



Egyptian Journal of Linguistics and Translation

'EJLT'

ISSN: 2314-6699

<https://ejlt.journals.ekb.eg/>

Volume 10, Issue 1

January 2023

Peer-reviewed Journal

Sohag University Publishing Center

A New Multicultural Scheherazad in Mohja Kahf's *E-mails from Scheherazad*

Abstract

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Multiculturalism as a term has recently been used to denote the celebration, acknowledgment and promotion of cultural differences. It is fundamentally defined as political and symbolical recognition of minority cultures, histories and traditions. The theory is thoroughly inspired by liberal ideas of human rights and equality. The aim of this paper is to analyze Mohja Kahf's collection *E-mails from Scheherazad* through the lens of multicultural concepts. Recognition of difference, belonging, identity and representation are key concepts of multiculturalism which will be explored in Kahf's depiction of her Arab roots and culture. A reading of the poems will investigate how the poet negotiates Arab American identity and how she envisions multicultural societies. In her poetry, she re-conceptualizes the Arab identity, particularly the Arab Muslim woman in a pursuit to change western negative orientalist attitudes. Achieving knowledge construction about the Arab American identity, illuminating its major qualities with representations that balance wronged stereotypical images, building bridges of cross-cultural understanding, reducing prejudices against Arabs and initiating dialogue between cultures are main concerns in Kahf's poetic vision. Kahf's poetry deals with ethnicity and cultural diversity in America and strongly represents multicultural ideals particularly acceptance of difference, shared humanity and connectedness of cultures. This paper is part of PHD thesis and a requirement of a doctorate degree in English language and literature, titled "*Aspects of Multiculturalism in poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye, Mohja Kahf and Elmaz Abinader.*" Faculty of Arts, Helwan university.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Recognition of Difference, Mohja Kahf, Arab American Identity, Stereotypes of Arab women.



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شهرزاد جديدة متعددة الثقافات في ديوان "رسائل اليكترونية من شهرزاد" لمهجة كهف

مستخلص

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التعددية الثقافية هو مصطلح تم استخدامه مؤخرا ليشير الي التقدير والاعتراف بالثقافات المختلفة داخل المجتمعات المتعددة الاعراق. توصف التعددية الثقافية بانها الاعتراف الرمزي والسياسي لثقافة وتاريخ وتقاليد الاقليات. تستوحي هذه النظرية افكارها الرئيسية من مبادئ حقوق الانسان في الحرية والمساواة. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية الي تحليل ديوان "رسائل اليكترونية من شهرزاد" للكاتبة الامريكية من اصول سورية مهجة كهف وذلك من منظور التعددية الثقافية وافكارها الاساسية. المساواة والانتماء والهوية والاعتراف بثقافة الاخر كلها افكار جوهرية في شعر مهجة كهف الذي يصور اصولها العربية الي جانب الهوية الامريكية والانتماء الي كلا من هاتين الثقافتين. من خلال قراءة وتحليل مختارات من الاشعار يبرز البحث كيف تصور الشاعرة قضايا الهوية والمجتمعات المتعددة الثقافات والاعراق حيث تقدم كهف صورة حقيقية للهوية العربية من خلال ذكرياتها وتجاربها الشخصية لتصنع منها تصورا اخرًا مختلفًا مما يتم تقديمه من افكار غربية نمطية مخطئة عن العرب وخاصة المرأة العربية المسلمة. من اهم الموضوعات التي تتناولها شخصيات شهرزاد الشعرية الجديدة التي ترسمها مهجة كهف هي التنوع الثقافي في المجتمع الامريكي وبناء صورة معرفية عن الهوية العربية الامريكية مما يشكل جسور ثقافية بين الحضارات وذلك بهدف تقليل التحامل والافكار النمطية المجحفة وخلق حوار بين الثقافات. يخلص البحث الي ان شعر مهجة كهف يمثل افكار التعددية الثقافية بقوة وخصوصًا ثقافة الاختلاف وتقبل الاخر، الي جانب افكار اخري مثل المساواة بين البشر وتواصل الحضارات.

الكلمات الرئيسية: التعددية الثقافية، تقبل الاختلاف، مهجة كهف، الهوية العربية الامريكية، تغيير الصورة النمطية للمرأة العربية.

