

**Hagaras an Archetype Matriarch: A Comparative Study of Ostriker's  
“The Opinion of Hagar”and Kahf’s “Hagar in the Valley”**

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## هاجر كنموذج للأمومة

دراسة مقارنة بين قصيدة أوسترايكر "رأي هاجر" وقصيدة قحف "هاجر في الوادي"

بحث مقدم من الباحثة: سهير نافع عبدالعزيز الشايع

تخصص اداب في اللغة الانجليزية

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### abstract

This paper marks out the archetype figure of Hagar, one of the most revisited examples of motherhood in the corpus of Islamic and Jewish studies. The researcher shows that both Alicia Ostriker, Jewish-American poet and critic (born 1938), and Mohja Kahf, an Arab-American poet (born 1967), attempt feminist readings of Hagar's story. The study tackles Hagar in Ostriker's poem "The Opinion of Hagar" and Kahf's "Hagar in the Valley".

Both poets retell their traditional Jewish and Muslim narratives and depend heavily on scriptures and religious heritage. Through Hagar's story, they both reflect on contemporary cultural issues; discrimination against women and the hardships faced by immigrants are two main issues that Ostriker and Kahf see in the story of Hagar. Yet each poet has a different focus and different manners based on adaptation and appropriation of the original story. The reinterpretation of Hagar's narrative depended on the poets' religious sources, as well as on each poet's reception of the narrative. The two poems of 'Hagar' are considered a recovery for the female voices that have played a significant role in the development of women's religious history in the United States of America. With intertextuality, the two poets situate the narrative of Hagar as an archetypal and mythical figure for all women and as a key text in interfaith dialogue between Judaism and Islam.

### مستخلص البحث

يسلط البحث الضوء على شخصية هاجر والتي تعتبر واحدة من الامثلة الاكثر تناولا كنموذج للأم في الدراسات اليهودية و الاسلامية. وتفترض الباحثة ان كلا الشاعرتين أليشا اوسترايكر الشاعرة والناقدة الامريكية اليهودية الاصل و مهجة قحف الشاعرة الاميركية ذات الاصول العربية قد حاولتا قراءة وتحليل قصه هاجر من وجهة نظر نسوية. الدراسة شملت قصيدة اوسترايكر "رأي هاجر" وقصيدة قحف "هاجر في الوادي". كلا الشاعرتين تناولتا القصة حسب ما لديهما من الارث الديني والكتب الدينية التي يمثلوهما. من خلال قصة هاجر عكست الشاعرتين قضايا وثقافات معاصرة ومنها التمييز ضد المرأة وما تواجهه المهاجرات من صعوبات. مع هذا نجد لكل شاعرة طريق واسلوب مختلف بالتعامل مع القصة الاصلية. حيث ان تفسير قصة هاجر قد اعتمد على خلفية الشاعرة الدينية وما تملكها من مصادر وفهم خاص لنظريات المعالجة النصية. كلا القصيدتين يمكن اعتبارهما كصوت نسائي مهم في تطور تاريخ النساء الديني في الولايات المتحدة الاميركية. فالشاعرتين قد وضعتا قصة هاجر كاسطورة دينية امام النساء وكمفتاح لحوار الثقافات بين اليهودية والاسلام.

## Hagar as an Archetype Matriarch: A Comparative Study of Ostriker's "The Opinion of Hagar" and Kahf's "Hagar in the Valley"

*"Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction. . . . We need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have never known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us."*(Adrienne Rich)<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

This paper marks out the archetypal figure of Hagar, one of the most revisited examples of motherhood in the corpus of Islamic and Jewish studies. Hagar is the second wife of Prophet Abraham, the father of all believers both in Judaism and Islam. 'Hagar' is a Biblical character in the book of Genesis. Known in Islamic tradition as Hajar which in Arabic means emigrant; she is also an important figure for Muslims; men and women alike emulate her running between two mountains, *Safa* and *Marwa*, in search of water to save her thirsty son in one of the most important rituals of Islam. For Muslims and Jews, Hajar/Hagar is the mother of Ibrahim's/Abraham's oldest son Ismail/Ishmael.<sup>2</sup>

Both Alicia Ostriker,<sup>3</sup> Jewish-American poet and critic (born 1938) and Mohja Kahf,<sup>4</sup> an Arab-American poet (born 1967) attempt feminist readings of Hajar/Hagar's story. The study tackles Hagar in Ostriker's "The Opinion of Hagar" from her Torah-based volume of prose and poetry titled *The Nakedness of Fathers: Biblical visions and Revisions* (1994). In this book Ostriker approaches the Torah with a midrashic

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<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Rich theorizes "re-vision", for her it was vital that women should return to the writings of a past steeped in the patriarchal tradition in order to expose the logic of discursive oppression in which they had long been trapped. 33

<sup>2</sup> Ibrahim is the Qur'anic spelling and pronunciation of the Prophet's name as well as Isma'il while the Torah spelling is Abram and Ishmael. The researcher adopts the English spelling for all Qur'anic and Torah names as used by Ostriker and Kahf unless they are mentioned in Qur'anic and Torah citation.

<sup>3</sup> Alicia Suskin Ostriker is a Jewish-American poet, critic, feminist and professor of religion and poetry. She is faculty member of the Drew University's low-residency poetry MFA program and the professor emerita of English at Rutgers University. In 2015, Ostriker is elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

<sup>4</sup> Mohja Kahf is an Arab-American Muslim woman writer, the author of poetry, creative nonfiction, essays, literary criticism, academic scholarship, short fiction and novel writer. She was born in Damascus, Syria and was three years old when her parents left Damascus in 1971 for the United States. Currently, she is a professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and a creative writer with many works to her name.

sensibility.<sup>5</sup> The volume contains stories in prose and poetry in which Ostriker re-imagines Torah stories from a contemporary Jewish feminist perspective. The paper also tackles Kahf's poem "Hagar in the Valley" from her Qur'anic-based volume of poetry *Hagar Poems* forthcoming in 2017.<sup>6</sup>

The story of Hagar/Hajar itself is a compilation of ancient and diverse sources. It appeared firstly in Jewish Scripture, the Torah, in the book of Genesis, then in the Qur'an, the Muslim's Scripture. Between these two Scriptures, there are similarities and differences in the story of Hagar. The paper highlights the comparison between Ostriker and Kahf's treatment of the Hagar archetype, in the two poems, relying on the Islamic and Jewish traditions. The poets' religious texts are regarded as undying sources of intertextuality in the field of literature. As the Torah and the Qur'an admittedly served as excellent sources of intertextuality, Ostriker and Kahf's poems of 'Hagar' could be viewed as dependent on the Torah and Qur'anic narratives of the archetype of Hagar. The poets set forth new readings to Hagar's narrative as they place it in new contexts. As a matriarchal model, Hagar is an appropriate leading figure in the Islamic and Jewish modern American society. Her life story as a single mother in exile, as well as her struggle and achievements are parallel with the experience of many American immigrant women. In addition, for these women, the narrative of Hagar offers a social liberation and an example of power and autonomy. As a pivotal model of reform for the contemporary women in a patriarchal dominated society, Hagar suffers from oppression, and endures many ordeals.

