

Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence, and Other Stories Study Guide

Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence, and Other Stories by Layla Abu Zayd

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence, and Other Stories Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Introduction.....	4
The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 1.....	6
The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 2.....	7
The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 3.....	8
The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 4.....	10
The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 5.....	12
A House in the Woods, and A Vacation.....	14
The Discontented, and Divorce.....	16
Silence, and Dinner in the Black Market.....	17
The Stranger, and Out of Work.....	18
Characters.....	19
Objects/Places.....	22
Themes.....	24
Style.....	26
Quotes.....	28
Topics for Discussion.....	30

Plot Summary

Year of the Elephant is a novella (along with several short stories) written by author and journalist Leila Abouzeid. It was based upon real-life accounts of people that Abouzeid met during her years in Morocco.

The novella "Year of the Elephant" centered on Zahra, a peasant woman. At the opening of the story, she had been devastated with the news that Mohammed, her husband, had divorced her. In contemporary Morocco, divorce was nearly a death sentence. Zahra was shunned by the community, and was stripped of all marital possessions, save for a small stipend and a single room in a home she received as an inheritance. Having nowhere to go, Zahra returned to her home town.

The return trip jogged Zahra's memory. She had a happy childhood, though she was raised by her grandparents after her own parents refused to care for her. As a young woman, she had an arranged marriage, without her consent. After a year of being unable to get pregnant, Zahra and husband Mohammed moved to Casablanca. There, the couple became involved in the movement for Moroccan independence from France. Zahra traveled with a wanted freedom fighter named Faqih in order to get him out of danger. Besides this, Zahra smuggled guns, information, and other freedom fighters in her time helping the resistance.

In Casablanca, Zahra helped to organize a women's literacy group and donation drive, with Faqih's wife Roukia and another woman named Safia. After independence was achieved, Mohammed was given a caid, a prestigious government appointment, and given a large mansion and estate. Mohammed was changed by his newfound power and wealth, becoming imperial and adopting European ways, and he clashed with Zahra who clung to her peasant customs. Mohammed responded by divorcing Zahra.

Zahra was full of despair at first; she had no education or skills to make a living with. She remembered she could spin wool, but after many hours spinning wool, she barely earned anything. Several factories also rejected Zahra for her lack of education.

Zahra was eventually encouraged by her home town faqih, or spiritual adviser, and through faith in God she was able to weather her personal storm. She got a job as a cleaning lady, and in the end she vowed to forget the past. She developed an independent spirit and was stronger because of her ordeal.



Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

Elizabeth Fernea provides the introduction. She praises *The Year of the Elephant* as "an event in cross-cultural literary history." It was the first novel written by a Moroccan woman in Arabic to be translated into English. There have been other acclaimed pieces of Moroccan literature, the vast majority by men, but *The Year of the Elephant* was different. Though it also dealt with Moroccan struggles for independence from the French, like other literature, it adopted the perspective of a working-class woman. Though Abouzeid was trilingual, she chose to write in Arabic for personal and political reasons.

Abouzeid was born in 1950 to a middle-class family in the village of El Ksiba. She was six when in 1956 Morocco attained its independence from France. Her father was involved in the Moroccan resistance efforts. She attended journalism school, and later worked as a journalist, the host of a popular radio talk show, and a television news anchor.

Morocco has a unique history. Before colonialism, it was an alliance of a central government (the makhzen) and several tribes who were largely independent and made their own laws, the siba. Moroccan forces had battled French and Spanish forces for most of the 19th century, and it was only in 1912 when Morocco was subdued and made a co-protectorate by France and Spain. But Moroccan nationalists never stopped resisting, most famously in the form of the "Rif rebellion." The Sultan of Morocco himself also resisted, and was not just a puppet of Europe. Morocco gained its independence formally in 1956.

The Year of the Elephant makes reference to the year in which the Prophet Muhammad was born, 570 AD. In that year, an army attacked Mecca, using elephants. The elephants refused to enter the town to destroy it. Then, great flocks of birds appeared to drop clay pellets on the army to drive it back. In making "The Year of the Elephant" her title, author Abouzeid is saying that Morocco's independence was won by all the common people of Morocco, who were like the many common birds that turned away the great army.

In 1956, when Morocco was freed, the popular Sultan returned to the country from exile and was greeted like a returning hero. He gave a congratulatory speech that day and delivered it in Arabic, which was an important choice because Arabic was the language of the common man, whereas French was the language of commerce and of the powerful. Arabic itself was a type of resistance against colonial rule.

In the mid 1950s, Morocco had an educational crisis. Many wanted to revert public education to being taught in Arabic, as part of a return to a cultural identity. But French was ingrained in education and curriculum, and the move would be a very difficult and



costly one. Administrators eventually made a compromise, and adopted a bilingual stance, accepting of both Arabic and French. This is the period the author Abouzeid grew up in, the product of both Arabic and French education. Abouzeid early on embraced Arabic rather than French for her radio shows and books.

The Year of the Elephant was written with both classic Arabic and a vernacular dialect for dialogue. This was an innovation of Abouzeid's, and was her attempt to present both the "old" (colonized Morocco, the language of religion and education) and "new" (the vernacular now spoken by all).