هذا البحث جزء من رسالة لنيل درجة الدكتوراة في اللغة الانجليزية وادابها بعنوان "سمات التعددية الثقافية في شعر كلا من ناعومي شهاب ناي، مهجة كهف و الماز ابي نادر". كلية الاداب جامعة حلوان.

A New Multicultural Scheherzad in Mohja Kahf's *E-mails from Scheherazad*

Multiculturalism is a term that is closely related to questions of identity, ethnicity, inclusion and representation. Multicultural theories offer concepts of cultural equality in societies that are made of people coming from different origins and embracing different religions in order to improve better and more positive intergroup cultural relations. The term has recently been used to denote the celebration, acknowledgment and promotion of cultural pluralism in countries marked with cultural diversity. It focuses on developing equal relations between minorities and the dominant culture in modern multicultural societies. The term is new though the condition of a variety of people from different races, ethnicities and religions existing within one community is as old as history.

In "Is Multiculturalism the Solution?" Michel Wieviorka defines the term as "the condition in which ethnic, religious or cultural groups coexist within one society" (881). The theory is controversial for it deals with concepts of identity, equality, freedom, belonging and difference which are usually considered sources of tensions and dilemmas (882). The term has grown to cover a wide range of subjects "as diverse as cuisine and clothing, ethnicity and nationalism, education and religion, devolution and globalization" (Watson 106). The adjective 'multicultural' refers to the positive significance of visible features of cultural diversity concerning the variety of food, dress, music etc. available in a given society. The noun 'multiculturalism' refers to deeper implications of philosophical and political nature concerning "the coexistence of different orientations to engagement with the world, and the way in which those differences jostle for recognition within national and global boundaries, sometimes in relative harmony with each other, sometimes in real conflict" (Watson 107).

In his essay "Is Multiculturalism dead?" Tariq Modood, a renowned multiculturalist, states that the twentieth century witnessed the celebration of the human race as singular and equal. This sameness is not of color, language or religion but sameness of humanity. The idea

of the superiority of the white race was abhorred and considered shameful. It was a turning point in modern history as assertions of importance of recognition and celebration of difference appeared as an overwhelming necessity. Modood gives a definition of multiculturalism that forms a comprehensive solution to super cultural diversity:

What we need is a vision of citizenship that is not confined to the state, but dispersed across society, compatible with the multiple forms of contemporary group-ness, and sustained through dialogue; plural forms of representation that do not take one group as the model to which all others have to conform, and new reformed national identities. That is multiculturalism. (88)

Thus multiculturalism is fundamentally a project of inclusivity of different cultures into the vibrant and dynamic national narratives of any culturally diverse society. Hence, it is seen as a political and symbolic recognition of minority cultures, histories and traditions (Bhabha, "Liberalism" 43). Its essential pillars are basic human rights, gender equality, recognition of different cultures as worthy of respect, and promoting politics of mutual respect and inclusion. The aim of this paper is to analyze Mohja Kahf's collection *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003) through the lens of multicultural concepts. Equality, belonging, identity and recognition of differences are key concepts of multiculturalism which will be explored through the poet's depiction of her Arab roots and heritage. A reading of the poems will investigate how Kahf delves into issues of Arab American identity and how she envisions multicultural societies.

In his canonical book *A Different Mirror: The Making of Multicultural America*, the philosopher and multiculturalist Ronald Takaki argues that minorities are invisible partners to the making of the American Nation since they were excluded from the national story of the country and marginalized by its historians. Takaki believes that such marginalization, exclusion and deliberate process of omission have to be rejected. He asserts that "The Master

Narrative of the American History is a powerful and popular but inaccurate story, our country was settled by European immigrants and Americans are white” (4). According to Takaki, immigrants from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the indigenous people of the continent were mainly the basis of American history, yet they were either overlooked or uprooted from its epic story. He believes that this master narrative should be challenged and the minorities which make the multicultural history of America must be recognized and included. The ‘Master Narrative’ narrow definition of who is an American reflects the more general thinking that can be found in western curriculum, news and entertainment media, literature and public policies. Through this filter, interpretations of the ‘other’ and the world have been constructed, leaving minority groups feeling left out of history and America itself (ibid 5). So, the theories of multiculturalism attempt answers to questions such as: what or who is an American? How does an American look like? Can an American be identified on basis of race, skin color, ethnicity or religion? Caleb Rosado gives this explanation of the theory:

