

## The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story

*Hanan Al-Shaykh , ????? ????? , Roger Allen (Translator)*

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**The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story** Hanan Al-Shaykh , ????? ????? , Roger Allen (Translator)

In a masterly act of literary transformation, celebrated novelist Hanan al-Shaykh re-creates the dramatic life and times of her mother, Kamila.

Married at a young age against her will, Kamila soon fell head-over-heels in love with another man—and was thus forced to choose between her children and her lover. As the narrative unfolds through the years—from the bazaars, cinemas and apartments of 1930s Beirut to its war-torn streets decades later—we follow this passionate woman as she survives the tragedies and celebrates the triumphs of a life lived to the very fullest.

## The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story Details


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# From Reader Review **The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story** for online ebook

## **Annalie says**

Throughout the book, I was amazed at how different the culture and outlook on life was. It was very interesting to read a true account and gain a new perspective on life in the Middle East. What made the book less enjoyable is that, although I had great empathy with Kamila, I found her silly and immature. I think this may be because women were treated like eternal children in that male-dominated society and of course many women would just not grow up. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have under those circumstances. It enraged me to read about those young girls being forced into marriage with older men. To me this is sexual abuse of children, plain and simple. And the worst of all is that it is still happening today. I feel strongly about respecting other people's cultures, but you have to draw the line somewhere!

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## **Bettie? says**

New York, 2001 - As Hanan al-Shaykh travels through the streets of Manhattan to her daughter's wedding her mind is elsewhere.

Remembering her own secret ceremony some thirty years ago, her thoughts turn to her mother, Kamila, who was sacrificed into marriage: her absent mother who, in recent, reconciled years, has pleaded with Hanan, her daughter the writer, to tell this story.

Lebanon, 1934 - Kamila is nine years old when she is taken from the poverty of her childhood village in southern Lebanon to Beirut.

Though she has never learned to read or write, stories, poetry and films are her passion, and she longs to go to school. Instead, she is to lead a life of domestic servitude-and worse, she has been secretly betrothed to her brother-in-law, Abu-Hussein, a man eighteen years her senior.

A welcome escape from the strict household, Kamila is apprenticed to Fatme the seamstress. One day Kamila catches sight of a beautiful young man, Muhammad, sitting by a fountain. At the age of thirteen, for what will be the first and only time in her life, Kamila falls deeply in love. The following year, to her fury and anguish, Kamila is married to Abu-Hussein. That night, he forces himself upon his child-bride and a daughter is conceived: four years later, Kamila's second daughter, Hanan, is born. In secret, but risking everything, Kamila continues to see Muhammad. But in choosing to follow her heart, she must also, agonisingly, leave behind her beloved daughters.

Beautifully evoking the fabric of life in Lebanon, *The Locust and the Bird* is a remarkable and intensely moving memoir. Told in a voice that is entirely distinctive and authentic, this unique portrait of the life of one woman gives us an astonishing insight into the lives of many others in the Arab world.

First broadcast in 2009 on BBC Radio 4.

‘A fearless, pioneering writer’  
( Independent )

'An important Arab voice which must be heard now'  
( Giles Coren, The Times )

'The Locust and the Bird puts to rest, with much gentleness and ease, every stereotype about the Arab world and its women to which we have long grown attached in its nakedly truthful and wonderfully authentic rendition of the life of the ordinary and yet remarkable Kamila, this memoir digs deep into themes of oppression, marginalization, poverty, love and survival as Kamila herself lived them: With humour, wit with extraordinary imaginativeness and barefaced fallibility.'

( An Nahar Newspaper, Beirut )

### About the Author:

Hanan al-Shaykh is one of the contemporary Arab world's most acclaimed writers. She was born in Lebanon and brought up in Beirut, before going to Cairo to receive her education. She was a successful journalist in Beirut, then later lived in the Arabian Gulf, before moving to London.

She is the author of the collection 'I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops' and her novels include 'The Story of Zahra, Women of Sand and Myrrh', 'Beirut Blues' and, most recently, 'Only in London', which was shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize. She lives in London.