Although Ostriker and Kahf write about the same female archetype 'Hagar', their methods of dealing with Hagar's narrative are different. Each writer reflects the diversity in the status of Hagar according to her own religious traditions. Thereupon, this variety is reflected in the title, themes, events, and images of the two poems under study in this paper.

### **The Theoretical Framework**

Twentieth century American literature witnessed a great change due to the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the passage of Immigration Act in 1965. As a result, the United States is now more of a multicultural state that hosts many cultures of non-white and mixed race citizens. Feminism, which involves the critical study of gender as one foundation of social

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<sup>5</sup> Midrash is a type of biblical interpretation which is found in the Jewish biblical commentaries.

<sup>6</sup> Mohja Kahf sent the draft of *Hagar Poems* to the researcher by e-mail on 06/17/201. Starting with Hagar, the book contains poems about religious and historical female figures.

experience and cultural expression, has emerged during this period of change. This period is pivotal for ethnic minorities as well as women in the United States; its intellectual atmosphere led these groups to examine their own history and culture. Feminism, in its first wave, was mainly concerned with the economic, political, and social equality of males and females, aiming to transform the male-dominance of the past and to create a fair future for all. The second wave of feminism looked for a way to shed light on women's roles in history, literature, mythology, and religious traditions. They regularly used religious and cultural discourse that characteristically revolved around religious archetypes and Biblical citations. This emphasis on the religious and the archetypal continued to be present in the third wave of feminism. With its postmodernist emphasis on adaptation and appropriation, this wave has further revived the interest in history and myth.

When Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), the founder of analytical psychology, introduced the study of archetypes in psychology, most American women poets are directly or indirectly influenced by the writings of Jung; according to him:

There are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life. Endless repetition has engraved these experiences into our psychic constitution, not in the form of images filled with content, but at first only as forms without content, representing merely the possibility of a certain type of perception and action<sup>7</sup>.

The term 'archetype' decides the form and function of the literary work as the meaning of the text is inspired by cultural and psychological myths. The archetypal images are delineated and defined by their stories in myth. Archetypes denote "recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character types, themes and images ... myths, dreams and even social rituals"<sup>8</sup>. Jung points out that the experiences of the individual are greatly determined by the common experiences of the human race. These experiences are situated in the unconscious mind of mankind. Jung believes that a collective unconscious lies behind each person's unconscious; this collective unconscious is not directly understood but is rather expressed in the form of an archetype. Thus, an archetype is an original pattern from which copies are derived. This original pattern is ubiquitous and has existed throughout time and in every culture with an infinite array of representations.

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<sup>7</sup> P.48  
<sup>8</sup> Abrams12

American feminist poets attempt to read the archetypes recurrent in their religious texts. In the last chapter of her landmark study in feminist criticism *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986), Ostriker coins the term 'revisionist mythology' to describe a poetic practice by women poets who transform cultural notions by revising myths. Ostriker discusses how these women poets try to "rewrite from a female point of view to discover new possibilities for meaning".<sup>9</sup> She insists that when "women write strongly as women" they intend "to subvert and transform the life and literature they inherit".<sup>10</sup> For Ostriker the 'revisionist mythology' is a major means by which women poets redefine "both women and culture"<sup>11</sup>. These women poets deal with mythic archetypes in the interest of interrogating the past for the sake of a contemporary social change. Accordingly, Ostriker asserts that mythic archetypes belong to culture, and are closely connected with the religion and literature of any culture:

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using a myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.<sup>12</sup>

In the myths, one may discover a set of cultural values which are superior to the currently accepted ones. These myths represent a source for new values that may be more appropriate to the cultural needs of their time than the values of the present. In other words, the reinterpretation of the myths of the past helps writers and readers to understand and to deal with the current crises of today like loss of identity, looking for a model ...etc. Similarly, Henry A. Murray claims that the myths of the past in mythical poetry help to analyze present crises and to suggest alternative approaches to resolve them:

[Myth] may be most effective when it provides no more than what is necessary in the way of an [sic] historical and contemporary perspective – say, a description of relevant antecedent events, of the current crises, and of the desired outcome.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, myths proclaim the presence and power of the story. Phyllis Tribble denotes that human beings cannot live without stories; she further

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<sup>9</sup> P.11

<sup>10</sup> P.211

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Stealing the Language* 212

<sup>13</sup> P. 337

explains that stories are considered “the style and substance of life” which “fashion and fill existence”.<sup>14</sup> The narrative is a story or an account of events narrated by a story teller. The Qur’anic and the Torah stories are seen by Muslims and Jews respectively as the authentic narratives told by the Creator of the universe. These narratives include events dealing with incidents related to animate or inanimate figures which both utilize the collective unconscious of the readers of these texts and further feed it for future generations. These figures are meant to give moral lessons, and to provide examples of good or evil behavior for human beings of all ages.

Both poets construct their feminist reading of the narrative of Hagar within an intertextual context. They both seem to believe that all texts intertext with other texts: “no texts are composed in a cultural vacuum, and all contain echoes which resonate from intertexts which have influenced the author”.<sup>15</sup> M. H. Abrams, in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, denotes that the notion of intertextuality is popularized by Julia Kristeva (1941). Abrams defines intertextuality as a term:

. . . used to signify the multiple ways in which any one literary text is made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and illusions, its repetitions and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier texts, or simply its unavoidable participation in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures that are “always already” in place and constitute the discourses into which we are born.<sup>16</sup>

Then, he explains that a text from Kristeva’s perspective is “in fact an “intertext”—the site of an intersection of numberless other texts and existing only through its relations to other texts”.<sup>17</sup> Thus, for Kristeva intertextuality is a text made up from several texts. Kristeva bases her theories of intertextuality on Mikhail Bakhtin’s works. She ascribes to Bakhtin the discovery that any text is constructed as “a mosaic of quotations” or as “the absorption and transformation of another text”.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Barthes views the text as:

[A] tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. ... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to

<sup>14</sup> P1.

<sup>15</sup> Boyarin qtd. in Elman 192.

