Re/calling Scheherazad:

Voicing Agency in Mohja Kahf's Poetry

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Abstract:

In her collection of spoken word poetry entitled *Emails from Scheherazad,* Syrian American poet, Mohja Kahf, invokes the orality of Scheherazad's storytelling to voice her agency and dispel perceived silences about Muslim women. Kahf uses the role of storyteller to strengthen discussion of misunderstood subjects like violence, desire, passion, and sex, perceived as "off limits" to Muslim women. Conducting an autobiographical reading of Kahf's poetry, I assert that her writing comes from a personal place, infused with anecdotes from her own life experiences. In surveying Mohja Kahf's inclusion of the autobiographical voice in her poetry, it becomes clear the author pushes the boundary of the autobiographical 'I' to include additional voices and vantage points, such as the third person perspective, in the sphere of life writing. Whether cast in a classroom, a PTA meeting, or in the bathroom of Sears, Kahf's poetic subjects illuminate their simultaneous maneuvering of Muslim and Syrian traditions against an American backdrop. To read her poetry in a political light, Mohja Kahf's *Emails from Scheherazad* becomes a creative, autobiographical work that uses hybridity – both in genre and identity- to humanize American Muslims. This article, therefore, traces the motif of storytelling in *Emails from Scheherazad* to determine how in autobiographical poetics, the author rejects Islamophobic critics through reclaiming one's own story. Drawing on Arab American studies scholars like Steven Salaita, Leila Ahmed, Waïl Hassan, and Nouri Gana and fusing their criticisms with research conducted by autobiographical studies scholars like Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, and Nawar al-Hassan Golley, this article bridges gaps between Middle Eastern literary studies and autobiographical studies. In doing so, it illustrates the way in which Kahf challenges discriminatory attitudes against Muslims as she stitches American Muslims into the fabric of ethnic American literature.

1 In a video performance of her poem, entitled, "Fayettville as in Fate", Syrian American writer, Mohja Kahf declares to her viewers that the way in which American Muslims and American Christians can understand one another is through the power of speech and the art of poetry. Seeking to resolve the problem of prejudice lodged at Muslims in America, the poet poses cross-cultural dialogue as a potential solution for fighting racism. In her video, an animated Mohja Kahf exclaims, "Darling, it is poetry/ Darling, I am a poet/ It is my fate/ like this, like this, to kiss/ the creases around the eyes and the eyes/ that they may recognize each other" (Kahf, *Emails* 7/ "Fayettville"). Performing in her headscarf, Kahf shatters the 'Western' notion that all Muslim women (particularly those who are veiled) are silent victims by writing herself into an American literary landscape with her own style of poetics. In the autobiographical poem, she speaks about how she has recently moved to Arkansas as an associate professor of English and

Comparative Literature at the University of Arkansas: Fayettville, using the poetic 'I' to signal her autobiographical voice. Fluctuating in tones, shouting enthusiastically, and sing-songing her way through the poem, the poet creates a more positive space for Muslim and Arab Americans in the presumably xenophobic Fayetteville. Though "Fayettville as in Fate" was first published in 1995, it is certainly more prevalent today after 9/11, perhaps explaining why it was made into a video and uploaded to YouTube for global viewership in 2009. The poetic video offers an alternative medium to print, presenting the gestures and tonal variations to the reader, in this case, the author delivers and demonstrates the politics of her poem. Kahf showcases her poem by using her persona as the poem's author to aid the delivery of her work's message. With the advancements of technology and the expansion of new media, the autobiographical 'I' humanizes Muslims while being digitally transmitted at a rapid rate.

2 To bridge the gap between white Americans, Arab Americans, non-Muslims, and Muslims, Kahf urges her readers to speak about their similarities and differences repeatedly commanding her audience: "say it, say it." By emphasizing speech as a means for cultural conflict resolution, Kahf shatters the illusion that Muslim women are unable to speak for themselves. This is further reinforced by the title of her poetic collection in which "Fayetteville as in Fate" is housed: *E-Mails From Scheherazad*, which heralded the author's arrival as an Arab American poet in 2003. Unlike monolithic stereotypes depicting the silencing of Muslim women, Kahf depicts fiery and assertive female subjects throughout her spoken-word poetry. Introducing her poetry through the reclaimed identity of Scheherazad, Kahf aptly invokes the power and force behind a literary feminist figure, who saves her court from the misguided jealousy of the tyrannical King Shahriyar in the infamous *One Thousand and One Nights* (restyled as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment* in initial English interpretations).[1] Through the storytelling power of Scheherazad (a savior figure who weaves tale after tale over a thousand and one nights to wizen her king and spouse), Kahf replaces the orientalist depictions of Muslim women as co-dependent objects with more nuanced images of Muslim women who are subjects, capable of asserting their agency. Through the language of poetry, Kahf does not just encourage Muslims, Christians, and Arabs to understand one another, but she also suggests that all Americans should

[1] Antoine Galland, Edward Lane, and Richard Burton were the first orientalists to translate *The Thousand and One Nights*. Their translations, however, are more like interpretations as they loosely adhere to linguistic constructions and plotlines. For a greater discussion about how orientalist scholars repackaged the stories for Western European consumption, see Fatema Mernissi and Eva Sallis' assessments in their respective works discussed in this study.

engage in cross-cultural understanding. Through the power of speech, Kahf advocates the written and spoken word as resistance literature – a vehicle capable of transporting all Americans (of diverse backgrounds) to a place of mutual understanding.