The Year of the Elephant is also a feminist text. But Abouzeid displays a particularly Muslim/Eastern feminism that Western feminists may not agree with. The protagonist of "Year," Zahra, does not display the kind of independence a Western feminist might. While feminists of the world are united in a search for justice, "Year" shows that there can be different kinds of feminism.



The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 1

The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

The narrator (Zahra) returned to her home town after a long absence. She felt like a stranger, and was full of despair and anxiety. The source of her despair was the fact that her husband recently sat her down and told her he was divorcing her. This was a terrible blow for a Moroccan woman. To further complicate Zahra's position, her close family members all died, and she was alone except for a few distant relatives.

The town was just flooded, and Zahra compared the devastation of the town to her own inner turmoil. Images of the flood caused Zahra to remember the Jewish merchants she used to know in the town, especially a woman named Rahma. She was a larger-than-life figure, and she seemed to have a strange power about her. The children of the village, including Zahra, thought she was a witch. The rumor was that Rahma had a "magic room" in her home, where she kept mischievous children, and also relics of great power.

Rahma intrigued Zahra, to the point that Zahra vowed to discover Rahma's secrets by befriending Rahma's daughter. After months of this friendship, Zahra is invited into Rahma's home. In Rahma's home there are several locked doors, and Zahra swore she heard fantastic creatures clawing and stomping behind the doors. Such was the magic of childhood. Zahra contrasts this episode to a time, much later, when adult Zahra happened to meet Rahma's daughter on the street, baby in her arms. She looked haggard and emaciated, and Zahra wondered at what life had done to her to change her so completely from the little girl she knew.

A single room in Rahma's house made up the totality of Zahra's possessions in the world; this room was her only inheritance. Zahra visited the current occupant of the room, and struggled to tell her the news of her divorce, and of her need for the room back. The occupant agreed to vacate the room shortly. In the meantime, Zahra didn't have a place to sleep, so in desperation she visited the local "faqih" or holy man at the shrine. He was largely unchanged from how she remembered him in her youth. Zahra cried as she explained her divorce.

Zahra and the faqih had an exchange, with Zahra doubting God, doubting Moroccan independence, doubting herself, and in turn the faqih doing his best to assure and comfort Zahra. In the end, the faqih gave Zahra a mattress, and she slept in the shrine for the night. In the morning, the faqih gave her the mattress to take to her room.



The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 2

The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Zahra next spoke of her childhood. She had the heritage of both peasants (farmers) and townfolk. Her family, along with the town, made a living by growing orchards, and orchard thieves made the nights very dangerous. Although Zahra's father treated her as a favorite, he was still a violent and unpredictable man, and she was afraid of him. As for her mother, Zahra contends that she felt completely indifferent towards her, like a stranger.

However, Zahra was mostly raised by her ancient grandfather and grandmother. Her grandparents let her do whatever she wished, and she had a reasonably free and happy childhood. But Zahra thought of her childhood home, and realizes she cannot go back there. Her grandparents had long since died, and the house has been parceled out to many immigrant families.

Zahra remembered an idyllic garden, where she would be pushed on a swing and laugh endlessly; this child had no idea of the hardships of adulthood. Where childhood was an "oasis" to Zahra, adulthood was a "desert." Zahra remembered helping her grandmother spin and comb wool.

Zahra spent her present time isolated in her room, irritated, antisocial. The women gossiped about her, but Zahra didn't care; she felt like a stronger person than she was before. One day, Zahra visited the tomb of her grandfather, and she was filled with serenity and energy.

Zahra's thoughts turned to her marriage. She was not consulted, and her consent was not asked for. Her husband simply saw her, and asked her grandfather for her. Zahra spent the lead-up to the ceremony weeping privately and avoiding her family. She spent a year in the house of her in-laws without venturing outside. Her only role, it seemed, was to get pregnant, and she failed to do so despite the in-laws' various herbal remedies and potions. The husband's mother wanted the husband to divorce Zahra because of her barrenness, but he did not do so at that time.

Zahra and her husband moved to Casablanca. It was a cosmopolitan, exciting city, and Zahra enjoyed the energy of the city. Zahra recalled the violence of the Casablanca Massacre, and how she was shocked and then full of despair after the event, as if she had lost a close loved one.



The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 3

The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Zahra went to the post office to fill out her divorce papers and get the small sum of money the law afforded divorced women, enough to live off of for a hundred days. She was humiliated with the process of standing in lines. Zahra visited the open-air market, and her spirit was oppressed by the place. She visited her faqih, and expressed her frustration and despair. She wondered what on earth she would do to survive, and she provided her own answer: she could spin wool, a skill she learned from her grandmother. Her spirits were raised by the prospect that she could actually make a living.

Zahra thought next about the first days of joining the Moroccan resistance movement. One day, a stranger named Faqih (not to be confused with Zahra's spiritual adviser, the faqih) came to her home. He was a member of the resistance movement, and a friend betrayed him to the police. Zahra's husband (Mohammed) was a nationalist and sympathizer to the resistance, and so he agreed to help smuggle Faqih to safety. This involved dressing Faqih in woman's clothing, and Zahra accompanying Faqih to a town called Souk al-Arba. There they would meet a merchant named Rahal. Faqih lost a leg in a war in Vietnam, and used a steel prosthetic leg. This wound, coupled with the pain of leaving two daughters in Vietnam who will never know him, filled Faqih with rage against the French, and this is why he fought for Morocco.