## Salam Husari says

[illegible]

## Neda says

[illegible]

## Amani says

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### Wissam Mattar says

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### Kristin says

I'm pretty sure this is the only book I've read that has made me a little afraid that I would actually die from the emotional upheaval it made me feel. Would some important vein burst in my brain from the physical pressure of my sympathetic co-experiencing of engulfing sorrow? However, it is not depressing. It's heart-wrenching--there's a vast difference. I cannot adequately summarize or review this book. In fact, it's such a personal biography that I would even say it's private-- I feel that I've violated someone's privacy. I will conclude only with the fact that the photo at the end of Kamila and Muhammad, beautiful and in love, clandestinely taken in some hideaway surrounded no doubt by the terrible forces bent on separating them, will be engraved in my memory forever. I am traumatized.

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### Bloodorange says

The writing deserved more than 2 stars, I think, but the book was frustrating in many ways and I did not enjoy it.

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### Ismail Elshareef says

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book--so much so that I read it in one sitting, that's how good it was.

Kamila, the protagonist, grows up poor in a Southern Lebanese village. Her mother, desperate to make ends meet, picks up and moves to Beirut to stay with her kin--a move that proves pivotal in Kamila's story. Ricocheting from one heartbreaking tragedy to another, Kamila finds solace in a forbidden love and Egyptian films starring Mohammed Abdel Wahab. She is, in effect, Juliet who is separated from her Romeo by traditions and duty, learning how to behave and think from the deceptive realities of movies. She has a keen sense of survival that renders her at times unsympathetic, but most importantly, a self-preservationist. Defying religion, society and expectations, Kamila lived out her choices only to find regret tormenting her in

her autumn years.

What breaks my heart and what makes this story relevant and universal is that Kamila's story is the reality of so many women and some men living today in patriarchal, religious societies. In some respect, Lebanon of 1934 is eerily similar to Saudi Arabia of 2009. Kamila's story, told beautifully by her daughter, is a window into the world of those tormented souls who carry on happily yet their hearts are heavy with despair and their spirits are acquiescent to defeat.

It's a fascinating and a depressing world, all in the same measure. Peak in, it's guaranteed to move you one way or another.

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### **Maha says**

The best of Hanan Al-Shaykh - a true gem. She surprises us, not only with its details, description of places and characters, but with the truth that she shares with us. A friend read the English translation and found it interesting and excellent. The novel also informs us about life in Lebanon in the first half of the twentieth century.

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### **Jalilah says**

This is one of the most beautiful love stories I've ever read, and it is not at all a romance novel! In fact it's not even fiction!

The Locust and the Bird is non-fiction, the telling of author Hana Al-Shaykh's own mother's life.

Nevertheless it reads like a novel. Interestingly enough, a complaint I've often read about Al-Shaykh's novels is that her characters are not likeable, but that is not at all the case here! When her mother Kamila was a little girl growing up in the south of Lebanon, so poor that she had to gather left over wheat from the fields for her meals, I just wanted to adopt her!

After moving to Beirut with her mother and brother she is not allowed to go to school, rather sent to work with a seamstress. It is here that she meets a young student named Mohammed who will become the love of her life. After her older sister dies, she is forced at age 14 to marry her decades older brother in law. As a reader I just wanted to rescue her! I laughed at her mischievous and rebellious antics to get away from her controlling family. As a young woman I applauded her bravery to leave her husband to be with her true love. As she matures into a witty, clever and resourceful woman she becomes the type of person that everyone would want to have for a friend. A large part of this story takes place in pre-civil war Lebanon. One gets a good feeling what the Beirut, once named "the Paris of the Middle East" must have been like. Reading this book took me on a voyage back in time to a different place leaving me with the feeling that Kamila is someone I've known very well. Highly recommended for everyone interested in reading something different!

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### **Paulina Sanchez says**

This memoir spoke to me in so many ways! Let's explore them:

I was never to read and write as I am now, if for no other reason but to write my story.

Let me tell you how it hurts when a piece of wood and a piece of lead defeat me. -Kamila,

## Hanan's mother

**Literacy:** I have the privilege to be able to write these words, and you have the same privilege in being able to read them and understand them. I can communicate with people who are thousands of miles away just through a piece of paper and pen or electronic means. There are people in this world who don't have those privileges and who don't have ways to tell their stories other than by narrating them. This memoir is basically a daughter giving her mother a voice through her ability to write. It's a beautiful memoir because it encompasses everything that her mother wanted to tell to the world, her story of hardship but also of deep and unbreakable love.

