



Arab-American Poetic Resistance in *E-Mails From Scheherazad*

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Abstract

This paper examines poetry in the context of Arab American verse production and focuses on its essential influence in the diasporic lives of Arab Americans, particularly through a selection of poems in *E-Mails from Scheherazad* by Mohja Kahf. Through poetry, Arab American writers, such as Kahf, have given voice to the experiences, struggles, conflicts, and tragedies of their communities back home as well as in the diaspora.

Key words: Racial stereotypes; Arab-American; Inter-group relations; Diaspora poetry; Orientalism

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INTRODUCTION

Arab American poetry is one of the preferred literary expressions for portraying the essence of Arab American experiences as diasporans. In the preface to *Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing*, Munir and Mattawa (1999) argue that “within the Arab-American literary scene, there is much more poetry than fiction” (p.xiii). Wardi-Zonna and Wardi (2001) state that, in contrast to earlier Arab American writers, contemporary Arab American writers have been mostly concerned with issues of “passing, racial identity, voice, and political affiliation,” since the latter half of the twentieth century.

The system of classifying Arabs in the US, as

defined by Said (1979), is reminiscent of the colonial discourse as the outcome of Orientalism. Said contends that “Orientalism [defines] the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane and superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, underdeveloped and inferior” (p.300). Thus, the concept of Orientalism is, structured upon radical racial difference. Wardi-Zonna and Wardi (2001) believe that Orientalism continues to operate in a more strident manner in the twentieth-century US. They expound that the underlying reason for such prevalence is that Arab Americans have been silenced and made invisible as a minority. In his book *Reel Bad Arabs*, Shaheen (2001) highlights some of the disparaging descriptions of Arab women that have been circulating in the American mainstream culture. They are seen as “voiceless, featureless, and mindless” (p.129). However, the active reactions progressively springing from numerous Arab American women writers in diverse ways to counter as well as thwart the extensive dissemination of negative stereotypes. The outspoken voice of Kahf, a representative of Muslim Arab women, is evident in her poems, which place literary expressions of Arab-Americans next to those of typically stereotyped ethnic groups, who actively pursue and expose a history of oppression and a legacy of neo-colonization.

The earlier and contemporary Arab American writers have discovered, in poetry, an outlet for their difficult diasporic experiences. Furthermore, they utilize the genre as a means of defining who they are and defend their image against racial misconceptions. Some notable young Arab American poets include Naomi Shihab Nye, Etel Adnan, Suheir Hammad, and Gregory Orfalea, among others. Kahf, who is an Arab-American poet, writes poetry in which one finds acute defence of Islam and the Arab people. In her literary works, Kahf celebrates the rich Arabic culture and Islamic civilization in a complex context of her hyphenated identity, which is evidently thematized in some of her poems in *E-Mails from*

Scheherazad.

SELECTED DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF KAHF'S E-MAILS FROM SCHEHERAZAD

In her poems, Kahf (2003) depicts the unending struggles faced by Muslims to fit in the American community. Her poems reveal some of the difficulties and conflicts that these characters experience to balance their "Islamness" with their "Americanness." The challenges and conflicts of Muslim Americans can be better understood against a background of alienation from their original countries. Abdurraqib⁶ maintains that Kahf's characters are often embroiled in constant attempts to create a "concrete sense of self and of belonging" (p.449). Their endeavours get harder as they become displaced from their homeland, yet they cannot claim assimilation with a similar community in their new home (Ibid.). Abdurraqib (2009, p.451) rightfully argues that the relationship between the original home and the host country cannot be resolved, because the concept of home for people in diaspora is in constant flux.

The crux of the issues raised in her poetry is the type and extent of compromise for which Muslim Arab American have to negotiate in order to fit in. Only through such compromise can they then find some sense of belonging in a space between each half of their Arab and American hyphenated identity. However, occupants of this "third space" sometimes oscillate to either halves of their Arab American identity. Abdurraqib (2009) wonders, "[h]ow do multiple selves coexist?" (p.452) The measurement of one being a Muslim Arab or an American cannot be easily determined, because the conditions they live in have compelled them to maintain a balance between both sides of the equation, and maintaining this delicate balance is concurrently not easy to keep. This attests to the complications involved in living in the American community for Muslim Arabs.