3 Using "Fayetteville as in Fate" as an introductory example, it is not surprising that in her poetry, there is much at stake for Kahf, who, as an Arab and Muslim American writer and professor, actively destabilizes the Western notion of Muslim women's victimhood. While her writing can be read as simultaneous personal and political, it is also feminist as she invokes Scheherazad to voice agency. In doing so, she confronts stereotypes having to do with the wearing of hijab or the invisibility of women, turning them on their head to reveal the inherent racism of those perceiving Muslims as Other. Keeping in mind autobiographical knowledge about Mohja Kahf's life, her birth in Syria, and subsequent immigration to the US, the fifty-two poems that comprise *Emails from Scheherazad* become even more impactful. Mohja Kahf, who was born in Damascus, Syria, in 1967, moved with her family to the United States in 1971 to escape the Syrian government's backlash toward those opposed to its politics. She moved to Utah when she was four, then to Indiana, until she was in the tenth grade. After that, she moved to New Jersey and completed her Ph.D. at Rutgers University. Not able to travel back to Syria because of her family's political opposition, and her husband Najib Ghadbian's active participation in opposition to the Syrian regime, she has spent time in other parts of the Middle East, with a few brief stints in Iraq as a teenager in 1984, Saudi Arabia as an exchange student in college, and, after moving to Fayettville, Arkansas, as a professor, she has regularly visited the United Arab Emirates with her husband during the summers (Drake). All of these cultural contexts and locations appear in her collection of poetry, *E-mails from Scheherazad* and her greater body of fiction. By crafting poems that discusses identity politics as they move between the Middle East and the Mid-West, Kahf creates a unique set of poems that presents hybridity for the American Muslims who discuss their religious practice against an American backdrop. Though she includes many poetic speakers, she is able to successfully create texts that move between her life experiences and identity politics, ones that resist victimizing Muslim women.

4 Many research points of interest intersect in her poetry, namely questions having to do with reading her poetry autobiographically, while also investigating the figure of Scheherazad as a feminist motif to voice one's agency and break down ethno-religious and gender barriers. Firstly, in reading her poetry as an autobiographical act, it can transcend aesthetics to become a mode of expression bearing witness. Through poetic form, Kahf creates resistance literature that

sheds light on identity politics that Middle Eastern women face while moving in-between homeland and elsewhere. A central question for this study ponders: how is poetry used as a hybrid mode of self-expression and tool for offering testimony, particularly from an intersectional identity fusing gender, culture, and religion? When surveying Kahf's inclusion of the autobiographical voice in her poetry, the author pushes the boundary of the autobiographical 'I' to also include varying voices and vantage points, such as the third person perspective, in the sphere of life writing. Ultimately, the poems of *Emails from Scheherazad* creatively fuse life writing and poetic form to birth hybridity – not just in terms of genre, but also with respect to identity as Muslims are humanized as Americans, too. Whether cast in a classroom, a PTA meeting, or the bathroom at Sears, Kahf's poetic subjects illuminate their simultaneous maneuvering of Muslim and Syrian traditions against an American backdrop. Secondly, by tracing her invocation of Scheherazad throughout her poetry, I argue that Kahf both reclaims the literary figure and recalls the power of the storyteller in each poem. By introducing her work as a series of emails from Scheherazad, which is a creative byproduct of emails exchanged in an email salon between Kahf and other 'marvelous women' beginning in 1995, Kahf foregrounds both herself and the poetic 'I' as the ultimate storyteller, who weaves tales of politics, homeland, exile, return, love, violence, religion, and the self in beautifully crafted poetic works (Kahf, *E-mails* acknowledgements). It is at this juncture between the genre of autobiography and the poetic form that I am most interested – a crossroads wherein the author recasts herself as the ultimate female, Middle Eastern storyteller, providing the reader (a stand-in for King Shahriyar) with the opportunity to confront ignorance through the morality-tales included in her poetry. Ultimately, in doing so, Kahf weaves compelling and humanizing stories about American Muslims into the fabric of ethnic American literature, adding to the rich, literary tapestry depicting diverse lives in the U.S.

Autobiographical Poetics: Intersections of life writing and poetry

5 Within the larger context of Muslim women's autobiographical narratives, it is important to differentiate the productivity of Kahf's work from the sensationalist attitudes of other Middle Eastern women writers producing material at the time of publication in 2003. Perhaps because of the increasing anti-Muslim sentiments since 9/11, some Muslim and Middle Eastern memoirists, such as Azar Nafisi, Latifah, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and hoaxers like Norma Khouri and Souad have published life narratives more congruent with Euro-American perspectives and policies