Multiculturalism is redefining who is an American by challenging the taken-for-granted definition of American as “white”. It is telling the people of the United States of America that an “American” is any person that is a citizen of this country either by birth or naturalization, no matter their skin color, physical features, cultural expression or national origin. The result is a delicious stew, a beautiful mosaic, that reflects the beauty of the human family. Multiculturalism is thus an inclusive process where no one is left out. (Rosado 9)

In “Multiculturalism and Integration”, Tariq Modood expounds two key concepts which he perceives as central to multiculturalism, namely difference and equality. Difference refers to how people are identified by themselves and by others in terms of being ‘black’, ‘white’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Muslim’ or ‘Arab’. This concept of difference is viewed through terms of

race, ethnicity, culture, religion and nationality. Difference should not be smothered through assimilation which is impractical and illiberal. When difference is accentuated and expressed, discriminatory practices and conflicts are challenged and mutual tolerance is encouraged. Equality is an ideal which denotes the perception of minority and different individuals as equal members socially and politically and not regarded negatively as alien or inferior within their societies. The ability of mainstream to recognize such 'positive differences' that are void of stereotyping, racism, discrimination and exclusion help minority groups perceive their identities as fluid and multiple.

Multicultural societies cherish evolving identities that are made of more than one culture and embrace interactive and dynamic concept of identity that is far from being static or ghettoized. Bhikhu Parekh defines a multicultural society as one that is made of individuals who "see it both as a community of citizens and a community of communities, and hence as a community of communally embedded and attached individuals" (340). Commitment and belonging in such societies occur when equal value of cultures and diversity of its members are recognized and respected. Parekh further elaborates that citizenship is about status and rights whereas belonging is concerned with being accepted and feeling welcome in society. Citizens feel as outsiders if they are excluded from social, political and economic participation in their communities. Therefore, multiculturalism is seen as a project of inclusivity of all groups into a national identity woven in debate and continuous discussion without imposing certain values of any group over the other. Such dialogical interaction challenges racism and stigmatization of identities only when supported with positive visions that encourage respect and inclusion of difference (Modood, "Is Multiculturalism" 86).

In multicultural environments that reject racism and white supremacy and employ new definitions of nationalism that provide a place for multiple identities, "the relationship

between groups should be dialogical rather than one of domination or uniformity” (Modood, “Multiculturalism and Integration” 4). Within such a definition, positive differences of minority groups are accepted, cultural sharing is valorized, whereas social exclusion and separate communities are not valid options (ibid 6). Minorities who have suffered severe traumas due to long periods of hostility and racism are compensated when modern states adopt multicultural strategies of tolerance, recognition, and integration.

Tolerance is the ability to perceive the different others with an eye of respect and acceptance and stop thinking that they are strangers or enemies. It also means that different cultures are equal and of great value to its members. Tolerance towards different ethnic minorities entails respect to its cultural and religious choices and practices and valuing what these cultures have to offer. Recognition means the ability to see and understand the reality that diversity is an important aspect of today’s modern world. It is the desire of the minority groups to be validated culturally, economically and politically. Equality of dignity is a basic form of recognition where the trait of being equal citizens, equal humans and equal creatures of God’s creation is acknowledged. It means the respect for a person for his/her existence as a human being, his/her ability to suffer and withstand pain, a conscious significance of his/her attributes and distinct character thus “this seeing of others as equals to ourselves, as possessing the human requisites for equal participation, characterizes the moral culture of a society” (Blum 76).

Integration is the equal opportunity given to a minority to communicate with, and be part of, the mainstream within an atmosphere of tolerance to cultural diversity. T. Modood proposes an integration that provides social interaction between members of the majority community to immigrants and ethnic minorities. These social processes of interaction should produce an intercultural dialogue that will eventually end xenophobia and intolerance (“Multiculturalism and Integration” 4).