Kahf's (1999, p.3) objective in her book, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* is to distinguish Muslim women as represented by Western stereotypes and "real Muslim women." In it, she states that the common dominant narrative underlying a wide variety of Western representations of Muslim women is that these women are "being victimized" (p.1). This image comes from the belief that Muslim women are either "submissive nonentities" or "rebellious renegades" (p.177). The destructive implication in such essentialist assumptions, according to Kahf, is that Muslim women are, thence, interpreted to have been rebellious against Islamic laws, and excited to embrace Western gender roles (Ibid.). She continues to explain that such a narrative is so diffused that it "operates at almost all levels of culture,

from high to low" (p.1). She attributes the demeaning depiction as such to "Western representations of gender, of the self, and of the foreign or other" (p.2).

Her aim in the book extends to her literary works, such as her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, as well as many of her poems. Her central purpose is to produce a realistic image of the Arab world and Islam, in general, through addressing specific American misconceptions about Arab Muslims, males and females. She retaliates in her works to the falsified and stereotyped images of Muslim women across racial, ethnic, and religious lines. Kahf (1999) believes that the only means through which "real changes in Western representations of the Muslim women" can occur is through the process of speaking back in the language of the West, a quest undertaken by Muslim women: Such action also debunks the Western myth of Muslim women being speechless submissive nonentities (p.179).

The collection's title, *E-Mails from Scheherazad*, suggests Kahf's act of resurrecting the famous character of storytelling to the contemporary settings of Arabs living in the US. It is an invocation of the storytelling legacy in *The Thousand and One Nights*. In this classical literary work, Scheherazad manages to delay her death on the hands of Shehryar by telling him stories. Her narrative skill saves her life. Kahf and many recent Arab American poets do not use their literary gift to avoid death literally in the US, but rather to powerfully resist stereotypical claims about her Islamic religion and Arabic heritage: the stereotypes that can cause the figurative death of the "real" Arab Muslims. Thus, the art of storytelling becomes a means of resistance rather than an act of survival. It stems from an urgent necessity to speak.

Kahf (2003) chooses Scheherazad as her persona to tell stories about the complex lives of Arab-Americans in a poetic form. What associates the poems in the collection most with the issue of resistance is their political and cultural nature. The collection contains poems about hijab woven in a scenic manner. She portrays several scenes of the troubles Muslim women encounter with regard to their dressings in a non-Islamic country. What is more important, I believe, is the sense of pride Kahf takes in hijab despite great objections to it in the American society. The Muslim identity is further displayed in the five prayers and regular preparation for them in "My Grandmother Washes her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears."

In her poem "E-mail from Scheherazad," the image of Scheherazad is more powerful and persistent than the original character of Scheherazad; Scheherazad's stories that are meant to rescue her from death embody the notion of "words to resist death" in contrast with "words are to die for" in Kahf's Scheherazad (2003, p.43). Such an aphoristic phrase demonstrates not only the major role played by Kahf in dismantling Western racial conceptions of the Arab world, but also the power of words, namely,

poetry. She associates the words uttered by her version of Scheherazad with resistance. Kahf's verbal resistance against misrepresentations of Muslim women is described by Macfarquhar (2011)—a columnist in *New York Times*—as a military one in “[s]he carries weapons; they are called words.” Scheherazad serves, according to Darraj (2004), as a “mythical force” articulating the “voice of the Arab woman [which] had been warped since it first made its way westwards” (p.1). It is an epitome of storytelling tradition reflecting the political and literary consciousness of many Arab American women writers.

Kahf's (2003) poems about the hijab take the form of scenes with opposing characters and dialogue weaved between them. For example in “Hijab Scene #2,” the poem reads, “‘You people have such restrictive dress for women,’ she said, hobbling away in three inch heels and panty hose” (p.42). This scene is like a slice of many slices about religious racism against hijab in non-Islamic countries. Kahf, in this poem, refers to the dilemma of Muslim women in the West in general, that is, having to reconcile their Islamic identity symbolized by the hijab with a society that is abhorrent of it. The prosaic nature of the poem stems from its conversational address and colloquial expressions. The use of colloquialism rather than formal speech in the statement made by the non-Muslim lady is ingenious on Kahf's part, for it depicts more authentically, in words, her values and beliefs system through the lady's sarcastic tone with regard to Muslim women's hijab. The ironic undertone of the poem is conveyed through the Muslim woman's observation of her non-Muslim counterpart's own self-imposed restraints, unaware of her own restrictive three-inch heels as she hobbles away (Kahf, 1999, p.42).