concerning Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) nations. They demonize Islam and the customs of their home countries by gazing at themselves through a 'Western' lens and worldview. With titles like *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003)*, Forbidden Love/Honor Lost* (2003), *Marriage by Force* (2004), *In the Name of Honor* (2006), and *Infidel* (2006)*,* to name a few, anxiety about Islam manifests since the writers stereotypically cast Muslim men as violent and oppressive, and Muslim women as silent and oppressed. In these narratives, the female Muslim subject is almost always portrayed as a victim, incapable of asserting her agency without the assistance of a European or American figure featured prominently in the narrative. Unquestioningly supportive of European or U.S. foreign policy, these works gaze at their respective MENA cultures from a historically western standpoint; they are neo-orientalists reviving the orientalist gaze. While, initially, the publication of Middle Eastern and Muslim women's life narratives allow many women to voice their experiences in pursuit of self-discovery, when sensationalized, some of these "escapee or victim narratives", as Mohja Kahf calls them, can serve as imperialist propaganda justifying militaristic conquest and expansion (Gana 1578). Gillian Whitlock points out that since 9/11, the demand for nonfiction, "particularly books which perpetuate negative stereotypes about Islamic men" resulted in bestsellers, since American readers were anxious to learn about the dangerous ethnic other (Whitlock 111). Similarly, Steven Salaita asserts that the growing desire for Arab American works became "too much in demand for its own good" (*Modern Arab* 4). The success of Middle Eastern women's autobiographical narratives have signaled the so-called center's need for access to 'exotic cultures' in the margins, in this case, reflecting America and Europe's needs to reaffirm the 'Third World' Muslim woman's native authenticity as part of an imperial project.

6 Standing apart from these sensationalist writers, however, is Mohja Kahf, who is a culturally conscious writer who critically engages national and transnational politics, especially pertaining to feminism and Islam. In her work, Kahf effectively creates a new vocabulary and discourse to express her position as a Muslim-Syrian-American-feminist-academic in a changing post-9/11 America. Perhaps, this is why Mohja Kahf's writing is so important, not only at the time of publication during the anti-Muslim sentiments surging after 9/11, but again today in 2017, during a Trumpian era full of executive orders and Muslim bans.[2] The global resurgence of

[2] Following the inauguration of President Donald Trump, the American president issued Executive Order 13769 on January 27, 2017, which temporarily suspended entry of refugees, travelers, and green card holders from initially seven MENA nations: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen for 90 days (120 days for most refugees appealing to the United States Refugee Admissions Program, US EO 13769). This order was immediately challenged

fascism and anti-Semitic rhetoric and politics adds urgency to Kahf's poetry, which grants her the opportunity to bear witness and speak her truth. Life writing scholars, such as Nawar Al-Hassan Golley and Gillian Whitlock, agree that in producing autobiographical material, Middle Eastern women writers are able to merge the private and domestic space with the public sector, in which they use writing and publishing as a means of coping with the events of their lives, such as childbirth, immigration, abandonment, displacement, and cultural trauma. Golley more specifically asserts in *Arab Women's Lives Retold* that in the study of Middle Eastern women's autobiographies, issues of postcolonialism, nationalism, feminism, transnationalism, political activism, and subjectivity converge in the discussion of Arab women's writing (xxvii).

7 Middle Eastern women life writers fashion their own images of the self through the retelling of their lives, thus using their voice as a creative agent of expression. This is especially critical, since as miriam cooke points out, "Arab women were thought not to write" (Golley, *Arab Women's* xv). With respect to the autobiographical articulations of decolonized and othered subjects, Chandra Mohanty, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson similarly agree that the marginalized are not merely objects of the colonizers or imperial oppressors, but are "agents of a conflicted history, inhabiting and transforming a complex social and cultural world" (Mohanty 77, Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography* xx). By writing revisionist histories and alternative testimonies, autobiographical subjects can assert agency through the writing of the self (xx). Through the act of writing, Middle Eastern women are able to question established customs and resist patriarchal limitations, while also creating anti-imperialist solidarities (Golley, *Arab Women's* xxvii). In so doing, Steven Salaita notes that ethnic American writers have the ability to challenge American hegemony through the power of the text (*Anti-Arab Racism* 147).

8 It is precisely this intersection between autobiography and poetry that has fascinated autobiographical studies scholars and literary critics alike, since many of the discussions and arguments concerning women writers reach the same conclusion: ultimately, this crossroads allows for feminist subversion of patriarchy and the assertion of agency. In Carol Muske's seminal work about *Women and Poetry*, the author invokes a question posed by Muriel Rukeyser:

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and an amended version, Executive Order 13780, was introduced on March 6, 2017, which removed Iraq from the restricted list, however deeming it necessary for "additional scrutiny" in case there is a connection with terrorist organizations (US EO 13780). Though denied as a 'Muslim ban,' because the executive orders target predominately Muslim nations and give advantage to non-Muslim religious minorities applying to USRAP, one could argue, as the State of Hawaii has in its civil suit against Trump that it violates the First and Fifth Amendments of the Constitution in its religious discrimination against Muslims and its violation of the Equal Protection and Procedural Due Process clauses (*US Hawaii vs. Trump)*

"What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open" (Muske 2). Jo Gill and Melanie Waters similarly ask in *Poetry and Autobiography*, "Does widening the term 'autobiography' to create a larger, more inclusive field of 'life writing' as has been common and useful of late, bring poetry within the same fold as conventional (prose) forms or does it leave poetry still marginalized, still pushed to the edge of an otherwise-expanding practice?" (Gill and Waters 1). These questions all seek to determine the relationship between poetry and autobiography, ultimately exploring various modes of expression rooted in the *self* – as opposed to the role of *other*, in which women, especially Muslim women, are often cast.