<sup>16</sup> P.317

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Kristeva 73.

counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.<sup>19</sup>

Kristeva recognizes the poetic text as being a concurrent affirmation and negation of another text. The poet or the reteller of religious and cultural narrative who engages in intertextuality attempts to adapt and appropriate a text from the past either by transforming or turning it upside down in relation to contemporary issues. The process of textual appropriation is to construct a text from religious and cultural sources, and to claim it as one's own, thus appropriating pre-existing patterns into present cultural norms. Adaptation according to Sanders is the "reinterpretation of established texts in new generic contexts or perhaps with relocations of an 'original' or source text's cultural and/or temporal setting".<sup>20</sup> As such, adaptation is a process involving the transition from one type to another. In this context, it means from narrative text to poetry. It can provide new clues to the meaning of the text as well as its cultural significance.

From a feminist perspective, the story of Hagar, which is narrated both in the Torah and the Qur'an, could be viewed as a matriarchal archetype adapted and appropriated by both Ostriker and likewise in Kahf. The Torah and Qur'anic maternal models are not limited to biological function; they have the quality of leadership, endurance, dedication and compassion as pivotal members in their families and societies. According to Jane Freedman, "Mothering is not only about biological reproduction but about a set of attitudes, skills, and values that accompany it, and some feminists argue that it is these attitudes, values, and skills which constitute the distinctness of femininity and which should be given a more central place in our societies".<sup>21</sup> Through their poetry, Ostriker and Kahf show the feminist role played by Hagar as a matriarchal model relying on their religious texts as sources for narrative. Each poet depended on the corresponding scripture and built her poem of Hagar on the details narrated in each Book; while Ostriker depended on the Torah, Kahf depended on the Qur'an respectively.

The two texts/intertexts, the Torah and the Qur'an are used by the two poets as authoritative sources for themes, characters, images and plots. Yet, each of them uses her intertext differently either placing more emphasis on the past, or using history to portray the present reality of contemporary women. By so doing, both poets engage in the process of

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<sup>19</sup> P.146

<sup>20</sup> P. 19

<sup>21</sup> P. 21

'figuration' in which characters from the past are being transformed, given a new life and used to shed light on the values and experiences of the present. Based on exegetical readings of the Qur'anic and Jewish figuration, Kahf and Ostriker read their religious narratives. Both poets read the traditional Muslim and Jewish narratives to explore cultural, political or spiritual issues. In addition, both Ostriker and Kahf resort to their traditional narratives in an attempt to reassert their identity in the United States of America in which they are often cast as minorities or even as threatening immigrants.

Ostriker and Kahf show their religious traditions through their poems to confront the cultural hegemony that many female immigrants face in the United States of America. They rewrite an American literature from the perspective of cultural and religious traditions which revise issues of gender, race, class and identity. Kahf's growing up in the United States forms a unique perception of the world. This perception is forged by the differences and similarities between the culture of her homeland and that of her adopted country. Her poetry is a mixture of both Syrian and American influences. Her own conception of Islamic feminism influences the themes of her poetry as an American Muslim woman. Islamic feminism is defined by Margot Badran as "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm... [It] derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and men, in the totality of their existence."<sup>22</sup> Lisa Suhair Majaj in *ArtNews* comments that Kahf's poetry draws on American colloquialism, the Qur'an, Islamic Heritage, Arabic oral tradition and Arabic poetry. Kahf respects her own faith as a Muslim and uses advantages offered by being an American, like free speech, to explore the Muslim American literature.<sup>23</sup>

While Kahf uses the Qur'an and *Hadiths* as her reference, Ostriker utilizes Midrasht to retell Torah narratives from a Jewish feminist perspective and redefines the impulse to transform the traditions she inherits. Jewish feminism can be defined as a movement that enquires improvement for Jewish women in the religious, legal, and social status as well as opens up new opportunities for their religious experience and leadership. Judith Plaskow, the Jewish feminist theologian, reveals that the exclusion from all-male prayer group, the exemption from positive time-bound and women's inability to function as witnesses and to initiate divorce are

<sup>22</sup> P. 242

<sup>23</sup> "Supplies of Grace" (n.pag.)

among the required issues of Jewish feminism.<sup>24</sup> Through her poetry, as a Jewish feminist, Ostriker counters traditional Judaism; she does not reject the traditions which she has been brought up to cherish but she challenges the patriarchal monopoly of this tradition.

### **The Image of Hagar in Ostriker's "The Opinion of Hagar"**

In her "The Opinion of Hagar", Ostriker provides her readers with a feminist reading of Hagar's narrative. For the religious and cultural sources of this narrative, she relies on the book of Genesis (16:1-16) and (21:9-21). Genesis, the first book of the Torah, contains the foundational text for the story of Hagar. Narrative about Hagar starts as follows:

Now Sarai, Abram's<sup>25</sup> wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. ... Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her... (16:1-4)<sup>26</sup>

The narrative about Hagar is a fragmented one: the fragments come from separate chapters and scenes in Abraham's saga. The opening sentence of chapter 16 scene one starts with Sarah; emphasizing that she is Abraham's first wife and ends with Hagar as her slave who becomes Abraham's second wife. The narrative of Hagar is so much related to Sarah's one. Tribble confirms that "[b]eginning with Sarai and ending with Hagar, the narrated introduction opposes two women around the man Abraham."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Ostriker starts her poem referring to Sarah as the mistress and Hagar as her slave.

Ostriker's "The Opinion of Hagar" is about Hagar; who is an Egyptian slave deprived from any right as a woman. She is deceived by

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<sup>24</sup> P. 785

<sup>25</sup> Sarah first appears as Sarai, and her name is not changed until Genesis 17 when Abram's name is changed to Abraham. In this paper the researcher will refer to them as they are more commonly known: Sarah and Abraham.

<sup>26</sup> Unless stated otherwise, Biblical quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. Whenever they are not identified in this paper, chapter and verse citations come from the book of Genesis.

<sup>27</sup> P. 10

Sarah's care when the latter tells her that they: "are women, together" (9)<sup>28</sup> and can be friends in spite of the social distinction between them. So, Hagar is a tool to fulfill Sarah's ends in having a child who will become an heir to Abraham. Showing her jealousy to Hagar and to her son Ishmael as he begins to move and to play "mocking", Sarah throws them away. She taunts Hagar as being a stranger: "Hagar, she jeered, Hagar the stranger" (26). The epithet "stranger" is the Hebrew meaning for Hagar's name in the Torah. Yet, Ostriker, who gives voice to Hagar throughout the poem, allows her at the end to show pride in her son. Hagar's son has "another story" not like his mother's. He is free and, like the modern American man, "can run a printing press/shoot an AK-47" (23-33). In the last lines of the poem Hagar wonders about the cause of Sarah's dislike as they "were women together" (38).