Kahf explores the fault-lines between veiled and unveiled Muslim American women shrouded in a multi-ethnic American society. The veiled woman gains both the respect and access to the ethnic community of African Americans on grounds of her black veil. Affiliation to such a community, therefore, is preconditioned by skin colour underneath the veil. Such criterion into a community illustrates the problematic situation veiled Muslim women face in the United States. In strictly white states such as Indiana, they tend to be racially excluded because of their dark skin, while heterogeneous communities hesitantly accept Muslim women as belonging to those of the racially oppressed. Davis, Zine, and Taylor (2007) report that in “An Interview with Mohja Kahf,” Kahf reflects upon the racism in such a “homogenous state [like] Indiana.” When unveiled, their light skin makes them dismissible immediately. Kahf, I believe, directs attention to the multiple identities Muslim women can incarnate with regard to their veiled or unveiled faces. As such, this problematizes the case for Muslim women in trying to pass their hybridized identity in the United States. She acknowledges the difficulties Muslim women face in

maintaining their Islamic identity in this country. They are confused as to how to fit in, and to which group they can belong.

Wardi-Zonna and Wardi (2011), the authors of “In Passing,” explore an important dimension of the passing of Arab Americans that is exhibited in the intricate problem of “bodies that do not adhere to protocols of racial and ethnic classifications.” It is not exclusively the colour of their bodies, rather what covers these bodies, particularly female ones. Therefore, Muslim American women differ from other ethnic minorities with regard to passing in the American society. It is the veil or the headscarf that marks them as such. In addition to the colour of their skin as a criterion for passing as Americans, their veil keeps them further apart from easy passing. In other words, their passing into the American community is determined by their skin colour latent underneath the veil. Thus, the American self has to be uncovered to decide upon admittance or dismissal is mystifying. This particular type of racial discrimination towards Muslim American women is exemplified in Kahf's “Hijab Scene #5.” The first stanza explains the first phase of classifying Muslim women by African American community:

“Assalam-O-alaikum, sister”
“Assalam-O-alaikum, ma'am”
“Assalam-O-alaikum” at the mailbox
“Assalam-O-alaikum” by the bus stop
When you're wearing *hijab*, Black men
you don't even know materialize
all over Hub City
like an army of chivalry,
opening doors, springing
into gallantry. (Kahf, 2003, p.31)

A number of complex stages typically ensue in Arab-American women's passing as Americans. In the poem, the Muslim American woman's affiliation with the white American community is difficult because of her veil. Being rejected by this community, she unknowingly passes as a part of the communities of colour. Upon reviewing “Hijab Scene #5,” Wardi-Zonna and Wardi² contend that it manifests an “unintentional passing into the African American male community.” The veiled woman is looked upon highly by African American males with regard to her “black” veil. However, the complexities of Arab racial classification is evident when the woman's privileged position in the African American society soon comes to an end; “Drop the scarf, and (if you are light) / You suddenly pass (lonely) for white” (Ibid.).

However, the speaker's position, when unveiled, is no less intricate than when veiled. Uncovered, she is not black but light-skinned; thus, she is now an outcast from the African American group. However, her light complexion will not gain her acceptance into the American mainstream chiefly due to her religious identity and Arabic roots. This again would put her back to her original essential category,

that is, a Muslim Arab. According to Suad (1999), Arabs in the US community are legally defined as Arabs, “a loaded signifier [...] essentially different and not comprehensible to the Western mind” (p.258), so, she ultimately remains in an in-between position. According to Wardi-Zonna and Wardi², this position is marked by the parenthetical markers around “lonely”; she is “excluded from both the majority culture and from communities of colour.” Such a dual racial classification distinguishes Muslim women from other ethnic women in the US community. I believe it also complicates the process of fitting in, which is of paramount importance if one is to get along with her life in the American society. In this sense, Muslim American women, particularly veiled ones, are under double racial oppression.