9 It is an interesting discussion considering that Philippe Lejeune asserts that poetry cannot express life writing since the definition of autobiography is "a retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of his personality" (Gill and Waters 2). James Olney provides a contrasting perspective, stating, "Poetry, like psychology and philosophy, is about life, not about part of it but potentially about all of it. The truth that poetry embodies …is a whole truth" (Schenck 287). In *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Olney further adds, "When the autobiographer thinks of himself or herself as a writer and would put down "writer" (or "poet," "novelist," or "playwright") when asked for a profession, the tendency is to produce autobiography in various guises and disguises in every work…" (Olney 236). In his seminal article, "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Bios: The Ontology of Autobiography," Olney defines poetic autobiography as that which struggles with memory. For Olney, the autobiographical markers of lyric poetry struggle with this work of memory, which differentiates it from lyric poetry in general (240). This adds an interesting layer to the discussion as the act of remembering, particularly by the narrating 'I' who crafts the narrated 'I' coming through in the autobiographical poem (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 72).[3] The potential autobiographical elements of a poem become more critical as the reader considers the potentially marginalized identity of the author penning her poem.

10 Unconscious and conscious comingle to create works that could simultaneously be personal, yet devoid of any biographical markers This is particularly interesting considering expectations of 'truth-telling' in autobiographical writing. Muske asserts that for women who are often considered as other, the poetic form can allow women to bear witness and assert the self

[3] I am using Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's terms: the narrating 'I' is the one producing the narrative, while the narrated 'I' is that which comes through after narration has concluded (72). What is interesting to note here is the way in which the writer of autobiographical material is engaging in the act of remembering to recreate and narrate life story.

through poetry, yet at the same time, they can fictionalize and use creativity to write around socially-constructed confines. For example, she states "[t]he desire for a historical self and the desire for a 'true telling self,' or 'real self,' merge into a single drama, it a dramatic voice" (Muske 4). Poetry often looks to share smaller truths as opposed to grand Truths supporting master narratives. In reference to this truth, Alex Goody adds, "[t]he conjunction of autobiography and poetry becomes important: the action of a poem has its own truth, its own shape, distance and duration, which, through the structures of sound and language, return the poem to itself." (Goody 61). Breaking from traditional autobiography, the poetic form offers an alternative truth as it communicates new meaning via the poem's overall message, rather than emphasizing life events through prose. Perhaps, it is helpful to think of a poem as more than just a mode of reading and writing, but also as an 'act' or action, granting the author license and creativity to showcase life truths, rather than represent them exactly (Muske 17). In *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story*, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley notes the formal hybridity of autobiography as it "exists somewhere on the line between fictitious narrative and historical truth" (Golley 59).[4] Recent scholarship in life writing studies seeks to push the boundaries of the genre, as well as to expand the way in which form can express the autobiographical. As a result, women, particularly those who are marginalized with intersectional identities, are able to use the vehicle of poetry to create new meaning from life experience.

Reviving Scheherazad: Storytelling as an Act of Agency

11 As a Muslim, Syrian American woman writer, Kahf diversifies the Arab Christian voices that have primarily made up Arab American literature in previous decades.[5] At the same time, she invokes the infamous Scheherazad to frame her collected poetic works, so that Muslim and Christian Arab readers alike will identify with the timeless figure. She has reawakened

[4] As Golley also notes, long before her assertions, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Paul de Man have all separated the textual 'I' from the authorial 'I' as part of a deconstructionist approach to discussing autobiographical writing (*Reading Arab* 59). In other words, the text does not need to reflect autobiographical facts, but rather, there is room for fiction that can separate the autobiographical "I" from the "I" of the writer, as Sidonie Smith also notes in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*.

[5] The absence of Arab Muslim voices in early Arab American literature is attributed to the fact that the first wave of Maronite Arabs immigrating to the U.S. began long before the Muslims, in the late 19th century. This first wave of Arab immigrants to the U.S. triggered the beginning of a more than century-long immigration for Christian Arabs, an immigration which had not been matched by Muslim Arab immigrants and refugees until after the 1948 creation of Israel, the Lebanese Civil War raging between the 1960s and 70s, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, and the 2004 Iraqi invasion (Gana 1574). Their immigration in comparison is much more recent, and the representation of Muslim Arab American writers in ethnic-American literature has exponentially increased during the last decade.

Scheherazad, but she updates her image, offering up a bolder speaker in the eponymous poem, "E-mail from Scheherazad" (2000), stating: "Hi, babe. It's Scheherazad. I'm back/ For the millennium and living in Hackensack,/ New Jersey. I tell stories for a living." (Kahf 43, lines 1-3). The poem offers a more contemporary rendering of Scheherazad, a woman who returns to the new millennium after divorcing King Shahriyar in order to tell stories and teach writing workshops in New Jersey and the U.S. Through her poetic speaker, Scheherazad, Kahf notes the power of storytelling, "That story led to story. Powers unleashed, I wound/ The thread around the pirn of night. A thousand days/ Later, we got divorced. He'd settled down" (lines 10-12). Employing imagery denoted by 'wound', 'thread', and 'pirn', Kahf analogizes storytelling to weaving, noting its "unleashed" power that embeds story within story. That power is invoked in the creativity and authority used in the act of storytelling, since the poetic 'I' identifies herself as the agent and doer of various actions: teaching, storytelling, publishing, touring, healing, and saving virgins from beheadings. Kahf's image of Scheherazad is simultaneously legendary and contemporary as she is actively engaged in an intellectual life with independence.