Zahra and Faqih boarded a bus for Souk al-Arba. They were silent for much of the way, each lost in thought and distress. The bus passed through Rabat, a European-style city on the coast, and Zahra was taken by its beauty. She further recalled a man in Rabat she would come to know in the future, a blacksmith named Hajj Ali. He was a good-natured man who believed in Moroccan independence. When Zahra did resistance work, she sometimes stayed at his home. Hajj Ali was given a "caid" after Independence, which is a prestigious title that provides power and wealth. Hajj Ali resigned his caid after only a year, and Zahra was shocked by this resignation: who would give up such wealth and power? Zahra visited the man later, and saw that Hajj Ali was ill-suited to such a political appointment, and much more comfortable as a peasant blacksmith. Zahra came to admire Hajj Ali for his honesty and integrity.

Zahra and Faqih went from Rabat to Souk al-Arba. They found Rahal the spice merchant, recognizable because he had six fingers on one hand. Rahal guided them to his home, where they were welcomed by his wife. They all decided not to drink tea that night, because of a French boycott. That night, Faqih was led away to be smuggled north to Tangier.

Zahra next recalled her burning of a shop loyal to the French. After Faqih disappeared, Zahra developed a friendship with his wife, Roukia. Together, they carried out nationalist



plots. One of these was the burning of a shop owned by a man named Pinhas. Zahra and Roukia approached Pinhas' shop. While Pinhas was distracted, Zahra doused a basket in flammable benzene and then lit it on fire. They then ran from Pinhas and the police. Zahra was separated from Roukia and nearly captured, but a group of women helped to hide Zahra and dress her in different clothes, saving her.

Sometime later, Zahra helped to smuggle several pistols concealed in her dress to nationalists. She traveled to a town called Khemisset by bus, with pistols concealed. She was very nervous about being caught. When she arrived in Khemisset, there was an increased police presence because of a murder. Zahra hid out in a cinema, stashing the pistols under her seat. Later, she met her nationalist contact and then retrieved the pistols, dropping them off and completing her task.



The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 4

The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Zahra went to market, and spent much of her funds purchasing implements for wool spinning, in a bid to start earning her living with wool. She felt empowered and hopeful.

Her thoughts returned to her husband, and his imprisonment. She learned one night from a stranger arriving at her door, Rachid, that her husband was discovered as a nationalist sympathizer and imprisoned at a place called Al-Adir. Zahra, accompanied by Roukia, made the long bus and walking trip to this prison, and it was quite an ordeal to reach. With guards watching, Zahra greeted husband Mohammed. They could not talk politics because of the guards. Mohammed told Zahra of a man named Walter, a German guard, who would house them for the night. Walter and his Moroccan wife greeted the two women warmly, and they spent the night.

Soon after, Zahra was relieved to learn that her husband had been transferred to the Ghoubila prison in Casablanca, so that she must no longer travel so far to visit him. When she visited him in Ghoubila, Mohammed told her that freedom is near at hand. Indeed, the guards seemed more relaxed about keeping order.

Around this time, Zahra met a woman named Safia, another wife of a nationalist. They decided to hold a women's meeting, in anticipation of independence. They organized a donation drive for the cause, and they also held literacy meetings so that the illiterate peasant women could better themselves through education. During one of these women's meetings, Faqih arrived from his exile in Tangier, and everyone was very happy to see him.

However, the women told Faqih of their women's meetings, and Faqih disallowed his home to be used as a storage place for donated goods. The assumption is that Faqih was distrustful of women empowering themselves in this manner. They agreed to store the goods at Safia's house instead.

Independence soon came. The day of the declaration of freedom itself was joyous and unforgettable, filled with city-wide dancing and feasting. Soon after, the Sultan of Morocco returned from his French-imposed exile, and was greeted like a returning hero. He delivered a rousing speech about Morocco's independence, and it soon became a famous and often-quoted speech.

Mohammed was released from prison, along with many other political prisoners. Like many resistance fighters, Mohammed was rewarded by a cushy job, a caid, a government position that would result in a mansion and much wealth. Mohammed and Zahra had to move to Rabat for this caid. Before Zahra left Casablanca, she was

disgusted to discover that Safia had stolen some of the donated goods for her own use. Zahra never spoke to the woman again.



The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 5

The Year of the Elephant, Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Back to the present, Zahra was disheartened when she discovered that many hours of working wool had only resulted in a small pittance of profits. She would not be able to survive by spinning wool. She decided to leave her home town and go to Casablanca, the one town she had always loved. Her faqih questioned how an uneducated woman like Zahra could survive in the big city, but Zahra was defiant and stubborn in her decision.

Zahra next told of the deterioration of her relationship with Mohammed. Mohammed changed after Independence, as did many nationalists. He lost his peasant roots, and became an elitist with his "caid" title and luxurious new mansion. Zahra told Mohammed that he is no better than the French imperialists they just kicked out of Morocco. Mohammed became disgusted with Zahra for her peasant ways, such as not speaking French, not being a charming entertainer of guests, and eating with her hands instead of using a fork. Zahra also was not haughty or condescending with their servants, and Mohammed believed Zahra was being a low-class woman by chatting with servants. Events reached a climax when Zahra learned that Mohammed had a mistress. Zahra confronted him with the knowledge, and Mohammed slapped her.

