual desire, and women's oppression. Her confessional and sensual style in revealing her female self and her reflections on her womanhood and femininity through a bold and blunt language unique of her own characterize her poetry as *écriture feminine*. These women authors increased not only the importance of women's writing in the development of modern Persian literature but also the status of women in the patriarchal society. The women status also owes its improvement to many women organizations and associations that were formed for their political and cultural demands requesting equal rights, education, the abolition of polygamy and the discriminatory policies towards veiled/unveiled women. Women's presence in the society was now too bold to ignore. An instance of their heavy presence is the Revolution of 1979 in which women from all walks of life, veiled and unveiled, with different ideological inclinations participated in anti-Shah demonstrations and strikes. However, the abolition of Family Protection Act, the implementation of *Sharia*, the decree demanding women to wear Islamic form of modest dress, and the Veiling Act of 1983 in the immediate years after the Revolution disappointed many women and men, and had them think that Iran is turning the clock back in respect of women's presence both in the public arena and literary world. Despite this circumstance and much to the chagrin of those who thought women would turn into a non-existence figure again under the Islamic Republic, writing by Iranian women inside Iran has increased rapidly and Iranian women carved a niche for themselves in the literary world a decade after the 1979 Revolution. The different genres of literature produced by Iranian women ever since commonly continue dealing with women's issue and gender relations which is indicative of their ongoing feminist concerns. Despite the heavy burden of patriarchal authority, these narratives articulate their protests against gender hierarchy, patriarchy and discriminatory policies and traditions. This succinct section forms the backdrop of Iranian women's journey in search of voice, presence and authorship.

ECRITURE FEMININE

Coined by Helen Cixous in her essay 'The Language of the Medusa' (1976), *écriture feminine* refers to a uniquely feminine style of writing that emblemizes feminine difference and emerged in response to the exclusion of women in public discourses in a fundamentally phallogocentric culture; in a culture where the man (the ruling class) claimed: "I am the unified, self-controlled center of the universe" and "[t]he rest of the world, which I define as the Other, has meaning only in relation to me, as man/father, possessor of the phallus" (Rosalind Jones, 1981, p. 248). Religion and philosophy supported this claim to centrality

and language followed suit. Speaking and writing from this position, man appropriates the world and rules it through verbal mastery. Language in different contexts as symbolic discourse is also another venue in which man exerts his power to objectify the world, narrows it down to his own terms and conditions, speak instead of everything and everyone else including women (Rosalind Jones, 1981). Women had no voice or if they ever had, according to Robin Lakoff's dominance theory (1973), it showed qualities of weakness and subordination in their language in a male-dominated society. Utilizing Lacan's ideas that the structure of language is centered by the phallus, Cixous traces the starting point of this masculine domination back to the time when a child encounters the first lack, i.e. the mother's penis. This lack of a penis and the fear of castration separate the child from the mother, make him/her renounce the mother, and make the mother the 'Other.' Here is when the father becomes an important figure and the Law that separates the child from the mother. Therefore, when the child discovers the language, s/he discovers the father and sees him as the pillar of linguistic structure (Peksen, 2005). Father is the center and the ruling principle of the whole language structure. This center is also called the phallus which stands "for all the differences that structure the symbolic order" (Ellmann, 1994, p. 19). Thus, father and his penis occupy the center in language system that impacts all other discourses.

In patriarchal culture, therefore, a text's "author is a father, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis" (Gilbert, 1986, p. 488). This father and his penis construct a language that normalizes women as the 'Other' who lacks and needs to be completed. This is a language which privileges masculine values: "a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously..." (Cixous, 1976, p. 879). While strong waves of feminism condemn gender difference and advocate gender equality in all aspects of life, the post-structuralist theoretical feminists such as Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva are more concerned with deconstructing gender difference in language and text. Although these French women differ in strategy to resist the masculine domination, they all agree that "resistance takes place in the form of *jouissance*, that is, in direct reexperience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality, repressed but not obliterated by the Law of the Father" (Rosalind Jones, 1981, p. 248). Kristeva does not go any further but Cixous and Irigaray highlight that if women, who have been historically sexual objects for men—virgins or *fille de joie*, wives or mothers—speak about their sexuality in new languages, they will institutionalize a point of *difference* through which phallogocentric notions and controls can be dismantled. The emphasis on the new language is due to the fact that these women cannot voice their concerns, emotions and plights in a masculine language which sounds inadequate to their expressive needs and would put them again in a position of linguistically marginalized, dormant or silent in speech and in social signification. The only way to defeat this masculine suppression is to create a language not dominated by the phallus.