Ethnicity is an affiliation or identification with an ethnic group. Synonyms of ethnicity include ethnic affiliation and ethnic identity. Ethnicity could be based on physical attributes, presumed ancestry, culture or national origin (Yang 39). Ethnicity can also be defined as an ascribed identity or an inherited cultural tradition that includes the various cultural attitudes, beliefs, practices, religion and language of a certain group. A. Abd Al - Salam defines an ethnic group as:

a collectivity within a larger population having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and a cultural focus upon one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance (320).

Ethnicity remains a vital and essential characteristic in modern times due to the continuous immigration around the world. It means having distinct qualities that refuse to wither away or relinquish in favor of other traits, and it also refers to resistance of the 'melting pot' assimilation or homogenization of mainstream culture. Ethnic stereotypes are types of social classification or categorization where different groups are depicted with certain traits which can be misleading or abusing. Accordingly, different groups perceive and interact with one another within the framework of these stereotypes which may not be accurate (Yang 41).

Arab Americans represent an ethnic minority that has always had a complex location compared to other minorities in the multicultural American society. They have been historically marginalized due to many factors, the most significant of which is the small numbers of Arabs compared to Asians or Latinos. The ambiguous location of the Arab American ethnic minority among other minorities resulted from their unclear or undetermined racial status whether they are white, nonwhite, people of color or even Asian. Arab Americans were strongly rendered as invisible and 'safe to hate' as they are linked to

Arabs who are often stereotypically represented as barbaric, violent, ignorant and uncivilized (Majaj, "Arab American Ethnicity" 322). Though classified as white, Arab Americans still face racism and discrimination and therefore try to articulate their ethnic identity and simultaneously integrate into mainstream community instead of assimilating and relinquishing their culture.

Recently, as a minority group, Arab Americans have experienced a great deal of violence and hostility as a consequence of the events of September 11th 2001, which made it necessary for them to negotiate their status in the political, cultural and social context of their community. Struggling to change the demonized image of Arabs and Muslims and end their exclusion from the American identity, Arab Americans assert and celebrate ethnic roots culturally and politically through artistic events, journals, conferences and literature. A cultural pride and an ethnic assertion of the Arab and Arab American identity are major themes in ethnic literature produced by second generation Arab American writers (ibid 323).

In this respect, Arab American literature has educational purposes similar to multicultural education as it conceptualizes cultural differences and promotes the celebration of heritage. It serves as a proper vehicle to facilitate the knowledge or a discovery of the 'Other'. Thus, multicultural literature is meant to offer a correct image and better understanding of minority groups within one society so that racial tensions are decreased. Minority writers attempt to convey visions of their countries of origin with the aim of constructing knowledge and reducing prejudices towards their cultures. Thus, ethnic literature displays "a mosaic of multiculturalism" and has become more concerned with resisting prior claims of assimilation as the idea of 'the melting pot' has been replaced with the 'Salad bowl' metaphor which implies the strong assertion of identity and the retaining of cultural distinctiveness (Alawi 1).

Americans of Arab origin have been in the United States for over a century producing

original literature that is representative of the Arab identity and deals with its immigrant history. Arab American literature is an important ethnic literature that expresses issues related to Arabs and Middle Eastern people and which has taken prominent status recently with the purpose of informing western readers about the region especially after the 9/11 events. It is also this type of writing that can inform the readers about the dynamics of a society that is constituted of a variety of cultures.

Mohja Kahf (1967-) is an Arab American poet, novelist and academic writer. Her work spans many genres with a particular interest in Arab American and ethnic themes. Kahf was born in Damascus, Syria, and at the age of four her family immigrated to the United States where her parents pursued a scholarly path and earned degrees in Economics and Pharmacology. Kahf followed their footsteps and earned a doctorate degree in Comparative Literature which she teaches at the University of Arkansas. Her first book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: from Termagant to Odalisque* (1999) was about the image of the Muslim and Arab women in western media and literature. Kahf published two poetry collections: *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003), and *Hagar Poems* (2016). She also wrote a novel entitled *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). Her work mainly explores issues of identity related to her Arabic and ethnic roots and is thoroughly marked with a special preoccupation with the value and freedom of the Arab and Muslim woman (Fadda-Conrey 159).