**Mother & Daughter Relationships:** As I said above, it's a story where the daughter tells her mother's story, and she does so at the insistence of her mother. Hanan has always thought that she knew her mother's story of how she divorced her father and gave up both Hanan and her sister Fatima. What Hanan doesn't know is the rest of the story, the parts that show her mother's reasons for leaving her behind. We sometimes assume that we know what happened, and that might be true, we might know a fact or two, but the context can make all the difference. In this memoir, that context is everything.

**The power of women:** Even when at their lowest, the women in this memoir found ways to get what they needed and wanted. It wasn't always the best way to go about things, lying, stealing, blackmailing, but they found a way. I found myself judging these women for doing these things but then I thought "what other way was there?" and I couldn't find an answer. It's an incredibly difficult situation they lived in, one where they had no power, where men dictated everything that they got to do in their lives, and where only other men could save them (in most situations).

**Lebanon:** I had never before read a book set in Lebanon, through this book I got to know a bit about the culture and history of Beirut and what happened there from the 1930s to the 1970s. History is usually focused on the "big" players, the United States, Germany, the UK, etc., but the histories of other countries is just as important, as well as the perspectives of the people who lived during those times and who were not exactly in the middle of the action.

This book really got me thinking, it's a story of hardship yes, but also of overcoming every obstacle and hanging on to love as best as you can.

I highly recommend it to everyone.

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## **Tamara Agha-Jaffar says**

**In The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story,** the contemporary Arab author Hanan Al-Shaykh writes the biography of Kamila, her mother. Al-Shaykh tells the story of her mother's childhood in 1930s Lebanon, her forced marriage at the age of 14, her illicit love affair with the man who later became her second husband, her divorce from her first husband, her second marriage, her widowhood and its aftermath. The narrative construction is unusual in that Al-Shaykh tells her mother's story from her mother's point of view, through her mother's voice.

We experience the Arab world through Kamila's lens. She is a child forced into a marriage with her much older brother-in-law after the death of his first wife. Although she is defiant and resourceful, she is also

immature. She never seems to grow up or to assume the responsibilities of an adult—even after giving birth to seven children. Denied access to schooling, she remains illiterate all her life. Her knowledge of the world and how it operates is influenced by what she sees on the movie screen. She confuses the real world with the glitz of Egyptian movies and the lives of Egyptian movie stars. Struggling with debt after the death of her second husband, Kamila does what she has been doing all her life: she relies on her good looks and charm to get her through her difficulties.

In her later years, Kamila comes to regret the choices she made in life, including abandoning her two oldest daughters in order to be with the man she loves. But in spite of her remorse, she does not come across as a sympathetic or endearing character. She is self-absorbed, selfish, and has no qualms about using people—especially her children—to achieve her goals.

Because Kamila is illiterate, she has to rely on those around her to shape her worldview. As a consequence, she espouses a narrow worldview with very limited options. It is not surprising she is incompetent when it comes to managing a budget, running a household, or raising children. She has never been taught. And what female role models she does have were denied the same opportunities, rendering them equally incompetent.

Kamila's tragedy lies in the fact she is never allowed to reach her potential. She has a romantic spirit that longs to soar. She loves the language of poetry, composing poems and committing them to memory but unable to write them down. Her family insists on keeping her illiterate, a situation she regrets all of her life. Forced into an unwanted marriage to a man nearly two decades her senior, castigated as a fallen woman when she finally divorces him and marries the man she loves, she spends most of her adult years pregnant with one child after another. There is little room for individual growth or development under such challenging circumstances. But Kamila has the last word when she convinces her daughter to put pen to paper and write her life story.

Unfortunately, Al-Shaykh's biography of her mother rambles, its prose simplistic and choppy. It reads like a diary—a series of unfocused, disconnected, episodic events that lack coherence or an organizational plan. But the book does have value in that it illustrates the deleterious impact on women when society denies them choice and opportunity for growth and development.

Throughout history, different cultures have oppressed girls and severely constrained their mobility and intellectual development. Whether they were kept barefoot, ignorant, or pregnant; subjected to the horrors of female infanticide, foot binding, or genital mutilation; bartered or sold off to an early marriage or prostitution, girls and women have historically been treated as pawns to be used and abused for the economic benefit of their families.

Kamila is no exception. Her childhood, upbringing, and experience severely hamper the range of possibilities available to her as a young girl growing up in that environment at that time and in that place. Unfortunately, many young girls throughout the world continue to experience the same harsh restraints—restraints that deprive them of the ability to thrive and flourish. As such, *The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story* serves as a cautionary tale of wasted potential and thwarted aspirations.

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**Noor says**

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