In the Lacanian Real, a stage before an infant enters the language, there is no trace of phallus and masculine domination. Kristeva calls this pre-oedipal stage semiotic to which women should return in order to create the feminine language. Whereas the Symbolic is dominated by the father, the phallus, and the law; the semiotic carries no sign of the father, the phallus, and the law (Kristeva, 1984). Another place where the phallus possesses no strong control is the margin of the Symbolic order. Drawing upon Lacan's Symbolic Order that maintains that men are in the possession of the phallus and are therefore closer to the Symbolic, and women are located at the margins of the Symbolic Order because of the lack of penis, Cixous takes this marginal position of women to her advantage and argues that this marginality makes women far away from established meanings and reasons, and takes them closer to the imaginary and fantasies (1976). The return to semiotic and the imaginary in the margins of the Symbolic Order help women to create a language that escapes the constraints

of fixed meanings and reasons which are phallogocentric. Anchored within such discourse, Cixous (1976) introduces the concept of *écriture féminine* as alternative writing for women that would pass through the restricting frameworks of phallogocentric discourse, and disrupts the conventional reading, writing and representational practices that are produced and supported by patriarchal values. What makes *écriture féminine* effective is the subversive and exorbitant character of female sexuality: just like feminine sexuality it is numerous instead of single, circulated instead of focused, and oriented towards process instead of goal (Cixous, 1976). *Écriture féminine*, in fact, celebrates this openness and multiplicity, and challenges the hierarchal oppositions such as man/women that appear in masculine writing.

Cixous' refusal to define *écriture féminine* and her contradictory statement that *écriture féminine* comes from the female body but men can also write from this position render the concept impractical to many critics. This concept has received other criticisms as well; a critic such as Ann Rosalind Jones (1981), for instance, points out several objections with *écriture féminine* including its tendency towards essentialism and its participation in the male-centered binary logic like Derrida's binary theory of '*différance*' to create a new binarism. These critics failed to see that Cixous does not define the concept because she believes that definition, encoding and theorization belong to phallogocentrism. The fact that she mentions that men can also produce *écriture féminine* is suggestive of her tendency not to exclude men from any discourses and therefore, she rejects essentialism and affirms plurality and multiplicity following a 'both/and' logic of difference. Cixous' participation in the male-centered binary logic is to challenge it and create a new binarism in which, unlike the former male-created binarism, women do have a voice. *Écriture féminine* has no intention of replacing the masculine writing; it rather intends to give women a voice. The concept is usually characterized with illogicality and incoherency but according to Diana Holms (1996), "*écriture féminine* will disrupt the order of the masculine text, but beneath its apparent incoherence may display a different type of order, based on the cycle rather than the straight line" (226). I am very much aware that all writings produced by women cannot be termed as *écriture féminine* because *écriture féminine* is meant to refer to a unique style of writing, especially poetry that displays gaps, silences, new images and puns, and is oftentimes characterized with eccentricity, incomprehensibility and inconsistency. I would argue, however, that *écriture féminine* should not be necessarily eccentric, incomprehensible and inconsistent to evade the phallogocentric structure of logicity and order. Establishing new styles, themes, motifs and symbols in and of themselves undermines the masculine logic, destructs the structure of phallogocentric system and creates a new set of feminine logicity and order. I am, therefore, extending the term *écriture féminine* to any kind of writings, poetry and prose, produced by women that circumvent the phallogocentric structure through forming a feminine structure and eradicating the 'silencing' and 'marginalization' of women. My extension of the term is not an overgeneralization, rather I believe that feminine writings that are acts of liberation and are starting points for a female consciousness— as the main objectives of Cixous' *écriture féminine*— can be termed as *écriture féminine* as long as they avoid the phallogocentric structure.