Right from the beginning, the title of the poem carries a direct reference to Ostriker's religious beliefs and inherited culture as the name of Hagar appears in the title of the poem. Ostriker's repetition of Hagar's name "Hagar, she jeered, Hagar" (26); as well as her narrative through the poem proves that "intertextuality extends all the way from the "operative repetition" of a single word to the use of a whole book as an "inter-web" of meaning."<sup>29</sup> Using Hagar's proper name in the title recalls Hagar's narrative in the book of Genesis. Nevertheless, the word "Opinion" in the title can be considered as Ostriker's act of appropriation and giving voice to the voiceless. Foregrounding the opinion of Hagar in this manner can be read as a critique of the Biblical narrative in which Sarah and Abraham are the controlling figures of the narrative. Hagar, as a character in Genesis, is considered a property. She is neither consulted for opinions, nor are her reactions taken into consideration by Abraham or Sarah; Hagar plays no role in the decision. By using such an ironic title, Ostriker criticizes the sexism, racism, and class distinction of the Jewish community. In addition, Ostriker gives a nameless slave a name in her poem: 'Hagar' as a name has not been used in reference to Hagar by the other characters in the Genesis narrative. She is labeled according to her social status as a maid and slave of Sarah in the household of Abraham: "I gave my maid to your embrace" (16:5) and "Since your maid in your hand." (16:6).

Ostriker starts her poem from the climax of Hagar's story in the Genesis; she makes use of her poem's first epigraphs from Genesis. (16:9-10):

<sup>28</sup>Unless stated otherwise, all the poems quoted in this paper are published in Alicia Ostriker's volume of prose and poetry *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (1994).

<sup>29</sup> Gresset, 4

*And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the  
Egyptian, which she had born unto  
Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said  
Unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and  
Her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be  
Heir with my son, even Isaac.*(Genesis 21:9-10)

By so doing, Ostriker attempts to draw the reader's attention to Hagar's narrative right from the start, and by overtly engaging in intertextuality and in adapting and appropriating the Genesis verse. She links the poem directly and overtly with the Torah and introduces the narrative of Hagar as mentioned in Genesis before she later invites her reader subtly to compare the story with the life of contemporary Jewish women in the U.S.

The epigraph indicates that Hagar is left away by her husband Abraham and his wife to the wilderness. Ostriker clearly emphasizes the discrimination against and the oppression of the different race and class by the rich and "the racially superior" Sarah. Hagar is portrayed as an oppressed poor slave who belonged to an inferior class in the household of Abraham. Sarah aggressively demands Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away from her. She depicts Ismael as the son of slave disregarding the fact that he is Abraham's child too. For Sarah, Hagar's son can challenge her son through mocking when Abraham, already an old man, is dead. Sarah also insists that her son Isaac is the only heir of Abraham and the Land of Canaan. Ostriker aims to create a mood of collision between Sarah and Hagar and allows the language of conflict in the epigraph to prevail throughout the whole poem. The first is the description of "the son of Hagar", "her son" and "the son of this bondwoman" highlights the mother, Hagar, not her child, Ismael, and shows the lack of equality between the sons. The second is the opposition and inequality between the mothers Sarah and Hagar. Sarah is rich, mistress and the first wife to Abraham while Hagar is slave, powerless, alone and the second wife. By being an "Egyptian," Hagar is considered a foreigner and a stranger, as her name indicates. Nothing is known or heard about her family, she is uprooted. The third is the mentioning of Isaac's name "my son Isaac" which means that Sarah has only one son. In the epigraph Sarah neglects Ishmael as the latter is not counted among the chosen progeny of Abraham and will not inherit any portion of the Promised Land. Although, Abraham never utters preference for any of his sons, he is silent towards Sarah's behaviour to Hagar and Ishmael in the original narrative and in the poem.

Ostriker's second epigraph is from W. H. Auden's 1939 elegy "In the Memory of W.B. Yeats" where Auden recognizes the passing of his contemporary as well as his own belief in the social efficiency of poetry. The elegy enables Auden to criticize both Yeats and the politically intentioned art. It is 1939 and the world is on the brink of World War II. Auden is dismayed at the thought of another world war as he had lived through the horror of World War I, and he is not excited to plunge right back into all that bloodshed and death. Auden paints the impending war as a sort of nightmare. He is not a stranger to the peaks and carters of national feelings:

*And the living nations wait,*

*Each sequestered in its hate (48-49)*

In this epigraph the "living" nationality can be a healthy affirmation of sociability, but nations that are "sequestered" in their "hate" cuts people off from each other. Moreover, it poisons the sources of feeling as hatred is the essence of war. The regularity of the rhyme scheme "wait" and "hate" reinforces the sense of impending doom. In this epigraph, Ostriker refers to the anti-Semitism towards Jews in America as they are considered rootless communities. She directly points to the memory of Nazis genocide of the Jewish people and the persistence of anti-Semitism in Europe during World War II. The hatred and the ethnic cleansing policy in Europe towards the Jews are analyzed by Benjamin A. Valentino as follows:

The mass killing of ethnic, national, religious groups has often been portrayed as the result of deep-seated hatred of victims by perpetrators. ... ethnic mass killing occurs when the leaders believe that their victims pose a threat that can be countered only by removing them from society.<sup>30</sup>

The basic for the anti-Semitism in Europe is that the Jews are seen as rootless even though they live in Europe for centuries. The rootlessness of Jewish communities is in the land not in blood. Their affiliation through blood and dispersal through the nations of Europe are seen as something dangerous by the anti-Semite to the national principle. Accordingly, Ostriker through this epigraph confirms that there is ethnic hatred between living nations. The epigraph can be regarded as a metaphor through which Ostriker points to the haterelationship between Sarah and Hagar as each represents a nation.

The first line of “The Opinion of Hagar” comes as a contrast with its title:

I have no opinion

I am an Egyptian woman

They sold me and made me her slave (1-3)

These three lines conform to Hagar’s state as narrated in Genesis: Hagar’s life is controlled by her masters and she is not allowed to decide or to speak about her own needs. Abraham and Sarah affect her life when they think and decide instead of her. As in the book of Genesis, Ostriker stresses Hagar’s state of slavery by making use of Hagar’s epithet “slave”.

Through adaptation and revision of the original text, Ostriker voices Hagar who is silenced and marginalized in the Jewish religious texts. Ostriker’s Hagar appears to have a voice, and with this new-found voice comes a new series of concerns. Ostriker voices Hagar through repeating the pronouns “I” and “me”. In this sense voice means the right to express one’s views freely. Ostriker’s Hagar is the only persona to speak in the first person in the poem. By making Hagar speak directly in her poem, Ostriker highlights the silence surrounding Hagar’s figure in the Torah. Adam Clark, a professor of theology, states that contemporary women writers have often “seek[ed] to rescue Hagar from the silences of biblical authors and have her speak in new and fresh ways.”<sup>31</sup> Generally, Ostriker, the Jewish feminist, has had the interest to bring women’s voices out from the shadows, and Hagar’s was one of the voices she attempted to liberate.