Kahf's poetry collection *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003) makes use of the figure of the legendary story teller Scheherazad of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Her poems revitalize and restore the strength and intelligence of this original heroine of the Middle East and challenge orientalist stereotypical representations of Arab Muslim women as passive, ignorant, and oppressed through her women characters who tell modern tales or send the readers e-mails. Kahf's poems are stimulated by both Arab and American cultures and are

greatly influenced by both Arabic and American poetry tradition. Thus, her poetry is a mixture of both Syrian and American influences. Kahf's task as a poet is to "give an honest voice and teach something that is true" as well as to defend her people against charges of terrorism and violence. Her poems bring forth voices of Arab immigrants in their new home in the U.S. and portray multiethnic scenes that never entered any literature (Kahf, "Poetry is My Home Address" 10). In addition to giving simple accounts of immigrant stories, stressing unique qualities of the Arab identity, Kahf's poetry about Arab Americans and other minorities helps her western audience to grasp and understand other cultures and wield worlds together. She explains:

I read Jersey poet William Carlos Williams's Paterson and wanted to write my Paterson, loved Walt Whitman's exuberant, sensuous parade of American people and wanted to add mine to the catalog, people who had never been in any photo album of America. (ibid 11)

This assertion is similar to Ronald Takaki's debate in his book *A Different Mirror* as he proposes that the history of America has to include immigrants from all races and ethnicities. Kahf's e-mails offer different narratives that inform western readers about her ethnic minority. Moreover, they demand recognition of Arabs as equal partners in the making of multicultural America together with other minorities. As an Arab American, Kahf is unwilling to stay silent about her ethnic roots and rather celebrates this ethnic identity and heritage. Thus her poems are tools to eradicate the invisibility of her Arab ancestors. The modern Scheherazadian stories create a method of recording history of a group of people who insist that they belong to the American nation despite their different culture and religion. The poems strongly reconstruct an image of America which has Arabs as well as other minorities in the mirror that should reflect them all.

In her collection of poems, the poet attempts to construct knowledge about both her

Arab ancestors and Arab American identity to remove prejudicial stereotypes about them. She chooses to tackle themes of hybrid identity, tolerance and recognition of difference. Her poetry is informed with an awareness of issues of the hybrid identity of Arabs in America. Kahf's collection is particularly preoccupied with multicultural issues of identity, belonging, and representation. Her poems criticize discrimination and sexism in both Arab and American cultures. In her essay "Defying Categories: The Pity Committee and the Careful Reader", she defies the idea of demonizing Islamic difference and the assumptions that Islam and Muslims are inherently or exceptionally sexist. She insists that these stereotypes do not help gender or social justice issues, explaining that:

We see how stereotypes distort us as human beings; they take our energy away from real ethical development. When we say that the Muslim women do not fit the Victim stereotype, we must not step away from our moral obligation to change the realities of Muslim sexism, just as we must work against endemic sexism in America. (120)

As a daughter of Arab Muslim immigrants, Kahf was raised on Muslim traditional teachings. She was deeply influenced by religious narratives and teachings of Prophet Mohammed and his companions. In this environment, Kahf learned to respect and appreciate Arab heritage and ethnic roots. She also developed a fascination with Arab Muslim women figures, among them Aisha, Prophet Mohammed's wife, who was the most appealing as she possessed knowledge and had "eloquence and nerve". Writing about Arab roots, Muslim hijab and representation of Arab Muslim women are crucial themes in Kahf's poetry. In her essay "Poetry is My Home Address", she makes the aim of her writing clear, defining it as a "personal truth telling about unrecognized or misrecognized part of reality" (14). She attempts to limit ethnocentric generalizations about the different 'other'. Through her daring poems she confidently tries to "face stereotyping and violent attacks from the mainstream ...

to be a woman warrior (14).

As a poet, Kahf identifies and connects herself to the Arab culture and its signifying markers such as Arabic language and hijab or the head cover Muslim women wear. She points out a connection to this type of traditional dress which ties her to Arab ethnic roots: “I like hijab; it connects me sensuously and sartorially to worlds of women including my mother and my mother’s mother with whom I would not give up that mark of connection” (ibid 14). She defends the Islamic veil or hijab and refuses to see it as sign of oppression or ignorance.