DA: AN IRANIAN EXAMPLE OF ECRITURE FEMININE

Da (2014) bears a style that provides a good example of *écriture féminine*. To begin with, it is hard to overlook *Da*'s long descriptive passages throughout its 696 pages. These descriptive passages possess too much detail that only a woman would notice. For instance, paying particular attention to what people are wearing and how old they are, is typical throughout the memoir:

The old couple's faces put them in their sixties and their eyes seemed glassy either from old age or cataracts. The man was tall and thin. He had a ragged turban on his head and was dressed in a faded grey and wrinkled dishdasha. His hands were unusually large, and I could tell from the calluses on them and his stubby fingers along with his sunburned face he had farmed the date groves all his life...His son had inherited his regular features.
(pp. 272-273)

While women's writings are descriptive and replete with details, men's writings are usually to the point and exclude too much detail irrespective of the genre. The contemporary feminist and sociologist, Devault (1999) echoes this opinion and believes that women's descriptive skill and their meticulousness are two conspicuous elements in their writings. Zahra's obsession with color terms is another feminine feature of the memoir. Zahra refers to color terms more than 100 times throughout the memoir so much so that some passages can be literally called colorful paragraphs. During the initial days of the invasion, Zahra goes to the local hospital to help and notices a small girl whose legs were in splints: "She was a beautiful girl with delicate features. Her hair, which lay on her shoulders, was an attractive brown... She was in a yellow dress with a blue and green flower print that had turned purple from the blood" (p. 57). The British-American Linguist, Robert Lawrence Trask (1995, p. 61) confirms that this is a feminine feature and points out that women are more likely to use precise color terms. Zahra includes precise color terms in her narrative as well: "Her face was olive bordering on yellow" (p. 62) and "She was wearing a dark brown and crème colored corduroy pants" (p. 74). Foregrounding emotions and feelings is also a feature in *Da* (2014) that makes it a good example of *écriture féminine*. The narrator's emotions in times of her father's death (pp. 168-222), her feelings upon seeing the wounded and the dead in hospital and in the front throughout the memoir, and her emotions on her brother's death (pp. 293-339) are just few illustrations of women's feelings and emotions that are hardly present in men's writing.

Da (2014) also shows affection amongst family members which is an uncommon occurrence in men's writing. Zahra recalls that her "father was forever declaring his love for her [mom]. Even after having eight children, they doted on each other like newlyweds" (191). Zahra's way of greeting Ali, his brother in which she "would kiss and hug" him and "stroke his beard for a while" (p. 328) also corroborates the existence of the warmth and closeness between family members. Another *écriture féminine* characteristic of *Da* (2014) is the presence of rivers, trees, greenery and animals that are included to describe beauty: "Shakha was a very pretty spot watered by a branch of Tigris, which explained its lush palm groves" (p. 14), "Both sides of Shatt were lined with trees so lush and leafy that walking under them was like entering a tunnel sheathed in green" (p. 378). The inclusion of these images, which are emblematic of birth and growth, in a war memoir is reflective of Zahra's willingness to refrain from following the phallogocentric structure of war memoirs which are mostly fraught with destruction, blood, killing and martyrdom beside sacrifice. Moreover, metaphorization of events is another vehicle that Zahra uses to establish a different writing structure than that of men: "With windows on either side of or room, we saw nothing but sky. This gave me the feeling we were living on a ship in the middle of an ocean, a ship that never reached land" (p. 666). As an indispensable component of women's writing, nostalgia is another trait that helps *Da* construct *écriture féminine*. Zahra's narrative enjoys the all-present flashbacks to happy childhood memories:

I had fond memories of the place. Mother and I would often shop here...Everything combined to make the bazaar a pleasant place: the smell of fresh fish, the bright sheen of their skin in the lights; the expression on some of the fish, especially the pampus, which always seemed to be smiling...the mongers would fish with their nets at night and in the morning present their catches to the customers. The ever-present gulls flapped their

wings and made a racket as they feasted on the trimmings the mongers threw into the grated openings in the bazaar floor...There was no sign of them now. (p. 291)