However, Kahf takes the issue of Muslim women’s hijab a step further. Her protagonists demonstrate that Muslim women’s sense of blessings from Islam does not lie solely in whether they are veiled, or not, because it is much deeper than that the presence or absence of a mere garment. They believe that being placed in circumstances to take off their veils is not what Western people conceive as liberation, since Muslim women’s sense of liberation comes not from physical appearance. The liberation, which they pride in, rather, stems from the equality with men guaranteed by Islam. This is also reflected, to a certain degree, in one of Kahf’s poem, “My Body Is Not Your Battleground,” emphasizing that the female physical body is not for Western or Eastern exploitation. In an article titled “Spare me the Sermon on Muslim Women,” Kahf reflects upon her personal experience as a Muslim woman in the US. She reminds her readers how being a Muslim is a wonderful blessing regardless of the hardships, trials, and tribulations inflicted by non-Islamic communities (Kahf, 2005). She goes on parading the blessings she enjoys as a Muslim woman through “veiling.” In “Spare me the Sermon,” Kahf (2005) argues, “I wear a veil when I go out. What a loss it would be for me not to have in my life this alternating structure, of covering outdoors and uncovering indoors.” Nonetheless, it is not the best part of being a Muslim woman, since many Muslim women in Islamic countries do not veil. What is more significant to her is rather the “central blessing of Islam that it affirms women’s spiritual equality with men.” For her, Islam is a spiritual matter, rather than material. In short, the core pride in the Islamic identity of Muslim American women cannot be affected. Thus, Kahf manages to dismantle outwardly as well as inwardly stereotypical images of Muslim women as being rebellious against Islamic teachings.

Abdurraqib (2009, p.455) argues that the challenge of the Arab American identity Kahf addresses in her volume of poetry is “infolded within issues of representation and community.” The issue of representation becomes tangled with the hyphenated identity of Arab Americans. They have to defend their Arab identity, which is tied up with

their homeland, against the claims of the culture into which they are assimilated. Their resistance relegates them to the Arab side of identity in the eyes of American people, which means a worse position than the one in which they are already. They virtually lose the advantage of a hyphenated identity, for hyphenation means being “Americanized.”

Kahf finds an inner resolution for the intangibility of such a challenge. According to Abdurraqib (2009, p.209), Kahf employs a strategy similar to Radhakrishnan’s¹³ strategy in finding the “Indianness within.” Being excluded in the American society, her characters look inward for a sense of identity. Furthermore, Abdurraqib⁶ (Ibid.) argues that the reader of Kahf’s poems is left with unmistakable sense that, to her characters, the community that really matters is the “‘Muslimness’ within them.” It is clear that her personal way of life is displayed by her characters, as Kahf’s *Emails* is semi-autobiographical. Abdurraqib (2009, p.450) emphasizes that Kahf “writes about existing in limbo—struggling to be a Muslim in America, while also struggling to balance her Arabness with Americanness. The crux of the issues the poetry deals with is: how much is she Arab and how much is she American.” Abdurraqib believes that Kahf’s “Muslimness” is the most “salient and stable community” for her (p.461).

In “My Grandmother Washes her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears,” Kahf (2003) demarcates another case of racial affront based on religious grounds. The Arab-American granddaughter is both the narrator and linguistic catalyst between her Arab grandmother and the American persons in the scene. The granddaughter’s correspondences to conflict parties evoke the mixture of pride and shame involved in being an “other.” Seeing the grandmother washing her feet in the sink before praying, the American characters could not hide their prejudice:

Respectable Sears matrons shake their heads and frown
as they notice what my grandmother is doing,
an affront to American porcelain,
a contamination of America Standards
by something foreign and unhygienic
requiring civic action and possible use of
disinfectant spray
They fluster about and flutter their hands and I can see
a clash of civilizations brewing in the Sears
bathroom. (Kahf, 2003. p.26)

A US-born, the granddaughter feels a rift between maintaining Islamic traditions while already assimilated with the American way of life, which is essentially different and sometimes radically opposing to such traditions. The clash of civilizations is an inevitable result from the ignorance of American “matrons” of what the grandmother is doing; they do not know that she is

performing a religious ritual. Thus, ignorance of the fault lines between American and Middle Eastern cultures causes the conflict and prejudice. Huntington (1993) views the clash of major civilizations, which include the Muslim world, as dominating the contemporary “global politics” and “the fault lines between civilizations will be battle lines of the future.” The sense of confusion is apparent when the narrator does not interpret literally the correspondences that transpire between her grandmother and the American characters: “I smile at the Midwestern women / as if my grandmother has just said something lovely about them / and shrug at my grandmother as if they had just apologized through me” (p.28). In one of her classes at Stanford University, Macfarquhar⁸ reports that Kahf has said that, “Islam makes [us] this other race.” In the United States, Muslims are treated as the “other” due to their religion.

Yet, the pride in Islam is not missed in Kahf’s devotion to the description of the performance of the *wudu*, namely, the ritual cleansing before prayers as well as the revelation of the punctual observances to prayer times. “My grandmother puts her feet in the sink / to wash them in the ritual washing for prayer, / *wudu*, / because she has to pray in the store or miss / the mandatory prayer time for Muslims” (Kahf, 2003, p.26). The granddaughter’s sense of shame originates from the biased and mocking stares of the American observant. The audacity of the grandmother to perform her “*wudu*” and prayer surpasses the granddaughter’s hesitant pride regarding her Islamic identity, which turned into admiration: “She does it with great poise” (Ibid.).