Kahf begins her volume of poetry with an emphasis on the importance of the inclusion of the different accounts of minority groups into the history of America. Stories of immigration are crucial in this respect as they stress how these immigrants suffered and how they perceived their new country. In the first part of the collection, the stories of immigrants are based on what Takaki calls the “mystic chords of memory” (Takaki 20), where the poet bases her poems on autobiographical incidents from her own life and memories of her family members. In the opening poem “Voyager Dust”, Kahf’s speaker mentions Chinese immigrants as an example for immigrants who come to America from a different part of the world and then refers to her mother who comes from Syria. The poem sheds light on the burdened immigrants who leave their countries of origin travelling to a distant land to pursue better life yet they carry a burden on their shoulder and a dream of return in their hearts. They are alienated and dislocated from their beloved countries in this strange and mysterious new country:

When they arrive in the new country,

voyagers carry it on their shoulders,

It was the voyager’s dust from China

It lay in the foreign stitching of her placket

It said: We will meet again in Beijing. (1)

The speaker relates the experience of a Chinese woman immigrant to her own mother who was also an Arab immigrant as both are seen as different and foreign. The Chinese woman is recognized as ‘foreign’ and seen as different by the majority. The speaker’s mother is also a member of a marginalized ethnic group who wishes to meet her family once more in Syria:

My mother had voyager’s dust in her scarves

I imagine her a new student like this woman on the bus,

getting home, shaking out the clothes from her suitcase,

The poet’s mother carries the same ‘voyage dust’ or feelings of alienation and displacement on her scarves which signifies her Muslim identity. The scarf is a religious identity marker similar to the foreign stitching on the clothes of the Chinese immigrant woman. The Arabic mother is a student who travels to the new country with her son and daughter (the poet) after they have been “driven out across the earth” (1), as a result of the destruction of their city in Syria. Both Syrian and Chinese immigrants are marked with difference in their new society and both share the dream of return to their country of origin. Both are heart-broken as they are alienated and separated from the warmth of their mother country. The Syrian mother’s children are Arab Americans who still carry this burden on their shoulder in the same way their mother did and they feel this connection to their country of origin and its culture. In this poem, Kahf deliberately deals with “the unspoken and unrepresented past that haunt her present history as an Arab American” (Hasabelnaby 6). She writes:

It was voyager dust. It said:

We will meet again in Damascus,

in Aleppo. We will meet again.

It was Syria in her scarves.

We never knew it

Now it is on our shoulders too (1).

In her pursuit to create unprejudiced knowledge and to deal with this complete lack of information or the misinformation about the Arabs, Kahf tells the stories of immigrants and simultaneously establishes a link between Arabs with other minorities in the U.S. stressing the importance of affiliation with one's ethnic roots.

In "Fayetteville as in Fate", the poet gives a minute description of a multicultural community in two American cities. A rainbow of cultures appears in the sky of the poem as each line carries a sign or a cultural marker of a certain ethnic group. The poem begins as the narrator tells her readers how she moved from New Jersey to a new town, Fayetteville, Arkansas, in what she calls "the immigrant way" stressing the fact of her origin as an immigrant:

I moved here from New Jersey and I like it just fine,
 Although I miss belligerent store clerks
 and being able to rent *Abi Fawq el-Shagara*
 at the Egyptian video/ pizzeria/ travel agency (6)

The narrator has just left her old town where she used to rent videos of her favorite Egyptian movies and remembers how she felt comfortable with everyone at the pizzeria, travel agency and the grocery store. She also misses practicing her Urdu with random gas station attendants, and how once a Wal-Mart clerk recognized her Arabic roots and greeted her with Arabic "*Shukran*" (6). The narrator thinks that moving to Fayetteville is a pure act of fate so she pronounces the name of the town as she does the word 'fate'. The new town is a model of ethnic and cultural diversity as the narrator describes how the community is made of diverse cultural backgrounds as it consists of Native Americans, French, Spanish, Africans and Europeans:

There is Cherokee and Choctaw in it,

around the rims of people's eyes.

There is Spain and France left in the names of things

There is the Wild West and the Old South here. (6)

Such multicultural atmosphere brings the vivid memory of home town in Damascus, Syria to the mind of the narrator:

I hear that people pick "poke" here,

and my family memory stirs with people who picked the khibbeze.