Ecriture feminine is not just the style and how one writes but what one writes about. Cixous' statement of "Women must put herself into the text as into the world and into history by her own movement" (1976, p. 875) indicates that *écriture feminine*— a strain of feminist literary theory itself— dovetails well with feminists' advocacy for gender equality in all spheres of life and endeavors to raise the status of women and put them in control of their own discourse. Thus, *écriture feminine* is all about women, femininity, feminism and texts. "Women," "text," "world," "history" and "movement" in Cixous' statement are also present in Zahra Hosseini's *Da* (2014). Zahra Hosseini's effort to raise the status of women begins with writing the memoir, a literary genre that was historically disfavored for men and taboo for women. This sentiment gradually faded away and memoir became a popular genre for male authors. It is interesting to note that memoir also became a favorite tool of expression for Iranian women in exile after the events of the 1979 Revolution and the 9/11 so much so that the sudden and rapid increase of its publication turned into a moot point. Elsewhere, I have argued that recounting their own experience of victimhood through memoir has been a post-9/11 strategy to persuade the public in the West that Iranian women are in need of liberation (Zeiny 2017). Despite this popularity for Iranian women in exile, memoir was still a forbidden genre for Iranian women inside Iran until memoirs like Maryam Amjadi's *Maryam's Boots* (2003), Masoumeh Ramhormozi *Eternal Fragrance* (2003) and Zahra Hosseini's *Da* (2008/2014) challenged this sentiment. These are not only women's memoirs written by and about Iranian women but also war memoirs which are supposedly men's genre. *Da* (2014) and others of its ilk are, therefore, part of the movement in bringing women into texts and into the history of Iran-Iraq war to disrupt the male-inscribed history from which they were either totally absent or had a very insignificant presence. *Da* (2014) includes a series of scenes that are recounted to improve the status of women. Zahra's effort to break the patriarchal and traditional taboo that women should not reveal personal information and family background can be seen on several occasions throughout the memoir. She discloses about every member of the family including her sister and mother:

Father and mother had come to Basra from the Kurdish village of Zarinabad near Dehloran. This was before their marriage, which took place at the end of the 1950s. My four siblings and I were born in the city: Ali in 1961, and afterwards with one year between us Mohsen, myself, and Leila. The last child, born three years after Leila, was Mansur... We dressed the way the Arabs of the region dressed: in long-sleeved over-shirts known as dishdashas. Mother...had been living in Basra since she was an adolescent and had long since grown used to the customs of the area. (p. 6)

The incorporation of family background, especially women members of the family, is not frequent in male-produced war memoirs; however, it is a common phenomenon in women's war memoirs (Ramhormozi, 2008). In this fashion, *Da* (2014) establishes and sustains a feminine structure aside from breaking the traditional taboo in a culture that romanticizes feminine silence and restraint. This seems to be the revitalization of feminism in a culture that has been discouraging women's self-revelation and self-referentiality. Through writing a memoir, Hosseini and similar preceding women memoirists generate a movement, a sense of sisterhood and political consciousness in the patriarchal society. What sticks out the most as feminism in *Da* (2014), however, is Zahra Hosseini's choice of words in the title of the memoir: *One Woman's War: Da*. Besides giving significance to women's role in the Iran-Iraq war, 'one woman's war' refers to a woman's struggle with the patriarchal culture and the patriarchal grips on war literature. The term 'Da,' which means 'mother' in Kurdish, is simply used to raise the status of mothers in a culture where fathers are predominant. Hence,

the words ‘woman’ and ‘Da’ are chosen to extend prominence to women and mothers who have almost always been (under)/(mis)represented in phallogocentric discourses. In this way, *Da* (2014) epitomizes *écriture féminine* which endeavors to reconcile with mothers and raise the status of women in general. Moreover, mothers occupy an important place in the notion of *écriture féminine*; constructing *écriture féminine* is not possible without returning to the Lacanian pre-oedipal/imaginary phase or what Kristeva (1984) calls a semiotic stage when a child identifies itself with the mother who makes this stage a feminine realm where there is no trace of the-law-of-the-Father. The fluidity, openness and multiplicity of maternity also bear vital significance in *écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976).