Ostriker confirms the suffering and oppression that Hagar suffers in Abraham’s household as slave; “But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar.” (16:1) On the other hand, Sharon Pace Jeanson, an expert in Hebrew Bible states that:

The story of Hagar is a portrayal of a woman who has little control over her destiny and therefore is required to do the bidding of her mistress. A foreigner in the land of Canaan, she lives as a servant in the household of two other newcomers to the land, Abram and Sarai.<sup>32</sup>

In the same way, using the verbs ‘took’ and ‘gave’, “Sarai his wife [Abram’s] took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to

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<sup>31</sup> P. 52  
<sup>32</sup> P. 43

be his wife,” (16:3) manifests how Sarah exercises power over Hagar, and how the latter is treated as a mere object. The Torah version of the story confirms that Hagar is Sarah’s servant as mentioned above in Genesis. (16:16-4)

Ostriker gives voice to Hagar as a humble woman: “You see how humble I am” (27). Yet, in the third stanza, she permits her to show pride in her son “Ishmael”; whose meaning is ‘God hears’ “recalling God’s involvement in Hagar’s affliction and Ishmael’s birth.”<sup>33</sup> Ostriker’s Hagar is powerless that’s why she seeks power from her son, another male figure. Hagar’s son is free and different from his mother; he is the ancestor of the Arabs: “My son is another story/Not like me, he is free and courageous.” (28-29) Ostriker adapts the epithet “wild ass” for Ishmael from the narrative of the Genesis which indicates stubbornness, idolatry, and lack of refinement; and points to the conflict between Sarah and Hagar and their descendants: “A wild ass of a man.” (30) Ostriker also constructs Hagar as a dynamic character through her actions and reactions. She shows how Hagar determines the future of her son Ishmael and how he grows into a modern American man. The repetition of “can” is to cluster Ishmael’s various skills and to draw the attention to his ability as well as emphasizing his distinguished strength as a contemporary man:

He can read and write

He can run a printing press

He can shoot an Ak-47

I call him Ishmael, I whispered to him:

Fight to your dying breath. (31-35)

This carries the intertext of the book of Genesis (16:11-13) in which we find the narrative of Hagar and her son Ishmael narrated as follows:

“You are now pregnant  
and you will give birth to a son.  
You shall name him Ishmael,  
for the Lord has heard of your misery.  
He will be a wild ass of a man;  
his hand will be against everyone  
and everyone’s hand against him,

<sup>33</sup> Jeansonne 46

and he will live in hostility  
toward all his brothers.” (16:11-13).

In accordance with the traditions of the day, the Ancient Near Eastern law and custom; when a slave woman bears a son to the master; she and her son would be free. The latter can inherit his father as an equal partner to the son of the first-rank wife. The status of Hagar and her son Ishmael could be explained according to the regulations of the Law Code of Hammurabi<sup>34</sup> which stipulates that:

If a man's...slave woman bears him children, and the father during his lifetime then declares to...the children whom the slave woman bore to him, “my children”...after the father goes to his fate, the children of the first-ranking wife and the children of the slave women shall equally divide the property of the paternal estate...<sup>35</sup>

Except Hagar, Ostriker does not make any persona speak in the poem. Although Ostriker mentions the name of Ishmael and refers to him as “my son” and “boy” many times, “When my son is born” (15) and “my strong healthy boy” (17), nothing is heard from him. There is no dialogue between the characters “the absence of dialogue [between Hagar and Sarah] continues to separate the females.”<sup>36</sup> This absence is connected with the harsh treatment committed by Sarah who shows her jealousy to Hagar: “She was yellow with jealousy/Of my round breasts” (16-17) It is this jealousy which leads Sarah to abuse her maid ‘Hagar’ the Genesis version: “And Sarai afflicted her [Hagar]” (16:6b). Nevertheless, Ostriker uses her poem to express her dissatisfaction with polygamy, a dissatisfaction which leads her to the extreme of speaking pejoratively about Abraham (Peace be upon him), who according to the author of this paper is a prophet who has to be valued and glorified. Hagar speaks about Sarah in the poem saying:

She used me  
When she couldn't have a child herself  
She made me sleep with her husband  
-That old, creepy man- (11-14).

<sup>34</sup>The Code of Hammurabi is a well-preserved Babylonian law code of ancient Mesopotamia, dating back about 1754 BC.

<sup>35</sup>As quoted in Schneider 35.

<sup>36</sup>Trible, 13

This objectification of Hagar conforms to the narrative in Genesis (16:2a) Sarah speaks in the imperative mode as to Abraham, and commands him to go to Hagar in order to give him a child:

And Saria said to Abram,

“Because Yahweh has prevented me

from bearing children

go to my maid.

Perhaps I shall be built up from her.” (16:2a)

Clark emphasizes that Hagar is used as an instrument, not as a person by Sarah and Abraham in the book of Genesis. He reveals that:

The depiction of Hagar in Genesis was never intended to be Hagar's story. It's an Abram-Sarai story signifying God's promise to his chosen people. Hagar is discussed instrumentally, as a device to validate the faithfulness of God's promise to Abraham.<sup>37</sup>

Through adapting the narrative story of Hagar, Ostriker seems to be reflecting on the present status of American Jewish women who dwell in the United States modern community. In an interview with Gary Pacernick, Ostriker points out that it is important to consider the past as a step towards the future. She states:

I think it's inevitable in any religion that some people are psychologically and emotionally attached to past tradition, while others have one foot in the past and want to take that next step into the future. Does this produce tension? Of course it does, and that tension is healthy. It is a sign of life.<sup>38</sup>

Tribble considers Hagar as a symbol of suffering. She is “one of the first females in scripture to experience use, abuse, and rejection.”<sup>39</sup> By recalling the past of Hagar's slavery, Ostriker makes Hagar remember her suffering “They sold me and make me her slave” (3), and how she is used and treated badly by Sarah:

But that was the end of me

She threw me away

Like garbage” (23-25)

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<sup>37</sup> P. 52  
<sup>38</sup> P. 230  
<sup>39</sup> P. 9

Rooted in her own experience as a Jewish woman from Eastern Europe, Ostriker tends to shed through this poem light on the Jewish woman's condition. These women are often badly treated and discriminated against by other women in the United States of America. They somehow repeat the story of Hagar who is ill-treated by Sarah. Utilizing an indirect speech of Sarah told by Hagar, Ostriker refers to race and class distinction between Hagar and Sarah as they are from diverse "social rank". Hagar is deceived by Sarah's care, Ostriker indirectly compares Sarah's behaviour with that of the Western Jewish and Christian women towards Eastern Jewish women when the latter arrive at the United States. Moreover, Ostriker tries to highlight the cultural and religious differences between various Jewish "nationalities" in the United States as America is considered a multi-cultural State; when Sarah tells Hagar that they are "women" in spite of their "social rank" as a slave servant and a free mistress. It also reflects Ostriker's perspective of womenism.