Whole populations of seed sowers and herb knowers

some from Damascus, some from Fayetteville, they meet

in my head like the walls of the Red Sea crashing together. (6)

The narrator blends the present U.S. environment with the past memories of Syria and the Middle East in general to produce a mix of metaphors that describe the nature of the relationship between different people:

Like a reckless cook throwing things into a pot,

hoping they don't explode when they touch each other,

hoping they don't turn bitter when the heat rises.

Their names and their languages are wildly different

and they believe improbable, vile things about each other (7)

The imagery of the mixed ingredients resembles the famous multicultural metaphor of the 'salad bowl' which combines different elements each with its original shape, colour and taste and yet they mix with harmony. The imagery also hints at the bitterness of the consequences if the heat rises and turns the salad bowl into a 'melting pot' which is another metaphor used to refer to complete assimilation into the mainstream and the loss of one's original characteristics in order to be accepted. The narrator believes that people are different yet they all share feelings of humanity and dignity. They have similar emotions and aspirations though

their names and languages are different:

This one wears overalls and that one wears a *sirwal*,
 but the open hand with the dirt in its creases
 makes a map both can read. (7)

The poet/speaker states that the aim of her poetry is to bring different people together and build bridges of understanding between them so they co-exist and live in peace and harmony:

But who will coax them close enough to know this?
 Darling, it is poetry
 It is my fate to kiss the creases that they may recognize each other. (7)

The narrator believes that recognition and acceptance of differences of one another is how cultural barriers are destroyed. The poem concludes with a prayer for stronger cross-cultural communication among the different ethnic minorities and the majority that will ensure a successful multicultural society:

May their children e-mail one another and not bomb one another
 May they download each other's mother's bread recipes
 May they learn each other's tongue and put words into each other's mouth.
 Say Amen. Say آمين
 Say it, say it. (7)

“Fayetteville as in Fate” is an ethnic poem that has pure aspects of the multicultural theory, namely the recognition and acceptance of differences, and the necessity of co-existence of different cultures to achieve social cohesion. The poem is a call for knowledge construction that will enhance tolerance and understanding between cultures. The poem also urges a unity forged out of difference where race and ethnicity are not divisive to the identity of the nation. In this poem, Kahf exposes multicultural themes par excellence where a dialogue between cultures is her sincere wish.

In “Lateefa”, two major aspects of multicultural theory are tackled; hyphenated identities and acceptance of cultural diversity. In this poem, Kahf paints an astonishing picture of a multiethnic society where cultures mix and people of different backgrounds mingle and intermarry. The setting of the poem is a multiethnic wedding celebrated in a park. The poem exposes multicultural identities in harmony where the private loyalties and nationalities do not hinder the fruitful blending of cultures. “Lateefa” portrays the migrant and diasporic community in the US where people need to be recognized and negotiate their positions in relation to the dominant culture. The main character in the poem is one of the guests who conveys this need as she calls her friends, the groom, the bride and her little child as well as other Americans to understand, discover and recognize that there are positive differences that need to be acknowledged. The poem begins:

Connie, Connie!

Constance Mustafa’s marrying Muhammad Smith

down in Bayonne Park today

God, I love this state!

An Afro-Caribbean Muslim woman

eating paprika- tossed Hungarian potato salad

at the wedding of a Pakistani-American to a West Indian man.

Be happy Columbus: at last, at least the two Indies meet. (21)

The narrator is amazed by the cultural diversity of the wedding scene. The narrator supports this multiethnic condition which does not initiate separatism or exclusion but rather proposes an acceptance and respect to diversity as she asserts “God I love this state!”. The members of the minority group in the wedding scene are not discrete or unchanging but they are fluid and hybrid. They affiliate with their ethnic roots meanwhile they practice social mixing and cultural sharing with each other as well as with the majority. The names in the poems are

symbolic of hybrid fluid identities or hyphenated identities which have become common in the American communities where they are “personal amalgams of bits from various groups and heritages and there is no one dominant social identity to which all must conform. The result will be a society composed of a blend of cultures, a multicultural” (Modood, “Multiculturalism and Integration” 7). The merging of the names symbolizes the cultural mosaic of the society.