12 The legacy of Scheherazad, heroine and storyteller, is not just important to Kahf, but to scholars like Fatema Mernissi, Eva Sallis, Suzanne Gauch, and Nawar Al-Hassan Golley who desire to see the figure celebrated for her intellect and wit, not her aesthetics. For instance, in *Scheherazade Goes West*, Mernissi discusses Scheherazad as an intelligent force, whose independent nature European translations have obscured to match the era's stylistic preferences (Mernissi 68). Mernissi reports, "Strangely enough, the intellectual Scheherazad was lost in all these translations, apparently because the Westerners were interested in only two things: adventure and sex. And the latter was expressed only in a bizarrely restricted form confined to the language of the female body" (62). Sallis agrees with Mernissi in *Sheherazade Through the Looking Glass,* noting that in European depictions of Scheherazad, she is often penalized for her power and described in Victorian terms of "courage, wit, and penetration infinitely above her sex" (Sallis 100). Adding to this notion, Gauch points out that European rivalry with Ottoman power, in particular, prompted an objectification of Scheherazad that reduced her to nothing more than an odalisque-type seductress (Gauch xi). In her version of Scheherazad, Kahf draws from the autobiographical persona of the academic scholar and restores intelligence to the storyteller who is often stripped down to her aesthetics and sexuality. Scheherazad is therefore capable of transforming and empowering through the art of storytelling. She's a paradigm for women writers, since as Golley notes, "when a woman writes her own story down on paper or tells it to

others, she is asserting her autonomy by ordering her life into a composition and to that extent moving toward feminist consciousness, though" (*Reading Arab* 81). By embodying the role of Scheherazad throughout her collection of poetry, Kahf reminds the reader that she is simultaneously the narrating 'I' and "narrated 'I', even if the poem is not a literal retelling of Kahf's life.

13 The extraordinary power of Scheherazad transitions from belonging to an independent academic to a truth-bearing enchantress in the poem immediately following "E-mail from Scheherazad" entitled, "So You think you know Scheherazad" (2000). In the poem, Kahf discusses the awesome power of the storyteller and truth-bringer, who allows the reader to catch a mirrored glance into their own souls and discover something deeper about themselves. Kahf opens her poem, addressing the reader with an accusatory tone in the second person, "So you think she tells you bedtime stories/ that will please and soothe,/ invents fairy creatures/ who will grant you wishes/ Scheherazad invents nothing/ Scheherazad awakens/ the demons under your bed" (44, lines 1-7). This poem offers a very different Scheherazad, one who 'awakens', 'locks', and 'unleashes' the truths within (lines 6, 9, 18). Although, the poem uses the second person perspective, I find this poem to be one of her most autobiographical since it establishes Kahf's role throughout the series: the ultimate storyteller who helps the reader confront their inner values, hypocrisies, and perhaps ignorance, particularly concerning Muslim women. This is the invocation of Scheherazad the healer and teacher who exposes 'demons' and 'terrors hidden within' (lines 18-19). After running from Scheherazad, the reader identified through the second person 'you' runs through a series of corridors and rooms to escape the demons she unleashes. The imagery of corridors leading to corridors and "the room within a room within a room within a room" compounds the tension of searching for one's identity. What is significant about the sequence of rooms is that they immediately recall the frame narrative structure of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which weaves story within story to overcome King Shahriyar's ignorance with Scheherazad's morality tales (Sallis 94). Likewise, Kahf, recast as the storytelling Scheherazad, uses her spoken-word poetry to help readers uncover truths and confront their own ignorance. As a motif, the role of storyteller is important for the poetess to establish herself as an agent of her own life writing.

Refusing Invisibility: Recuperating the Hijab and Dislocating Muslim Women's Victimhood

14 As part of this literary transformation into Scheherazad, Kahf uses her pen to slay the stereotypes constantly lodged at her fellow Muslims. Her motivation for writing, in fact, stems from her conviction and belief in Islamic values. In an interview with *Islamica Magazine*, Kahf states:

> In my upbringing, the foremost factor in bringing me to my voice was religion, and the religion of Islam as manifested in my family had a modern, political Islamist orientation. Whether I agree or disagree with that worldview today, I am dismayed that it is being painted as terroristic, not only in Western media, but by secular Arabs, Arab feminists, and others who consider themselves as 'progressive.' These progressives are often extremists themselves, favoring undemocratic secular rule over democracy that gives room to Islamists, whom they see as the apocalypse. (Kahf, *Islamica Magazine* 1)

In her poetry, Kahf often creates a feminist Muslim figure who is strong and assertive; it is an image that is antithetical to the scores of Muslim women's autobiographies published in the Global North, which usually demonize Muslim men and victimize Muslim women. Kahf resists monolithic assumptions about Arab women and attitudes that reject Islam in order to reflect a feminist and progressive sensibility. In particular, she offers her work as an alternative to the works of celebrated MENA feminists such as Fatema Mernissi and Nawal El Saadawi, who are more critical of Islam (*Islamica Magazine* 1). Instead, Kahf creates a space in her text that allows for a contemporary and empowering, but still strict practice of Islam. In order to humanize Muslims in America, Kahf writes against antiquated and recycled images about Muslims, countering widely accepted racist views. This seems to be the vehicle and motivation for her poetic critiques, wherein she attempts to create a space for contemporary American Muslims who must contend with the hostilities of a post-9/11 America. Not only does she diminish impoverished views about Muslims in America, but she also shines a spotlight on her own culture and religion, aiming to, as she says, "manifest traditions, but critique them too" (*Islamic Magazine* 1).