Roukia learned of Zahra's plight, and she took Zahra to a fortune-teller. The fortune-teller assured Zahra that relief was on the way, but it was not to be. Mohammed divorced Zahra soon after, providing no reason, and Zahra was left with no possessions save her clothes and the single room she had inherited.

Zahra traveled to Casablanca, and saw Faqih and Roukia. They were very sad at the news. Faqih revealed he had obtained his own caid, in a remote and mountainous region of Morocco. Therefore, Faqih and Roukia would soon be moving, leaving Zahra even more alone.

Zahra next visited factories trying to find work. She was told again and again that there were no jobs, or that she had to provide a proper written application.

Zahra's sister and her husband learned of Zahra's divorce, and came to visit Zahra. Zahra was not friendly with her sister, who she had always found prideful and vain. Zahra's sister insisted on taking Zahra in; it was customary for family members to take in a divorced woman. However, Zahra fiercely fought for her own independence, and flatly denied her sister. Zahra's sister was enraged, and they end in estrangement.

Eventually, Zahra found work as a cleaning lady at a French cultural center. Though initially ashamed of her position, Zahra grew and matured. She became proud of her

independence and hopeful for the future. She had forgotten her past, and in doing so had developed a closer relationship with God.



A House in the Woods, and A Vacation

A House in the Woods, and A Vacation Summary and Analysis

A House in the Woods: The setting is a small village. Three young girls, sisters, played near a stream. The eldest declared that they would build a house. The girls brought pebbles from the stream to the build site. The two younger sisters waded into the stream and used their dresses to carry many pebbles.

An old man saw the sisters struggling with pebbles, so he lent them an orange sack. He then settled down under a tree for a nap, pleased by the babble of the brook and the sounds of the girls' voices.

The girls completed their house, and then the eldest declared they would gather flowers to make it pretty. While gathering flowers, one sister had fun as she chased a hornet among the flowers. The girls played a trick on the sleeping old man, pricking his nose with a pine needle and rousing him. He became angry and yelled, but his anger soon subsided. The old man gave the girls several of his oranges, which they ate greedily. Together, the old man and the three girls left the forest. The house the girls built was left in ruins.

A Vacation: It was June, and a girl's school had been let out for the day. The final girl, named Roukia, returned home, and her mother had a surprise guest: the girl's female cousin. Roukia took an instant dislike to the cousin and stormed out of the house in a tantrum.

At night, Roukia continued a nightly ritual in which she unlocked the door for her father, who always came home late from town for an unknown reason. One time when Roukia did this, she frightened away a would-be burglar. Making herself seem much braver than she really was, Roukia told the story of her clash with the burglar to her cousin, in order to frighten her.

The next day, Roukia's mother had Roukia and the cousin go out to collect thyme in the fields. Roukia and the cousin head down to the cellar to get a sack. While they were downstairs, the cellar door slammed shut and the handle fell off the door, effectively locking them in.

Roukia tried to force the door open and pick the lock with a hairpin, but nothing worked. It was very dark. Roukia and the cousin happened to stumble into each other in the dark, and both children were gripped with fear, screaming at the top of their lungs. Roukia realized that the bravado she pretended to have with her burglar story was all but disproved, and she was ashamed and angry. In this anger, Roukia conjured up the mental image of a demon. Her uncle used to frighten her by evoking this demon figure. The uncle and demon were never around at the same time; while it is unclear, the



assumption is that the uncle was in fact the demon, and that perhaps the uncle was physically or sexually abusive to Roukia.

Meanwhile, the cousin had become famished, and looked for anything to eat. She found a sack of chick peas and hungrily devoured them. In the act of eating, somehow a chick pea became lodged in one of her nostrils. Roukia used the opportunity to scare the young girl into thinking a tree would eventually grow in her nose from the pea.

At that point, the cellar door opened, and a woman found the girls. They were taken back into the house. Roukia's mother had alerted the community and was frantic about finding them. Roukia's father arrived, intent on beating Roukia, but Roukia's mother persuaded him not to. The problem of the chick pea in the nostril was solved when a woman gave the cousin a pinch of sneezing powder to inhale. The cousin sneezed and blew out the pea.



The Discontented, and Divorce

The Discontented, and Divorce Summary and Analysis

The Discontented: A state official had a chance meeting with a friend from his childhood, a janitor in the state building. They had gone in very different directions: the official had a grand living, while the janitor was mired in poverty. The friends went to the janitor's house, and the official was surprised to see that it was a dilapidated shack. The janitor only had meager possessions. The official blamed the janitor's leaving of school for his station in life, but the janitor saw his lot in life as the result of pure bad luck.

Feeling uncomfortable, the official volunteered to find the janitor a better-paying job, and urged the janitor to contact him again. Persuaded by his wife, the janitor visited the official's home. He was awed by the official's impressive luxury house and furnishings. The official offered the janitor the job of supervising peasants on a farm, which would pay much more than his current job. The janitor responded that he didn't know the first thing about farming, but the official made it clear the job would be "cushy" and not require much effort, much like the official's own job. The janitor left, and later telegraphed the official, stating that he would refuse the farm position. The official was angered at the janitor's apparent desire to remain impoverished.