Womenism voices ethnical black women and attempts at reclaiming the stories of women from African descent as resources for ethical inquiry. Ostriker shows racial as well as class differences between Sarah and Hagar. Whereas, feminism is concerned with gender equality as mentioned early in this paper; womenism goes beyond the racial and classical oppression on black women. As a movement, it has evolved through its rejection of all forms of oppression, and its commitment to social justice regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Womenism measures group unity to break the silence of oppressed women. Womenism seems to be central to Ostriker in finding ways to foster interracial cooperation among women.

Through Sarah and Hagar, Ostriker inquires race-class-gender equality among white and black women as well as all men in their American society:

She pretended to care for me  
Forget about our nationalities, forget  
About social rank, she would say  
We are women together  
That is what matters, Hagar (6-10).

At the end of "The Opinion of Hagar", Ostriker expresses nostalgia for womenism when she repeats the line but uses a past tense of the verb:

“We were women together.” (38) She lets Hagar wonder about the cause of Sarah’s hatred towards her while she continues to lament her fate:

But still wonder

Why could she not love me

We were women together (36-38)

Ostriker disagrees with the narrative of Genesis about Hagar. The word “woman” has its religious and cultural roots for women in Judaism who are viewed as inferior and who are often oppressed by men. The French author and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) provides a detailed analysis of women's oppression which focuses on the social construction of woman as the other:

When a woman tries to define herself, she starts by saying ‘I am a woman’. No man would do so. This fact reveals the basic asymmetry between the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. ... . This imbalance goes back to the Old Testament. ... . Woman is riveted into a lopsided relationship with man; he is the One, she the Other.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Image of Hagar in Kahf’s “Hagar in the Valley”**

Whereas the detailed narrative of Hagar’s myth is narrated in the Torah in the book of Genesis, the story of Hagar and the miracle of *Zamzam* are not directly mentioned in the Qur’an<sup>41</sup>; it is narrated in the *Hadith* and Islamic exegetical texts.<sup>42</sup> Hiba Abugideiri remarks that Hagar’s “near absence from the Qur’an is not necessarily because of her sex; rather, it comes from the lack of dispute surrounding her significance in Islam.”<sup>43</sup> Although the Qur’an does not refer to Hagar by name, it does not mean that Hagar is entirely erased from the Islamic tradition. This tradition includes the collections of *hadith*, or prophetic traditions that form an integral part of tradition in Islam. In the Qur’an, she is referenced

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<sup>40</sup> de Beauvoir qtd. in Selden 129.

<sup>41</sup> The name of the well of *Zamzam* comes from the phrase *ZomëZomë*, which in Arabic means ‘stop flowing’, a command repeated by Hagar during her attempt to contain the spring water.

<sup>42</sup> The *Hadith* traditions are next in authority to the Qur’an. In *Sunni* Islam the two *hadith* collections *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim* are believed to contain the most authentic traditions ascribed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him).

<sup>43</sup> P. 81

through the story of her son *Ismail*<sup>44</sup> and her husband *Ibrahim* who invokes Allah saying the following prayers:

O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring to dwell in a valley without cultivation, by the Sacred House, in order, O our Lord, that they may establish regular prayer. So fill the hearts of some among men with love towards them, and feed them with fruits so that they may give thanks. (*Surah 14: Ibrahim, 37*)<sup>45</sup>

Relying on the Qur'an and on *Hadith* as religious and cultural frameworks, Kahf's in "Hagar in the Valley" offers her feminist reading of Hagar's narrative. Hagar's story as known by Muslims is mentioned in detail in *Sahih Al-Bukhari, The Anbiya* (Prophets). It is read as follows:

Ibn 'Abbas Narrated: Abraham brought Hagar and her son Ishmael while she was breastfeeding him, to a place near the Ka'bah under a tree on the spot of *Zamzam*, at the highest place in the mosque. During those days there was nobody in Mecca, nor was there any water. So he made them sit over there and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates and a small water-skin containing some water, and set out homeward...<sup>46</sup>

Kahf's "Hagar in the Valley" captures Hagar while reminiscing as she was left with her child in the desert of Mecca. However, Hagar thought it is the will of the Almighty Allah and that only Him would indeed take care of her, and provide for her and her child. The water-skin is empty, Hagar's child cries from thirst and she could not help him. So she leaves him there and runs through "boulders" and "black ridges". Hagar runs between the mountains of *Safa* and *Marwa*, especially in the low ground where she could not see her son. And sometimes her walking corresponds "with the rhythm of the cry of the child." (24)<sup>47</sup> She does it for seven times, but in vain. After that, she returns to her child and with amazement, she finds his "palms were moist" (32). The water bursts and flows to form the springs of *Zamzam* which is metonymic for Allah's mercy which "finally burst/then to flow forever" (39-40). Then, she comes back to her suffering and survival to compare between the "hardness and heaviness" of the valley with that of the water's lightness. Hagar is a true example of a woman who has great faith in God; she is granted with water/mercy and gives birth to prophets. At the last stanza,

<sup>44</sup> Ismail is the Qur'anic name for Ishmael as well as Ibrahim for Abraham.

<sup>45</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all the verse from the Qur'an quoted in this paper is from Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. *The Holy Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary.*

<sup>46</sup> *Hadith* vol.4, book 55, and No.583

<sup>47</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all the poems quoted in this paper are published in Mohja Kahf's poetry collection *Hagar Poems* forthcoming 2017.

Kahf/Hagar wants people to remember their need for God's mercy: "when they have a white fire/when they thirst for this water." (50-51) She ends the poem with a rhetorical question: "What will make them remember?/And will they come to the belly of my valley/when they have a white fire,/ when they thirst for this water?" (58-61)

To start with the title, Kahf constructs "Hagar in the Valley" according to her Islamic religious perspective and inherited culture of Hagar's narrative. The name of "Hagar" appears in the title of the poem; using the proper name of "Hagar" recalls Hagar's narrative in the *Hadith*. However, the word/place "Valley" has a special meaning in Kahf's version of the story, and it represents the dominating image of the poem which will be explained in this paper.