15 In addition to her poems about Scheherazad, her hijab scene series recast Muslim women in positions of power. In her poem "*Hijab* Scene #3", Kahf discusses the perception of veiling in the United States, stating: "Would you like to join the PTA?" she asked/ tapping her clipboard with her pen./ "I would," I said, but it was no good,/ she wasn't seeing me…/ A regular American

mother next to me/ Shrugged and shook her head…/ "Dammit, Jim, I'm a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!"/—but the positronic force field of hijab/ jammed all her cosmic coordinates" (*E-mails* 25). In her poem, Kahf elucidates the negative view of Islamic veiling in America, signaling its perceived opposition to a mainstream, pop-cultural American identity with markers like 'PTA' and 'regular American', which also includes a sci-fi reference to *Star Trek* via Captain James 'Jim' Kirk and the enemy race of the Klingons. Kahf underscores a hijab-wearing Muslim woman's assumed difference from non-Muslim Americans, oscillating between her invisibility as a participatory member of the PTA and her visibility as a threatening, ethnic 'other,' not unlike a Klingon. In this instance, hijab becomes more than just a symbol of religious devotion, but a paradoxically visible/invisible barrier surrounding the wearer. The poet's use of science fiction imagery aptly troubles the 'alien' status often lodged at immigrants. Additionally, the poet explores misperceptions about the veil, comparing the veil to a 'force field' capable of 'jamming' and disabling her ability to interact and communicate with others. In witty, free-flowing poetry, Kahf discusses the perceived limitations of the veil in American society, problematizing its stigmatization, before offering solutions for interfaith dialogue in her other poems. This is not the first time that Mohja Kahf personifies the veil and attributes to it transformative powers in her body of work. Perhaps, this is also why she includes a sketch of herself while wearing the veil on the author's note in the paratext. Her attention to hijab is personal, thereby signaling her inclusion in multiple groups fusing together as American Muslim.

16 Rather than dismiss the body or present Islamic veiling as a form of hiding the body, Kahf presents the body as a central space for feminine existence, instead drawing attention to how veiling enhances presence of self and liberation from objectification as part of asserting women's agency. The normative narrative in Western European and American discourses tend to dictate that dress, especially religious dress hailing from orthodox Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities, seek to control the female subject and her body. According to Meyda Yegenoglu in "Inscribing the Other Body", European feminist scholars and philosophers alike draw on Enlightenment philosophies to regulate the body and argue that when it is unveiled, it is in its natural state, and to do otherwise is to subjugate the free individual with irrationalism (62). Many second wave feminists and non-Muslim, Euro-American feminists have used theory to argue that dress is an apparatus for social control, usually equating veiling with suffocation, and unveiling with emancipation. Rightfully so, feminist scholar Christina Ho has dubbed such scholars as "Orientalist feminists", since many Western feminists have called for the liberation of Muslim

women (without consulting them) from the perceived barbarism of their cultures, homes, and nations (Ho 433). Women's bodies – and the veil by proxy – have been the battlegrounds on which many Euro-American powers have waged imperial campaigns. They use the question of women and the 'liberation' of veiled, Muslim women to intervene in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. This discourse perfectly falls in line with Western criticisms of the veil, which often cite scholars such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu to justify critiques about clothing originating from supposedly oppressive cultures.[6] It is interesting to note that alternatively, Yegenoglu notes that Foucault's assessments about marking and stamping the body through social construction can also suggest that to unveil the body is to also mark it by a social practice that distinguishes it from the veiled body. This suggests a "materiality, for questions regarding the differences between bodies can only be meaningfully asked if the corporeality of bodies is no longer seen as a biological, natural and neutral, but always as a product" (63). Ultimately, Yegenoglu asserts that while many arguments claim that the veil is a cultural practice, so too is the act of unveiling a marker of a specific cultural practice informed by European liberalism (64).

17 Kahf on the other hand, argues in her work the opposite; examining what veiling can achieve for women – not as religious mandate or social pressure – but as a lifestyle choice to express one's faith. In a post-9/11 world, the veil is often vilified and identified as the most striking symbolic marker for Muslims, and it is not surprising that it appears as a reoccurring motif in Kahf's poetry. Through her writing, the author establishes a new Muslim identity, wherein the veil, amongst other Islamic dress, is just an outward expression of faith, and not a pejorative mascot for otherness or foreignness. About the veil, Kahf notes, "There is something deep down beautiful and dignified about it. It has brought some beautiful and joyous dimensions to my life that always amaze me" (Abdelrazek 97). In her hijab scene poems, for instance, she celebrates the veil as liberating, while rejecting the racism and objectification lodged against Muslim women in America, whose oppression is always represented by the *menacing* veil. Though her "*Hijab* Scenes" were written in 1992, they touch on the timeless critiques against the