Divorce: An "emaciated young man" was panicky and anxious. He drove recklessly from work to home and flew off of his motorcycle in an accident, sustaining only minor injuries. The man's brother visited him. The young man said that "life is depressing," and that his own poverty had forced him into a series of bad decisions, including leaving school and marrying a homeless woman. The brothers recalled their father, who had abandoned them when they were young by filing divorce. Their father slept with many women and left many children without a father. The young man believed the lack of a father in his life left him with psychological scars he never healed from.

The young man loudly complained about a wrinkly shirt collar, blaming his wife. The wife stood up for herself, and told the young man he should not blame others for his own choices in life. The young man was taken aback at his wife's courage. He left the home, and immediately went to a court clerk to file a "quickie" divorce, thus continuing the legacy of abandonment started by his father.



Silence, and Dinner in the Black Market

Silence, and Dinner in the Black Market Summary and Analysis

Silence: Two elderly sisters returned to a home on the day before the holy month of Ramadan. One was youthful-looking and robust; the other was sickly and thin. Silence dominated the household, and there was an unstated tension between the women. Ramadan began, in which fasting takes place during the day. The sick, thin woman took comfort in the sense of community and serenity that comes with Ramadan, while the robust sister was angry and bad-tempered. The tension came to a head when the sick, thin sister called the robust one a whore. It was revealed that the robust sister stole the husband of the sick, thin sister, causing divorce. It was further revealed that the robust sister took the sickly sister in to her home as a way of asking God for forgiveness for her adulterous sin. Not about to give her cheating sister such pleasure, the sickly sister left the home. Sometime later, the robust sister received a telegram stating that the sick sister died. The story ends with the robust sister smiling at the news.

Dinner in the Black Market: A woman called the "employee" received a visit from a woman called the "visitor." The visitor was impressively dressed, and had a charming manner about her. The visitor stated that they are old high-school classmates, and that the visitor had become the owner of an insurance company. When the employee mentioned she was on a search for a new rental apartment, the visitor stated that she had some available apartments in buildings she owned, and she invited the employee to visit her.

The employee and her husband, along with another husband and wife who are friends, paid a visit to the visitor, in her luxurious home. They were wined and dined, and the husbands praised the visitor for her hospitality and charm. However, both men discovered that all the money had been taken out of their wallets. The "visitor" was nothing more than a con woman who took on an identity to steal their money.



The Stranger, and Out of Work

The Stranger, and Out of Work Summary and Analysis

The Stranger: A man, Aziz, arrived in Fez, his childhood home. He was very nervous and couldn't sleep. He was to meet his family, but he dreaded doing so. It was eventually revealed, through memories of this man, that he was born Muslim but converted to Christianity. He had adopted the religious life and would become a priest. He recalled a time when his mother and father fought violently with himself caught in the middle. They were fighting over the father taking on a mistress and filing for divorce. It was soon after that the man started to attend religious school. Aziz also recalled his black nanny, Yasmine, who he liked very much, and who always protected him from the violence of his father.

In the morning, with great anxiety, Aziz visited the home of his parents. Yasmine, aged but recognizable, opened the door. Aziz announced he has returned home. Yasmine disappeared into the home, and reappeared with a message from his mother: Aziz is dead; he died thirty years ago. His family had forsaken him because of his conversion. Devastated, Aziz left.

Out of Work: A woman was recently out of work. When she was employed, she had a very mechanical commute to work, to the point she never was able to appreciate her own town, to "stop and smell the roses" so to speak. She now used her unemployment to wander around town. She found that much had changed in the span of a few years. Many of her neighbors had gone, and their houses had been demolished to make room for luxury apartment complexes. Many new shops had sprung up, and young people were parading in the newest fashions. Her sleepy community had transformed into a kind of bustling metropolis, and she had never noticed the change, chained as she was to her job. At the end of the story, she continued her exploration of the city outside of her own neighborhood, visiting slums as well as upscale areas, truly coming to understand her own city for the first time in 20 years.



Characters

Zahra

Zahra was the protagonist and narrator of *Year of the Elephant*. According to author Leila Abouzeid, she was a real-life person, and the events portrayed were true. Zahra was born into a peasant community dependent on orchard farming. Early on, Zahra was essentially abandoned by her mother and father, and left to be raised by her grandmother and grandfather. Zahra had a pleasant, carefree childhood, and she contrasts this with her difficult adulthood.

As a young woman, she was chosen by Mohammed for marriage, and she had no say in the matter. As a wife, she was cloistered and controlled, and expected to bear many children for her husband. The couple was unable to bear children, and they moved to Casablanca.

Zahra loved Casablanca for its energy and cosmopolitan nature. Along with her husband, Zahra became involved in the Moroccan independence movement, and she helped to smuggle information, freedom fighters, and weapons.

After independence, Zahra's relationship with Mohammed quickly deteriorated, and Mohammed suddenly informed her he was divorcing her. Near-penniless, Zahra returned to her home town, claiming her sole inheritance, a small room in a house.

Zahra was initially outraged and saddened by her divorce, but she summoned up the strength to survive, and she developed a fiercely independent spirit. She vowed to not dwell on the past, but instead look to the future. She also found comfort in her Muslim faith.

Mohammed

Mohammed was Zahra's husband. He happened to see her on the street, and believed she had the right physical attributes to suit him in marriage. He was said to be very selective about previous candidates for his wife, and found Zahra to be ideal. He asked Zahra's family for her hand in marriage, and they consented. Zahra herself was left out of the process in this arranged marriage.