Kahf highlights Hagar's personality through the continual repetition of the pronouns "I", as well as "my" and "me", through the entire poem. She uses this first person point of view to make the reader see Hagar through her experiences and to let him/her know what she knows or feels:

*I found the two boulders before me*

*I climbed the black ridges in desperation,*

*rock digging into the flesh of my thighs. (emphasis added; 19-21)*

Similar to Ostriker, Kahf voices Hagar as the only persona to speak in the first person in "Hagar in the Valley". Whereas Ostriker uses the pronoun I to highlight Hagar's voice, Kahf's Hagar is far stronger and more powerful, since she, unlike Ostriker's Hagar, has agency. Although, Ostriker's Hagar had a voice to express her views, she was a woman in a patriarchal society who cannot exercise agency. Agency is a point at which these views are translated into actions. It is the ability to make decisions and effective choices about one's own life to influence change like that of Kahf's Hagar. Women who have agency are being empowered to fulfill the needs that they have identified for themselves; Hagar, in Kahf's poem, is not dependent on others, her husband or her son; she decides for herself and is supported by the Almighty. Agency in Kahf's Hagar is a source of her strength and of her pride.

Abugideiri sees Hagar as a "powerful figure for demonstrating how female struggle and liberation remain integral aspects of Muslim women's modern lives."<sup>48</sup> Kahf, as an Arab and Muslim woman in

America, highlights Hagar's power and her ability to liberate herself and others. Kahf's Hagar fulfills her goal in contrast to Ostriker's.

"Hagar in the Valley" is a confirmation of Hagar's Arabian descent as well as endurance, strength. She is a revered image of matriarchy and of womanhood that is emulated by Muslims regardless of their gender. Juliane Hammer asserts that Kahf's Hagar appears as a "strong-willed" female who surrenders to the "will of God" and decides "to persist in her new and dangerous environment."<sup>49</sup> Kahf's poem highlights Hagar's distinguished endurance and struggle for survival in spite of the intolerable conditions she confronts before finding the well of *Zamzam*. The poem does not portray any hard feelings against Sarah or Abraham (peace be upon him). It is a story of perseverance and faith followed by mercy and peace that takes place in the valley of Mecca. Kahf's Hagar narrates her story of achievement in the physical and spiritual senses. It is the story of how water/mercy eventually bursts and flows to form the springs of *Zamzam* which continues to flow till today and which are metonymic for Allah's mercy which He grants to those who believe and persevere:

I found it --  
as if something had broken  
deep  
in the channels of the earth  
as if the chest of God,  
full of pity,  
  
finally burst,  
then to flow forever:  
Water springs at Zamzam. (33-41)

Like Ostriker, Kahf lets Hagar recall the past "those days" by the repetition of the line "Sometimes I think of those days" at the beginning of stanzas 1, 7, 9. Hagar remembered the past when she was left alone by Abraham with her child in the valley to struggle for their survival under the heat of the sun. Kahf asserts Hagar's deep-seated faith in Allah that enables her to endure through her trajectory of struggle and survive:

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<sup>49</sup> P. 96

The child on my hip, the weight  
Of the heat on my head, the sun  
far above like a hard-hearted city  
This is the final ground of faith,  
Where a woman is left alone  
to survive as she can.(4-8)

These lines carry an intertext of the Islamic *Hadith* that are read as follows:

Ismail's mother followed him saying, 'O Abraham! Where are you going, leaving us in this valley where there is no person whose company we may enjoy, nor is there anything (to enjoy)?' She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him, 'Has Allah ordered you to do so?' He said, 'Yes.' She said, 'Then He will not neglect us,'<sup>50</sup>

Kahf's Hagar is a story of suffering and wholesome survival; she is a true example of a woman who has great faith in God, and who is, therefore, granted with water/mercy:

Sometimes I think of those days of mine  
The pit of the belly of the valley  
I think of the stone of doubt  
thatburden the breast,  
of hardness and heaviness  
and the lightness of water. (42-47)

Hagar is empowered by the spiritual access to Allah; she discovered Allah's will that is called *taqwa*. *Taqwa* is the faith in Allah that makes you sure you will never get lost. Kahf highlights Hagar's power that she acquires from her faith in Allah. She, therefore, rereads female's agency within an Islamic context. Her agency is inspired by her *taqwa*. It provides a social liberation for women, where they become dependent, only on Allah the Almighty.

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<sup>50</sup> *Hadith* vol.4, book 55, and No.583

Many Muslim women in America identify themselves with Hagar's great faith in Allah as well as strong will. Asra Nomani, (1965) is the founder of an organization for Muslim women activists in America called "Daughters of Hagar". Nomani repeatedly invokes the figure of Hagar and identifies herself with Hagar especially that she is a single mother too. In an interview, Asra Nomani refers to Hagar as the mother of Islam:

I tell them think of the story of Bibi Hajar who was a mother of Islam, who stood alone in Mecca, who is the source of our strength. It is from her courage that we have the tribe from which the prophet Muhammad was born. It is because of the strength of a woman that Islam exists today. If she had been devastated and destroyed we would never have existed.<sup>51</sup>

Like Nomani, Kahf is one of the "Daughters of Hagar"; Hagar thus becomes the archetype for many Arab and Muslim immigrant women in America who attempt to appropriate the narrative of Hagar as well as her *taqwa* into their daily lives. The poem, in fact, has autobiographical undertones. The struggle of Hagar in surviving alone must have inspired Kahf, herself, the daughter of immigrants, who has eventually proved herself as a writer and as a professor while taking care of her two female children and the household.<sup>52</sup>

As a feminist, Kahf asserts Hagar's identity as "a woman". She defines the valley, which can be read as symbolic of the world of immigrants as the place "where a woman is left alone/ to survive as she can" (7-8). Kahf reinforces Hagar's loneliness as a woman after the finding of water: "I have been more alone than any man." (52) Unlike Ostriker's, the loneliness of Kahf's Hagar is a source for her empowerment and independence. Hagar's loneliness and her consequent achievement due to perseverance and faith can therefore both inspire and reflect the trajectory of many Muslim and Arab American immigrants who are viewed as strangers in the American society; nevertheless they endure, struggle and accomplish due to faith and perseverance.

Through the narrative of Hagar, Kahf delivers the religious ritual of *Hajj*. She adapts and appropriates *Safa* and *Marwa* rituals in a new version highlighting the Islamic tradition through Hagar's rites. The Islamic *Hadith* on this occasion is read as follows:

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<sup>51</sup>Nomani qtd. in Hammer 76  
<sup>52</sup>Haddad, *You Are Blessed* 6

...found that the mountain of *Safa* was the nearest mountain to her on that land. She stood on it and started looking at the valley keenly so that she might see somebody, but she could not see anybody. Then she descended from the *Safa* and when she reached the valley, she tucked up her robe and ran in the valley like a person in distress and trouble, till she crossed the valley and reached the *Marwa* mountain where she stood and started looking, expecting to see somebody but she could not see anybody. She repeated that (running between *Safa* and *Marwa*) seven times. The Prophet said, "This is the source of the tradition of the walking of people between them (i.e., *Safa* and *Marwa*)."<sup>53</sup>

Consequently, Kahf's Hagar is the archetype of the tolerant, wise, courageous and devoted religious woman. Hagar is a pivotal mother in Islam. Prophet Muhammad's lineage is traced through Hagar and Ishmael:

I was given water and gave birth to prophets  
who emerged from my womb to a world as parched  
as the valley of my trail (53-55).