[6] For example, following Michel Foucault's writings on the body in the 1970s, many studies asserted that the body was governed by political systems, which insisted on managing the body in social interaction as an apparatus of its control (Arthur 2). To quote Pierre Bourdieu, "the social determinations attached to a determinate position in the social space tend, through relationship to one's own body, to shape the dispositions constituting social identity" (Bourdieu 71). For Bourdieu, the body can be influenced by the social forces around it. With respect to dress, the body is especially vulnerable to the choice in dress as the meanings given to alternative styles of clothing are determinant of social, cultural and religious significations linking fashion to other social fields (Arthur 2). But many non-Muslim scholars are using this theory to claim injustices against veiling Muslim women. It is not their choice that they are veiling, but a consequence of their socially constructed sphere. This ideology is not only ignorant, but inaccurate; denying gender-neutral spaces that some veiling societies have created in the workplace and education.

veil that date back to colonialism and resurge today, particularly after heightened Islamophobia. Through her first two hijab-scene poems, Kahf undermines the notion that the veil must exclusively constitute otherness or restrictiveness, as the appearance or clothing of other Americans may also be considered just as confining. In her short "*Hijab* Scene #1" (1992), she depicts the moment in which two aesthetically-different Americans come into contact and evaluate each other, stating, "You dress strange," said a tenth-grade boy with bright blue hair/ to the new Muslim girl with the headscarf in homeroom,/ his tongue-ring clicking on the 'tr' in "strange" (*E-mails* 41, lines 1-3). There is dramatic irony in the poem wherein the boy with the blue hair and tongue rings is oblivious to his own unconventional appearance, which does not represent a mainstream American identity. Kahf ironizes the teenager's treatment of the Muslim girl who wears the hijab in homeroom. The alliteration between 'headscarf' and 'homeroom' not only link Muslim with American identities together, but they also recall 'home' for the girl who lives in America. Similarly, in "*Hijab* Scene #2" (1992), Kahf targets women's clothing in her dialogue between a non-Muslim American woman and a Muslim American woman, writing, "You people have such restrictive dress for women,"/ she said, hobbling away in three-inch heels and panty hose/ to finish out another pink-collar temp pool day" (*Emails* 42, lines 1-3). In both poems, Kahf demonstrates that American identity is not singular or monolithic in any way, which begs the question: why continue to exclude Muslims from it? As Samaa Abdurraqib notes, both poems "place expressions of Muslim identity in juxtaposition with expressions of American identity" (Abdurraqib 68). These poems both show the ways in which the representatives of non-Muslim American identity are limited in some way. While the American figures in both perceive the Muslim woman's hijab as 'strange' or 'restrictive', as Abdurraqib points out, the boy's speech is impaired by his tongue ring, while the heels and panty hose hinder the woman's ability to walk. In the second poem, the veil is seen as liberating, not restricting the movements of the wearer in the way that the temp-pooling hobbling woman experiences. Moreover, the limited social mobility of the accuser exclaiming "you people" is evident in the fact that she is working yet another "pink-collar temp pool day", which not only suggests the temporary status of her employment, but also recalls sexist issues like the the wage gap, glass ceiling, and glass escalator reserved for women in the workplace. Kahf calls attention to how non-American Muslims are oblivious about the notion that their appearance, habits, and life styles can seem just as constricting to others as the hijab seems to them. She illustrates that veiling is no different than other modes of dress and they need only serve as personal expression, rather than cultural

markers of confinement. In this way, she attempts to carve out a space for American Muslim women, pushing for an environment that does not stigmatize the veil.

18 Contrary to Western feminist and colonialist beliefs, the veil does not oppress women; rather, the confines of a patriarchal society that seeks to reduce the condition of women to either the eradication or implementation of the veil limits the mobility of women. In her essay entitled "Under Western Eyes", Chandra Mohanty critiques representations of the veil as a "unilateral" institution of oppression, questioning the generalizations of the Western feminist perspective that condemns the act of veiling as a "control" over women or a "universal" symbol of "backwardness" (Mohanty 56). She condemns Western feminism and subsequent writings about Third World women for portraying the average 'Third World' woman as leading an "essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)" (56). That is, just as colonialist men use(d) a binary equating unveiled women with being educated and modern, and veiled women with being uneducated and backward, Western feminism has also universally reduced veiling discourse to a binary of oppression and liberation within Muslim communities. In response to stereotypes about the veil, Kahf offers an alternative assessment recognizing that the social context of veiling matters: "the surrounding context can make it oppressive…where observing *hijab* includes the practice of separating women from the resources of society including education, mosques, sources of religious and spiritual guidance…[*hijab*] develops oppressive qualities" (Abdelrazek 97).