Mohammed was a dedicated member of the Moroccan resistance movement, and through Mohammed, Zahra became involved in the fight for independence. Mohammed assigned her to several missions, and Zahra participated in resistant actions in part because of marital loyalty.

After independence, Mohammed was given a caid, and assigned a formerly French-controlled mansion and estate. Touring the huge home, Mohammed was giddy with his newly-assigned wealth and prestige. However, Zahra was not so convinced that a huge



home full of servants was such a great thing. Mohammed's caid and the couple's luxury drove a wedge between husband and wife. Mohammed adopted European ways of dressing and acting, including speaking French, and when Zahra clung to her peasant roots and did not embrace European customs, she was shunned and ridiculed by Mohammed.

Mohammed took on a mistress, and he slapped Zahra when she questioned the arrangement. Then, one day, Mohammed divorced Zahra. According to custom and law, Zahra was forced to depart from the home, penniless.

Faqih

Faqih was a freedom fighter whom Zahra helps to freedom. He was the husband of Roukia, whom Zahra befriends. Faqih lost his leg fighting for the French in Vietnam (Indo-China), and had been bitter and angry at France ever since.

Roukia

Roukia was the wife of Faqih. Zahra partnered with her to organize a women's literacy group and organize a donation drive to help the resistance. Roukia moved to the Atlas Mountains when Faqih received a caid for that region.

Rahma

Rahma was a Jewish woman who lived near Zahra when she was a child. Zahra believed her to be a witch, and Zahra befriended Rahma's daughter in order to get inside Rahma's home to discover her secrets.

Rahal

When Zahra escorted Faqih to protect him from the police, they sought Rahal. Rahal was a spice merchant, with a sixth finger described as "like a tumor". Rahal aided Faqih by smuggling him to Tangier, out of danger.

Hajj Ali

Hajj Ali was a good-natured blacksmith who helped Zahra when she conducted resistance activities in Rabat. Hajj Ali was given a caid for his efforts, but soon after he resigned, uncomfortable with such a title and much more comfortable as a common blacksmith.



Safia

Safia helped Roukia and Zahra organize a donation drive, collecting various household goods and jewelry from women to aid in the resistance effort. Zahra was very disappointed to one day see Safia wearing one of the donated items for herself.

Zahra's Sister

Zahra's sister was described as a beautiful woman. Her beauty caused her to be haughty and vain. Zahra's sister confronted Zahra about her divorce and insisted that she and her husband take care of Zahra. But Zahra refused her sister, remaining fiercely independent.

The Faqih

Not to be confused with the character Faqih, the faqih was the holy man at Zahra's local shrine. Zahra confessed her despair and fears about divorce to the faqih. The faqih provided spiritual comfort, and by the end Zahra leaned upon faith to help her get through her ordeal.



Objects/Places

Casablanca

Casablanca was the largest city in Morocco. Zahra lived in Casablanca for about ten years. She enjoyed its cosmopolitan feeling and big city energy.

Rabat

Rabat was the political capital of Morocco, and was described as a very pretty town on the coast. In her resistance activities, Zahra spent a good deal of time in the city. Rabat was where Hajj Ali lived.

Souk al-Arba

Souk al-Arba was the village where Faqih and Zahra traveled to, to find the spice merchant Rahal. Rahal was a resistance sympathizer, and he managed to smuggle Faqih out of danger to Tangier.

Caid

Caid was a prestigious government position that involved significant property, power, and wealth. Many freedom fighters were rewarded with caids at the end of the fight for independence, including Mohammed, Hajj Ali, and Faqih.

Year of the Elephant

Year of the Elephant refers to the year 570 AD. In that year, Mecca was attacked by an army with an elephant, but the elephant refused to march into the city. Birds also appeared to pelt the army with clay pellets.

Wool Spinning

Zahra learned how to spin and comb wool when she was very young, from her grandmother. After she was divorced, Zahra tried her hand at spinning wool for a living, but she found she could not earn nearly enough with the occupation.



Pinhas' Shop

One of the resistance activities Zahra carried out was the burning of Pinhas' Shop. Pinhas was a man who refused to stop selling European cigarettes, defying the boycott of European goods.

Al-Adir

Al-Adir was a prison. When Mohammed was arrested and tried for organizing a strike, he was imprisoned at Al-Adir. Al-Adir was very distant from Zahra's home in Casablanca, and she had to travel a long distance to visit him.

Divorce

Zahra's divorce was the central event in Year of the Elephant. In Morocco in Zahra's time, men could divorce their wives for any reason, and women had no claim to any marital property. Thus, divorce left Zahra penniless and with only a single room in which to live.

Casablanca Massacre

The Casablanca Massacre occurred in 1952, and it was a catalyst for independence. Zahra was full of shock and then grief because of the events of the massacre.



Themes

Feminism

Year of the Elephant can be read as a feminist text. Throughout the text, there was clear outrage over the treatment of divorced Moroccan women. Not only was divorce a cultural stigma—and Zahra was ostracized by local gossip because of her divorce—but divorce was also financially devastating. The root of divorce's impact was traced to education. Moroccan women, particularly peasant women, did not have the education necessary to make a decent living after their marriage was severed. The marital system was oppressive precisely because it created such dependence in women. In the story, Zahra attempted to change things by creating a women's literacy group, and in fact she learned to read and write through this group. It is clear that author Abouzeid supported increased education as a way to empower women in the developing world.