Kahf is not content to draw only such a sense of loss between one’s Islamic identity and assimilation to the American identity; she identifies its cause. The confusion of the granddaughter is not marked by shame in Islamic traditions; rather, it is an expected confusion between sharply contrasted ways of life. The narrator complains saying, “No one is fooled, but I” (p.28). In the poem *My Grandmother*, the door symbolizes the doorway to both cultures, whereas the mirror is a reflection of the narrator’s fragmented hybrid self. The stanza “Standing between the door and the mirror... in cleanliness, grooming, and decorum” shows that both parties, the grandmother and the matrons at Sears, embody values of cleanliness, grooming, and decorum. Yet, these common shared values are misinterpreted because of misinformation and lack of cultural understanding.

Kahf insists on demonstrating a sense of conflict devoid of apology of Islamic traditions, since she is cautious against being misinterpreted by Western feminists. In MacFarquhar’s article,⁸ Kahf states that the way “outsiders [...] view Muslim Americans sometimes shapes her choices as a writer.” She is aware and careful of the dangerous tendencies of Western feminists as well as of the Western public, in general, to interpret and label this sense of confusion as a marker of “an escaped

Muslim woman.” In the same article, she argues that Westerners, more often than not, reach such conjecture, because they assume that “all Arab women are dying to uncover.” Moreover, Arab American writers, as Amireh (1996) clarifies, are often “marketed” and “manipulated” by publishers “to meet the expectations and assumptions of Western Readers” (p.9). Kahf, however, is resistant to publishers’ manipulation as she continues presenting authentically courageous images of Muslim American women against racial profiling.

For Arab American writers, writing becomes a camera that captures the realities of their lives in a foreign setting, which seems more important than figuring out a place for themselves. This is particularly true especially after the 11 of September 2001 events (9/11 events). True revelations of Muslims and Arabs become central and forefront in the agenda of Arab American writers. Since the early twentieth century, the image of Arabs in the Western collective conception has grown worse. The Arabs have been portrayed in a more sinister picture than before; they have become the embodiment of terror and evil. Shaheen (2001, p.123) argues—in a detailed study of the image of Arabs in the Western culture—that the caricatures of Arab men fall into three categories: “Repulsive terrorist[s], the sinister sheik[s] or the rapacious bandit[s], who is[are] bestial, demonized, and dehumanized.” Such images become fixed in the Western collective beliefs after the 9/11 bombings. Wardi-Zonna and Wardi² argue that Arab American writers are witnesses of their “historical and political struggles regardless of how they situate themselves racially in America.” In his overview of Arab American literature, Ludescher¹⁶ determines that among the most painful issues facing Arab American writers is how to respond to the 9/11 acts of terrorism. Upon these attacks, Chalala (2001) published an article in which he explains the shock of many Arab American writers at the destruction of their long-time efforts to correct anti-Arab stereotyping in American society. He, thus, urges these writers to express their attitudes toward the attacks to the American public to “prevent a racist backlash.”

The creative Arab American writings in the late twentieth century are described by Kaldas and Mattawa¹⁸ as one of the powerful and inspiring attempts to break the silence of previous years through literary production (p.xiii). Such literary efforts are “infused with and emerging from the density of particular historical experience” (p.xiv). They contend that the “silence” does not mean that there had not been Arab American works, but the socio-political conditions for Arab American people especially in the late 1970s and post-9/11 have inspired the Arab American writers to speak once more with a different tone (p.ix). This change of tone is presented by Ludescher (2006) as a transitional phase from nostalgia—whose pioneers were the first generation of Arab immigrants—to critique. He argues that Arab

American writers have transcended the nostalgic phase, since they are faced with more pressing issues in relation to their image in the US community. He attributes the change to the fact that the third wave of Arab immigration was “highly politicized”; for the first time, Arab Americans began establishing organizations to “defend the Arab point of view and combat negative stereotypes of Arabs.” Of these organizations, the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and Arab-American Civil Rights Organization are noteworthy.