According to the promise of a covenant given to Ishmael by Allah as Abraham's first son, Ishmael is blessed by Allah to have many descendants, and he is given Prophethood. The Qur'anic verse reads as follows:

Also mentioned in the Book (the story of) Isma'il: He was (strictly) true to what he promised, and he was an apostle (and) a prophet. He used to enjoin on his people Prayer and Charity, and he was most acceptable in the sight of his Lord. (*Surah 19: Maryam*, 54-55)

Poems can have characters just as other literary works. Both Kahf and Ostriker construct Hagar as a dynamic character through her actions and reactions in their poems. In Kahf's "Hagar in the Valley", Hagar decides where and when to run quickly or slowly to correspond with her child's crying rhythm:

I ran heavily, I ran lightly  
I ran with the momentum of running, of ritual  
I ran with the rhythm of the cry of the child

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<sup>53</sup> *Hadith* vol.4, book 55, and No.583

behind me, waxing and waning

Today they say seven

It may as well have been seven

stages of descent to the final question of faith (22-28).

The repetition of "I ran" emphasizes Hagar's persistence and demonstrates the significance of the event. Hagar runs seven times, or maybe more as she hints to this in the poem, in search of water. She runs back and forth looking for water for her child between the hills of *Safa* and *Marwa*. As a reward to Hagar, that event forms *Saai* ritual done by the Muslim pilgrims when they perform *Umra* and *Hajj* to Mecca. She agrees to be left in the valley because her faith assures her that she and her son would be looked after. Allah in His holy Qur'an says:

Behold! Safa and Marwa are among the Symbols of Allah. So if those who visit the House in the Season [*Hajj*] or at other times [*Umra*], should compass them round, it is no sin in them. And if any one obeyeth his own impulse to good, be sure that Allah is He Who recogniseth and knoweth (*Surah 2, Al-Baqara* 158).

Other than Hagar, *Kahf* has no characters or personas to speak or take part in "Hagar in the Valley". Hagar is alone with her child in the valley of Mecca. Even her 'child' who is mentioned many times in the poem could not articulate a word. Yet, only his crying is heard all over the poem: "the crying of the child/ behind me, waxing and waning" (24-25). Moreover, there is no dialogue in *Kahf*'s "Hagar in the Valley" "I have been more alone than any man" (52).

Ostriker's Hagar is portrayed as "the other", poor, slave, neglected, oppressed, foreigner, and a powerless woman who is abused by her family. Unlike Ostriker's Hagar, *Kahf*'s Hagar is portrayed as "the self", not "the other". She is proactive not reactive. She has agency and she relies on her religious tradition that regards her as both "the self" and the "selfless mother". She is often referred to as "Ismael's mother" or as "the mother of Ismael", which seen from an Islamic feminist perspective does not detract from her autonomy or her agency. Riffat Hassan, a pioneer in Islamic feminism, states that it "should not be interpreted to mean that Hagar's identity as a person/woman is being subsumed in her identity as a mother, or that she is seen as nothing more than the mother of a son."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> P. 166

In contrast to Ostriker's Hagar's son Ismael who is mentioned as a boy mocking and playing then as a strong man in "The Opinion of Hagar", Ishmael in Kahf's "Hagar in the Valley" is only stated as an infant who is in need of his mother's power, courage and will. Kahf refers to Ismael many times firstly as a child held by his mother in the hot valley: "the child on my hip, the weight" (3) and a thirsty child when Allah ordered Abraham to leave them at that valley: "Hard when the child is hoarse of thirst/and makes noises like a hurt animal" (10-11). Then as a crying child when Hagar runs between *Safa* and *Marwa* looking for water: "I ran with the rhythm of the cry of the child" (24). At last Kahf's Hagar stops when she feels change in the valley as her child's palms are wet when *Zamzam* spring bursts: "I stopped at a catch in the cry of the child/ when I found him, his small palms were moist" (31-32).

### Conclusion

By comparing and contrasting the two poems: Ostriker "The Opinion of Hagar" and Kahf's "Hagar in the Valley" with each other as well as with their original religious texts and interpretations, the following conclusions were reached. Both poets retell their traditional Jewish and Muslim narratives and depend heavily on their scriptures and religious heritage. Through Hagar's story, they both reflect on contemporary cultural issues. Discrimination against women and the hardships faced by immigrants are two main issues that Ostriker and Kahf see in the story of Hagar. Yet each writer has a different focus and a different manner of appropriating the original story. The reinterpretation of Hagar's narrative has depended on the poets' religious sources, as well as on each poet's reception of the narrative. Ostriker's Hagar is an object; she is oppressed and fuming with hate to her oppressors; Kahf's Hagar, on the other hand, is a subject; she is focused on faith and on survival, and is satisfied with her mission and her achievement. The two poems of 'Hagar' are considered a recovery of the female voice that have played a significant role in the development of women's religious history in the United States of America. The titles of the two poems carry direct reference to the poets' religious texts and inherited culture. Hagar is the speaker or the "I" persona voiced in both texts. In Ostriker's, Hagar has voice to tell about her suffering while in Kahf's, Hagar has both voice and agency. She makes decisions and effective choices about her own life. Ishmael, Hagar's son, appears as, a young man who is the source of pride in Ostriker's poem. In Kahf's, poem, her action and her faith are the main sources of pride; Ishmael is not the male figure who brings pride and satisfaction, but rather the baby dependent on his own mother for survival. As such, Kahf's poem is a celebration of female agency.

Whereas Ostriker's poem highlights the unattained rights of Jewish women in Judaism, Kahf's poem tends to celebrate the great social status given to women and mothers in the Qur'an, a status that is often overlooked in the patriarchal interpretations of the holy text. Ostriker foregrounds the oppression and the suffering of Jewish women; through Hagar, she tries to deconstruct the male-dominated society of Judaism and to reconstruct the feminist role from a contemporary perspective. As a Jewish feminist, Ostriker attempts to counter the male bias of the Jewish tradition and of its patriarchal social system, which in the poem is represented by Abraham. The world of Ostriker's poem is that of conflict and hate between Hagar and Abraham on the one hand, and between the two female rivals Hagar and Sarah, on the other. The poem is haunted by sexism and racism as well as by class distinction. On the other hand, Kahf tries to revive the Islamic tradition by highlighting an image of Hagar who is empowered by the spirituality of the true faith (*taqwa*) and who experiences womanist reconciliation with the males and the females in the story. In spite of the difference in emphasis and the different trajectory each poem takes, the two poets situate the narrative of Hagar as an archetypal narrative for all women and as a key text in interfaith dialogue between Judaism and Islam.

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