Zahra Hosseini is constantly questioning the patrilineal culture of the society through doing tasks that are usually men’s jobs and stands firm against anyone warning her women cannot or should not do the task. For instance, when she wants to dig graves, a man gravedigger tells her: “This is not a playing. You can’t dig graves,” (p. 99) she gets mad and responds: “Why not? Is that what you men think? We’re weak just because we’re women?” (p. 99). Another similar instance is when a man tells her that she cannot lift the stones because they are too heavy but she says very defiantly “Yes I can” (p. 137). When Zahra decides to inform the authorities of what is going on and ask for more people to come and wash the corpses, Zeinab asks her: “Who is going to listen to you?...This is something a man should do, go there and demand new people” (p. 103), and Zahra responds: “What’s wrong with us? We have tongues, don’t we?” (p. 103). On many occasions, Zahra defies top military male officers asking her and her friends to leave the front because it is dangerous to which she oftentimes responds: “If it’s dangerous, what keeps you here? I’m no different from you” (p. 206), “Don’t think that only men can fight; women can also” (p. 207) and “We won’t go back... We’re here and we know what we are doing” (p. 457). This is Zahra’s way to protest against the presumption that women are weak. These excerpts and many other examples such as taking care of the cemetery at nights (149), accepting responsibility to take care of the family (133), calming down the uncontrollable crowds at times of invasion (p. 197), and cleaning and repairing guns and reloading magazines (pp. 365-6) suggest that Zahra has not been dominated by any man; this reinstates her own agency and women’s in general. Her tough, tenacious, brave and ready-to-help-at-any-time personalities challenge the stereotypical role of Iranian women.

Zahra Hosseini’s feminism also comes to surface with her continuous mentioning of the Blessed Zeynab, Prophet Muhammad’s granddaughter, in the memoir. Zeynab is an iconic figure and symbol of piety, strength and sacrifice in Islam, and she is known as the ‘Heroin of Karbala.’ Zahra thinks of the Blessed Zeynab when she faces her father’s body for the first time (p. 181), she calls out to her to get “strength to go on” (p. 244), she admires her composure “in face of tragedy” (p. 171), and wonders “how could a human being reach such a state of wisdom that she could look beyond the obvious horror and see the blessings in her son’s and brother’s torments?” (p. 171). Zahra can relate to the sufferings of the Blessed Zeynab as both of them had to endure the martyrdom of a father and their beloved brother. Zahra would like to emulate the Blessed Zeynab’s actions, her heroism in times of war, especially in Karabala and her great fortitude. Zahara’s brother, Ali also tells her “to be like Zeynab, Abbas’s mother” (p. 171), particularly in wartime. The fact that she chooses a woman as role model concords well with Cixous’ *écriture féminine* in bringing women into texts and history.

DA AND NATIONALISM

Zahra Hosseini seems to take feminism up a notch and links it with nationalism as the connection between the two is central to women's movement in the Middle East. Contrary to Western feminism which is oftentimes more individualistic, Iranian feminism is deeply connected to nationalism. For instance, during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, Iranian women organized many clandestine associations and meetings in support of the nationalist and anti-imperialist movement, organized street riots and strikes, participated in fights against foreign forces, boycotted the importation of foreign goods, helped in the demolition of a Russian bank, and raised funds for the establishment of the National Bank. These activities were derived from the nationalistic pride but they are also qualified as Iranian feminism by virtue of women's concurrent endeavors to gain 'equality of all citizens in law' and voting rights. Zahra Hosseini's recounting of her experience in the front is replete with similar instances. Her willingness to go to the front (p. 104) and her insistence that women are also good fighters to defend the country (p. 207) are not only motivated by nationalistic pride but are also derived from her feminism. Her choice of words for the title of the memoir: *One Woman's War: Da* accentuates women's role in nationalism and highlights woman's struggle with the patriarchal culture.