Serageldin (2004), the Egyptian-American writer, remarks that, “there has never been a time when a ‘literature of representation’ was more relevant to those of Arab or Muslim heritage” than after the 9/11 events (p.138). Edwards (2003) argues that this is reminiscent of Stuart Hall’s note on diaspora literature of how “articulation is central to the study of workings of race and culture in social formations.” Hall’s statement further emphasizes the importance of writing to the Arab American community and the effect Arab American literary voices have on the American collective view of Arabs in the US and the Middle East. Another Arab American writer who affirms Serageldin’s views is Naomi Shihab Nye. Nye (2002) attempts to come to terms with the 9/11 events, and deflate the negative aftermath on Arabs, in general, and Arab Americans, in particular, through poetry. Nye’s (2002) introduction to her poetry collection *19 Varieties of Gazelle* reveals generally Arab American writers’ faith in, intimacy with, and power of poetry:

Writers, believers in words, could not give up words when the going got rough. I found myself, as millions did, turning to poetry. [...] why should it be any surprise that people find solace in the most intimate literary genre? Poetry slows us down, cherishes small details. A large disaster erases those details. We need poetry for nourishment and for noticing, for the way language and imagery reach comfortably into experience, holding and connecting it more successfully than any news channel we could name. (Nye, 2002, p.xvi)

Negative stereotypical images of Arabs and Islam would be confirmed if Arab American writers shoulder the responsibility in clarifying that neither Islam nor the Arabic culture supports violence against innocent people. They call for eradication of generalized and critical judgments against all Muslim Arabs. The traumatic event of the 11 September 2001 and its terrible consequences on the image of Muslim Arabs are reflected upon from a liberal humanistic view in Kahf’s “We Will Continue Like Twin Towers.” In this poem, Kahf presents the collapse of the World Trade Centre as a dilemma particular not only to the American people but also to the Arab world as well. This empathetic perspective can be seen through the extended simile in the following stanzas:

Maybe they had never met before they flew
through the last air, the woman and the man
who held hands and leapt together

from the burning tower
of the World Trade Center.
Like the bride and groom of bombed Beirut
who walked across death-filled debris to marry,
even knowing that beneath their feet
everything that kills hope was being unleashed.

(Kahf, 2003, p.83)

Kahf subverts the West’s generalized view of terrorist Arabs through showing a similar crime committed against Arabs. She inserts the erstwhile neglected tragedies of the Arab world symbolized by the terror bombings in Beirut. She inclusively condemns the killings done on both sides. Although she is an Arab, she does not express the suffering experienced by her own people only. In spite of being the target of American racial hatred, Arab Americans will not correspond with the same: “If the moon enters her darkest phases, / we will continue to walk the earth / making our own small light wherever we go / I will continue to invite your children / to play with my children” (Ibid.). This attitude is being intensified by the interrogational question, “Will you continue to want your children / to come and go with mine?” (Ibid.). The concluding stanza is utterly antithetical to terrorism, violence, and hatred against humanity in large. It reveals her encompassing outlook even further especially through the optimistic tone carried by the following imagery:

We will continue to walk the earth
[...]
as dependent on each other, and as beautiful
as the flight of the woman and the man,
twin towers in my sight,
who jumped into the last air hand in hand. (Ibid.)

The “we” refers to the East and the West or Arabs and Americans in particular. Both poles are personified by “the woman” and “the man” in the previous lines. In other words, the experiences of the woman and man in the World Trade Center and in Beirut are now made one as they are referred to generally. This image could be seen as the merger of two contrasting elements, such as male–female, east–west, and Arab–American. The relationship between the East and West is made similar to that between man and woman; they are indispensable to one another, as each constitutes an integral part to a beautiful structure similar to that of the twin towers, separated but conjoined. She is able to transcend the barriers between Arab and America due to her universal sense of tragedy in the poem.

CONCLUSION

The emotions of most Arab Americans have found in literature, especially poetry, an effective outlet. Therefore, the fact remains that poetry is for the most Arab American poets a vehicle for exteriorizing deep

confusions, articulating political and cultural views, preserving their own heritage, and defending their image. One can sum Kahf's and other Arab American writers' literary efforts through recalling Stephen Daedulus' comment on personal and artistic freedom in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "When the soul of a man [or woman] is born, there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" (Joyce, 1916, p.117). The issues raised by Kahf, as discussed in my selection of her poems, are essentially drawn from the diverse experiences of Arab Muslims in the US. In most of her poetry, Kahf fashions, in words, the real situations that Arab Muslim women go through in the US. Words are her painting brushes as well as weapons. The highlighted points in the mentioned poems attest, above all things, to how poetry is a means of resistance, source of power, and impetus for change, not only for Arab-Americans or for other ethnic minorities, but also for whoever chooses that it be as such.

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