



Hanan al-Shaykh

“God, It’s as Though You’re Sewing a Dress For a Flea”

Link to Text: <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/god-its-as-though-youre-sewing-a-dress-for-a-flea>

Author Bio:

Writer **Hanan al-Shaykh** was born into a Shia' Muslim family in Lebanon. She received her primary education in Beirut and left in 1975 for Egypt, where she attended the American College for Girls in Cairo. Al-Shaykh began her journalism career in Egypt before returning to Lebanon. She has also lived in Saudi Arabia and is currently residing in London.

Her short stories and novels feature primarily female characters in the face of conservative religious traditions set against the backdrop of political tensions and instability of the Lebanese civil war

Her novels include *Suicide of a Dead Man*, *The Praying Mantis*, *The Story of Zahra*, *The Women of Sand and Myrrh*, and *Beirut Blues*. She also published a short-story collection, *I Sweep the Sun Off Rooftops*, and two plays, *Dark Afternoon Tea* and *Paper Husband*.

Translator bio:

Randa Jarrar’s work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, the *Utne Reader*, *Salon*, *Guernica*, the *Rumpus*, the *Oxford American*, *Ploughshares*, the *Sun*, and others. Her first book, the Arab-American coming of age novel *A Map of Home*, is now on many college syllabi. In 2010 she was included in the Beirut 39 project recognizing the best writers of Arab origin under the age of forty. She is a professor of creative writing and the executive director of the nonprofit Radius of Arab-American Writers.

Questions:

- What do you think the author meant by the title of a ‘God, It’s as Through You’re Sewing A Dress For a Flea’?
- Why was ‘reception day’ so important to the main character? And the space of the cabaret?
- What dynamics in Lebanese family relations (and wider society) are hinted at in the story?
- How do you understand the main character’s kleptomania?

Discuss this paragraph:

"I explain to him that my husband knows nothing about me except that I'm lazy, and how he lifts the sheets off the bed to see if my feet are clean. I add that I'm still young, not an old person like him. I catch myself before I repeat something a neighbor had once said, "my husband's got some life in his ass yet," and then I ask the honorable judge, "Just look at me: how many arm-lengths of fabric do you think I need to make a dress?" By this, I mean that I am quite short in stature, and that just two yards, or arm-lengths, of expensive fabric are needed to make me a dress: therefore, it shouldn't be said that my husband is generous, or that he buys me fabric. The judge says, "Oh, dear God," after he completely despairs of being able to advise me. But my brother Grim never stops shouting at me: "Have you not a single drop of shame? God, it's as though you're sewing a dress for a flea. Everyone's gossiping about how big a thief you are."

→ What commentary is Al-Shaykh making on the main character's evolution from girlhood into the role of a wife?

→ Do you think anything has been lost in the translation of this story?

Further reading: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2009/jun/06/beirut-hanan-al-shaykh>