Knowing that nationalist ideologies have deep root in the patriarchal social system and being aware that nationalism itself is regarded as a masculine project, Zahra Hosseini challenges the existing standards in nationalism. In nationalist discourses, women are represented as 'mother and the nation' in need of protection; they are presented as the bearer of 'national honor' and men are portrayed as proprietor and guardian of the nation and national honor. Hosseini questions this patriarchal definition and presents a new set of standards in which women are no longer needed to be defended but rather they are able to stand up for themselves and their country. This marriage of feminism and nationalism can also be located right at the outset of her memoir. Her reading of the book "Women Heroes" (p. 1) at the age of fourteen and her interest in "Djamila Boupacha" (p. 1), a former militant woman from the Algerian National Liberation Front, disclose her eagerness to interrogate the assumption that nationalism is a masculine project. Just like admiring the Blessed Zeynab in enduring tragedies in Karbala, Zahra Hosseini adores Djamila Boupacha for her strength and endurance, and her entering "into a one-sided struggle against the occupiers of her country" (p. 1). Citing Djamila has also one more significance if one reads between the lines: it draws attention to Gisèle Halimi, the Tunisian lawyer and feminist, and Simone de Beauvoir, the French feminist and social theorist. As important figures in feminism, both of them assisted Djamila with her trial. Halimi acted as a counsel for Djamila and helped her bring her torture case to trial and Simone de Beauvoir assisted in the case publicity by writing an article in the French newspaper, *Le Monde*.

This is the first example of a series of instances in the memoir that criticize the traditional belief about the role of women in nationalism. Zahra's knowledge of how to use a G3 assault rifle and the Colt (p. 88), her wish to go to the front (p. 104), her carrying the rifle (p. 237), her willingness to be martyred for the country (p. 239), her firing the RPG (p. 468), her wanting to go back to the front despite her injuries (p. 478), her wish to go the front again after marriage (p. 605) exemplify the role of Iranian women in nationalism in addition to supportive positions during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. Anchored within such discourse, Hosseini is deconstructing the masculinist nationalism and reimagining the nation. According to Ann McClintok "If nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power, the nation-state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations and male privileges" (1995, p. 385). *Da* brings back memories of Iranian women's nationalist movements and their roles in nationalist projects. Women's roles as a continuation of domestic and maternal

responsibilities in the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war have been widely recognized and accentuated but their roles as real participants in the nation-building projects have not been discussed widely. *Da* delineates that women's role in the Iran-Iraq war was more than mothering soldiers and supportive positions behind the front such as nursing, driving, managing ammunitions and cooking. The women she conceives are no different from men in defending the country. This sentiment is echoed in her actions throughout the memoir and her father's advice at the beginning of the invasion: "Yes, today everyone must help. The difference between men and women don't matter anymore. Everybody must lend a hand in the defense... We can't let a foreigner invade our country... Both men and women must stop this from happening" (p. 69). Hosseini's definition of nationalism can be best described as what Tavakoli-Targhi (200, p. 113) explains as "the participation of the nation's children (both male and female) in determining the future of the motherland." The connection between nationalism and *écriture féminine* in *Da* lies not only in deconstructing the masculinist nationalism and including women in nationalist discourses but also in bringing to light women's own cultural negotiations of the nation and nationalism.

CONCLUSION

As the *écriture féminine* in the genre of war literature, *Da* (2014) demonstrates that *écriture féminine* is not a better or worse, and stronger or weaker writing structure. It is just different writing that bypasses the masculine structure through introducing elements that are strange and perhaps unknown for the general male writers. It is the insertion of these elements that make it vulnerable to critics' attacks. For instance, *Da*'s 'descriptive passages' and 'foregrounding the narrator's feelings and emotions' might cause contention between critics arguing that the events of the war would be overshadowed. What they fail to understand is that these elements help Hosseini to establish a feminine writing structure of the previously male-produced literature in which women had no significant presence. This feminine writing raises the status of mothers and women, and tends to include women in discourses from which they were absent. *Écriture féminine* is, indeed, the locus that reconstructs female identity and brings women back to the fore from the margins. Writings such as *Da* are rebellious against the fixed and definite characterization of phallogocentrism. *Da* (2014) protests against this phallogocentrism and patrilineal culture that inferiorize women. However, unlike the male-produced war literature where women are either excluded or portrayed within the arena of domesticity as mothers and wives of soldiers or martyrs, the men in *Da* share equal presence and importance with women. This implies that although it is feminine writing, *Da* does not exclude men and does not give them a lesser status. This is illustrative of *écriture féminine*'s disinclination towards essentialism and its affirmation of plurality and multiplicity.

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