Abouzeid indicted the system of law in the country for encouraging male oppression. Zahra repeated over and over the phrase her husband left her with: "Your papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides." Full of spite, Zahra railed against a system that would reduce a woman to her "papers," and sarcastically suggested that "whatever the law provides" was in fact hardly anything at all. The law (and the culture at large) was not on the side of women, and it had to be changed.

The Price of Independence

Year of the Elephant is rife with ambivalence as to Moroccan independence. On the one hand, the ideals of self-governance and a strong national identity are clearly praised and condoned. On the other hand, cracks appeared in these ideals, and reality did not exactly resemble the dream of independence.

First, there is the issue of caids. Caids were government positions that could be described as extremely cushy. Caids came with very little actual effort or responsibility, and plenty of power, prestige, and wealth. Many freedom fighters, including Faqih and Zahra's husband Mohammed, were given caids to reward their efforts. And unfortunately, these titles engendered the very attitudes and imperialist spirit that the resistance movement had fought against. History was repeating itself, and the caids, unable to resist the allure of easy money and power, had become little better than the French colonizers before them.

Second, there is the suggestion that the "independence" fought for by Moroccan resistance fighters did not necessarily include women. When Faqih returned from exile, he learned of his wife and Zahra's efforts to organize literacy meetings and donation drives, and he made it clear he wanted none of that activity taking place in his home. Faqih was intimidated by women trying to empower themselves. Abouzeid emphasized



the irony of independence being attained at the same time that systematic oppression of women remained the same.

Betrayal

Zahra spoke often of betrayal. Naturally, the central betrayal of the narrative was her husband Mohammed's sudden proclamation of divorce. There had been little in the way of warning signs that Mohammed would take this drastic action. And of course Mohammed was well aware of the devastation divorce would cause Zahra, making his action a true betrayal in several senses of the word.

Mohammed also seemingly betrayed his people and the cause of Morocco nationalism by abusing his position as caid, and treating servants like lower-class people. Mohammed had forgotten his peasant roots, and was lost to the temptation of power and wealth, perpetuating a cycle of class oppression. Fellow resistance fighter Faqih was not immune to this temptation as well, and his self-righteous hatred towards the French gave way to the excitement of taking an easy, well-paying job in the Atlas Mountains.

Friend Safia also betrayed Zahra and the independence cause, by stealing donated items and using them for herself. Zahra intensely disliked these betrayals, and in the case of Safia, she never talked to the woman again.

Betrayal relates to Moroccan independence in general. Men fighting for ideals of justice and equality during the resistance quickly "forgot" these ideals once they were presented with the spoils of war. The women who fought alongside men were also quickly forgotten, as they were denied the equality they fought for.

Style

Perspective

As Elizabeth Fernea states in her introduction, author Leila Abouzeid was born a few years before Moroccan independence was formally achieved in 1956. Her father was a resistance fighter, and so, like the protagonist Zahra, Abouzeid was deeply affected by the resistance effort, and believed strongly in the values of self-governance and nationalism. Abouzeid's strong nationalist tendencies were also demonstrated in her choice to write in Arabic rather than English or French. She believed language was a strong cultural determinant, and her choice of Arabic showed a degree of solidarity with her native Moroccans, rather than the members of the Western world.

Abouzeid was a feminist, and much of *Year of the Elephant* was devoted to pointing out the injustice of divorce in contemporary Morocco. Abouzeid, through Zahra, expressed outrage that a woman's entire life hinged on a state of marriage that could be so easily dissolved. The entire system, including the law that provided only a pittance for a divorced woman, was to blame for this injustice. The fact that Zahra ended on a note of hope indicated that Abouzeid likely felt that progress is possible, and better days were ahead for women of the Middle East and Africa. Abouzeid advocated for increased education for women (such as the literacy meetings Zahra organized), and called for increased community among the women of the world, as ways to attain justice.

Tone

Zahra was fresh from a surprising and devastating divorce from husband Mohammed. Appropriately enough, the tone is a mixture of outrage, sadness, and defiance. Zahra was outraged at a nation and culture that could so thoroughly harm its women, emotionally, financially, and otherwise. Zahra vacillated between this outrage and despair. She didn't know what to do or where to turn; such was the plight of the divorced Moroccan woman. To compound her situation, Zahra had no living parents or grandparents to rely upon, and she was estranged from her sister whom she disliked.

Zahra's sadness and anger gradually turned to a sort of stubborn pride. She had been bruised and battered, but she emerged stronger than before. She was impoverished and ostracized because of her divorce, but at the same time she no longer was restrained by the shackles of marriage; she was no longer a part of the oppressive marital system. She was, in essence, bloodied but unbowed, and Zahra matured to a level where she learned to understand the positive aspects of her position.

Abouzeid, through Zahra, betrayed a cynical attitude toward independence. Many of her statements about life after independence were tinged with irony or sarcasm. Independence had brought many good things to the people of Morocco, but it had also provided an opportunity for some to abuse the situation. With Zahra's cynicism,



Abouzeid wondered how much progress had truly been made with independence attained, and to what extent history was simply repeating itself.