19 Within her poetry, Kahf often appropriates negative images or misperceptions about Islam and rejects them, before refashioning them to recuperate Islamic values that are not dissimilar to Christian ones. Additionally, it is also evident when she uses violent imagery to express the power of her intellect and ability to break through metaphorical barriers and silences (including what she calls Syrian silences within a literary context. Kahf, *Silences* 230). In the special edition *Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* (*MELUS*) about Arab American literature, Catherine Wagner asserts that Kahf's poetry "riskily uses violence as a figure for a powerful force in American society" (Wagner 236). In using the word 'riskily', Wagner points to the hostilities aimed at Muslims after 9/11, which unequivocally associate Islam with terrorism. Yet, I would not consider Kahf's use of violent imagery as necessarily risky, but assertive and powerful, as it undermines the negative stereotypes so often equated with Middle Easterners and Muslims. Instead, Kahf's use of violent imagery in her

poetry is an inversion of prejudicial views, the first of a series, which thread her poems together. For example, considering her poem, "*Hijab* Scene #7" (1995), Kahf creates poetry that counters American oppression with linguistic aggression. In her poem, she challenges ignorance about Muslims in America, rejecting stereotypes, while affirming her simultaneous Americanness. She uses a defensive and emphatic tone to denounce negative stereotypes that non-Muslims possess about Muslims. She begins the poem with a series of rejections repeated through 'No', which is in answer to unspoken questions that presumably lump all Muslims together as un-American: "No, I'm not bald under the scarf/ No, I'm not from that country where women can't drive cars/ No, I would not like to defect" (*E-mails* 39, lines 1-3). The repetition of 'No' consistently rejects established beliefs that demonize Muslims. In terms of identity politics, the poetic narrator proclaims, "I'm already American", indicating that she is simultaneously Muslim and American, thereby paving the way for a new hybrid identity that does not need to pit Muslims and Americans against one another. Rather, Kahf poses a way forward via identity fusion that brings Muslim and American together in a way that can bridge gaps and heal rifts. As Amal Talaat Abdelrazek notes in *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings,* hybridity in Kahf's offers "another way to resist essentialized identity politics…breaking down the center/margin dichotomy, and opening up spaces between the center and margins" (69). She continues to challenge the unnamed interlocutor (who is unworthy of corporeal representation in the poem) with her question: "What else do you need to know", thereby, reflecting independence stereotypically not attributed to Muslim women. What is more, through additional acts of opening up a bank account, buying insurance, and reserving a seat on a flight, Kahf paints the portrait of everyday activities performed everywhere in the world, also depicting Muslims as ordinary as other Americans. In this way, Kahf's writing is tied to the diaspora, rather than rooted in homeland. From this new space, wherein both Kahf and the poetic speaker exist in liminality, neither here nor there, she can forge new works from a fluid, tertiary space that refuses closure. Cultural production from the in-between space of the diaspora can act as a mode of resistance that creates new meaning about identity that in this case, fuses Muslim and American identities together.

20 In contrast to her earlier rejections of stereotypes about Islam, Kahf marks the tonal shift in her poem with a series of affirmations repeated in 'Yes', which speaks to the potential power that Muslim women can assert. For her, language is powerful and able to explode through racial barriers, when the poetic speaker states, "Yes, I speak English/ Yes, I carry explosives/They're

called words/ And if you don't get up/ Off your assumptions / They're going to blow you away" (*E-mails* 39, lines 11-16). She recuperates violent imagery as a metaphor to embody the power of her words and to assign agency to those breaking through the silences. She mocks and subverts the association with violence that many link with Muslims. In so doing, she captures in poetic form, a complex image for many Muslim Arab American women, who are strong, assertive and simultaneously Muslim and American. Ultimately, by grafting violent imagery onto a discussion about language, Kahf complicates the homogenous view of the victimized Muslim woman by demonstrating her ability to assert herself and speak. The power of speech is therefore capable of combating racism against Muslims. Just like in her poetic video "Fayettville as in Fate", Kahf relies on speech to create a bridge for cross-cultural understanding, particularly during times when Islamophobia resurges with the repugnance of racism.

21 Ultimately, through *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Kahf complicates accepted misperceptions about Muslim women in the U.S. By reclaiming the power of the storyteller, Scheherazad, she explodes through the homogenous and monolithic images of silent, oppressed Muslim women. The spectrum of poetic depictions, ranging from PTA mother to infamous storyteller, depicts each Muslim subject uniquely, already challenging the notion of a monolithic representation of Muslim women from a more flexible and fluid position in the diaspora. Following 9/11, the message is even more important, as Muslims are increasingly targeted for their difference from the American Christian majority. Yet, what Kahf points out is that these identities are not at odds and that the power to speak, share, and listen can help bring about mutual understanding and transformation between the self and the other. In fact, Muneer Ahmad has pointed out the possibilities for unification after 9/11, noting "The opportunity is there for these communities to forge necessary coalitions now, that they might endure beyond the period of immediate self-interest, and begin to imagine a shared citizenship outside the bounds of subordination" (Golley, *Arab Women's* 69). These sentiments, though written not long after the tragic events of 9/11 in 2002, echo truth in 2017's geo-political climate that has witnessed the resurgence of fascism and extreme acts of racism, particularly in response to Muslim immigrants and Syrian refugees. As the Syrian refugee crisis intensifies and the discrimination against Muslim minorities throughout the world persists, poetry like Mohja Kahf's becomes critical in humanizing Muslims, while calling for their acceptance outside the homeland. Like the legendary Scheherazad at the center of her poetry, Kahf wields the power of words and storytelling to deliver her message of cross-cultural understanding. She is truly an innovative writer drawing on

her Syrian, American, Muslim and female identities to create poetic speakers capable of breaking through stereotypes and molds. By presenting defiant and vibrant images of American Muslim women throughout her poetry, Kahf bears witness and crafts an inspiring narrative that uses hybridity to push the boundaries of American identity and the genre of autobiographical writing.

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