Structure

An introduction by Elizabeth Fernea provides historical context for the Year of the Elephant. Fernea offers biographical information about author Leila Abouzeid, and she provides background regarding the French colonization of Morocco and the resulting fight for independence. Fernea also points out a few themes that can be found in the work, including feminism, language differences, and generational differences.

Year of the Elephant itself is a novella divided into five chapters. After Year of the Elephant, there are eight very brief short stories. Fernea calls these stories "experimental," and indeed they are sometimes mere vignettes without any strong sense of story. The short stories are unconnected from each other as well as Year of the Elephant in terms of content and characters.

Year of the Elephant features a very fluid conception of time. The past invades the present constantly. A typical example might be Zahra, the protagonist, gazing upon a house in her home town in the present. The sight of the house would then spur the memory of a past event that is then relayed to the reader. These "flashback"-type events become even more complicated at certain times when a flashback happens within the flashback.

This chronological structure demonstrates the fact that Zahra, perhaps like the author herself as well as all the people of Morocco were forever influenced by the past, especially by their French and Spanish colonization. Wars and oppression in the past had left scars that will never fully heal, much like the French had left influences as far as the architecture of buildings and European fashion and so on.



Quotes

"[Author Leila Abouzeid] is thus a product of independent Morocco, and represents the members of the generation who came to maturity under a new central government, in a society very different from that of their parents. Year of the Elephant addresses three inter-related problems of this new generation: the issue of history, the issue of a national language and the issue of feminism." (Introduction, pages xii-xiii)

"[The Year of the Elephant] opens a small window through which western readers may glimpse not only an aspect of the realities of Moroccan women's lives, but also an aspect of the rich historical heritage and the complex reality—political, economic, linguistic—that in itself constitutes Morocco in the late 20th century." (Introduction, page xxvi)

"I come back to my hometown feeling shattered and helpless. Yesterday, anxiety was tearing me apart, but today despair is tormenting me even more. I wanted certainty, but when I found it, it only pushed me over the brink into total emptiness." (Year of the Elephant, Chapter 1, page 1)

"I pause to watch the girls. Their exuberance amazes me, so reminiscent of my own in this alley four decades earlier. If we had known then what awaited us in adulthood, we would have cherished that precious childhood joy. I tremble in fear of what the coming years hold in store for these girls." (Year of the Elephant, Chapter 1, page 10)

"As the shock [of the Casablanca Massacre] wore off, a sense of desolation replaced it, a feeling of all-pervading tragedy like the loss of a loved one, of defiance stifled by impotence. That day I lost all affection for life despite its luster of clothes and jewelry. The situation had to be changed or it was not worth living." (Year of the Elephant, Chapter 2, page 21)

"When had he [Mohammed, Zahra's husband] joined that struggle [for independence]? I don't know the exact date. The day I found out I was stunned. It was the same shock I felt when he sat down in front of me and said, 'Your papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides,' yet that earlier surprise brought pleasure, even joy, rather than pain." (Year of the Elephant, Chapter 3, page 24)

"The festivities of November 18th followed directly thereafter. What to say that could describe that day? The whole of Casablanca became one huge celebration connected by stages and loudspeakers. Songs and performances mingled with speeches, and the



aroma of tea being prepared on sidewalks filled the air." (Year of the Elephant, Chapter 4, page 49)

"As I told the Sheikh, I have forgotten the past. Completely forgotten it as if it never happened or had nothing to do with me. Nothing but vague, pale memories remain of my depression, and of the year of luxury I have no recollection at all. I call it the year of luxury in comparison with the year of the elephant, that year at the time of the Prophet." (Year of the Elephant, Chapter 5, pages 69-70)

"'Glory to God, the Supreme, the Almighty!' he whispered. He was mesmerized by the serenity of the place and its pleasant atmosphere. The girls' voices and the birds' warbling came to him in his slumber as if from a distance and lulled his senses." ("A House in the Woods," page 72)

"'If only you hadn't left school,' the official said, a note of censure in his voice. 'It was bad luck,' the custodian answered bitterly. [...] The custodian, staring straight ahead through the car's windshield, muttered to himself. 'Fortune, my cousin, lifted you to high office and dragged me to the ground, though you were once as wretched as the rest of us.'" ("The Discontented," page 80)

"The congenial atmosphere of the month of fasting imbued people's spirits with asceticism and the sweetness of devotion, and quenched their hearts with a kind of joy, as if one were lying in a field on a day in May, the scent of flowers and the blue of the heavens meeting in one's soul, cleansing it of blemishes, making it as pure and light as a breeze wafting toward the heavens." ("Silence," page 89)

"He walked, hungry to take in the city, his eyes yearning to see as much as possible, his senses reaching out to the stone-paved alleys and streets, the worn walls, the clopping mules that had carried men and goods through the streets of Fez for more than a thousand years." ("The Stranger," page 98)

Topics for Discussion

How did the feminism on display in *Year of the Elephant* differ from Western-style feminism?

What types of things did Zahra do for the Moroccan resistance? What wouldn't she do?

Describe what happened to a woman of Morocco in the late 20th century when she got divorced, as described in the book.

In what kind of emotional state did Zahra end the book? What was her outlook on life?

What was a caid? What was Zahra's opinion of the caid?

What was the meaning of the title, *The Year of the Elephant*?

How was Casablanca described in the book? What was Zahra's opinion of the city?