In Kahf’s poem, Takaki’s critical concept of the ‘Master Narrative’ is challenged by the presence of racial diversity in the wedding, an event which signifies a condition of happiness and continuity. Not only the mixture of different races is accentuated but the religious diversity of New Jersey is also expressed in the following lines:

I know the storefront mosques in the neighborhoods
where ‘*Allahu akbar*’ alternates
where church bells often ring at sunset,
confusing us in Ramadan. (23)

The speaker supports the multicultural ideal of peaceful co-existence and the recognition of each minority group regardless of race, religion or origin. There are no cultural dichotomies of ‘us’ and ‘them’. These binaries are rejected and challenged in favour of a new world that is wide, encompassing and peaceful for everyone to live in harmony. The following lines call for an ‘inclusive national identity’ and a peaceful co-existence of cultures instead of a ‘clash of cultures’:

Hey Connie, you think we can do it?
If we love what we are we can make it
survive here: George Washington, meet Harun al-Rashid.
Connie, there’s room here for all of us. (23)

These lines strongly refer to minority groups as citizens who belong to their multicultural

community. They desire to enjoy their rights of citizenship that are “imaginatively shaped by their sense of country, about who they are, where they are coming from and where they are going- by their ‘national story’”. This national story refers to the national identity where every citizen needs to be “written into the story- backwards as well as forward” (Modood, “Multiculturalism and integration” 3).

The conclusion of the poem expresses an urge for knowledge construction about minority cultures. As the wedding is held in a park, the guests are Muslims and therefore a traffic officer cannot understand the situation because of his ignorance of Muslim weddings. The officer asks the speaker in the poem to move the cars or he will give them parking fines. The officer’s inability to grasp the existence of the wedding because there is no priest in the ceremony signifies a crucial need to promote an understanding of multiculturalism. The officer cannot recognize or grasp the cultural difference, a situation which denotes a serious lack of knowledge about minorities who exist in multicultural communities:

“Officer, if you could just wait for the wedding to ____

“What wedding, lady? I don’t see no priest. Where’s the priest? “

“We don’t have __ see, we aren’t ____ we’re ____”

“Lady, you people gotta move your cars or they get tickets, see? “ (24)

This inability to understand the nature of the different others implies a possible exclusion of these minorities from the community. The poem represents minority groups and their intercultural relations and demands a more positive attitude towards the multicultural situation. The poem is a call for recognition and inclusion of minorities as it strongly suggests that their differences need to be recognized, supported and accommodated in the public sphere.

Kahf’s “Lateefa” stresses the need for “creating a new, ongoing ‘we’ out of all the little, medium-sized and large platoons that make up the country” (Modood,

“Multiculturalism” 3). In this poem, the poet brings into focus the kaleidoscopic nature of the multicultural American city of New Jersey and asserts through the imagery “the sensuous parade of American people” (Kahf, “Poetry is my Home Address” 14). She also expresses the necessity to learn and discover about the minority cultures and their different practices and traditions and calls for a state of open-mindedness that will enable co-existence and harmony to form a ‘community of communities’ (Parekh 340).

The freedom of choice to affiliate with one’s cultural, traditional and religious roots is a multicultural ideal based on human and civil rights for individuals as well as for groups. In her group of poems entitled “Hijab Scenes”, Kahf defends wearing ‘hijab’ as a civil right and an act of personal choice. A hijab is an essential part of the identity of religious Muslim women which denotes a strong commitment to religious traditions upon their free will. “Hijab Scene #3” reveals an incident where an Arab American woman is totally invisible and seen as ‘other’ because she wears Muslim hijab. The speaker of the poem tries to communicate with a school receptionist who does not recognize her as a regular American mother, simply because of her appearance as a Muslim woman wearing the head cover or hijab:

“Would you like to join the PTA?” she repeated,

“I would” I said, but it was no good,

she wasn’t seeing me.

“I would, I would, “I sent up flares,

beat on drums, waved navy flags, tried smoke signals,

American Sign Language, Morse code, Western Union, telex. (25)

The speaker tries hard to communicate with the school attendant in order to make him/her recognize her existence but she fails. The speaker represents an American citizen who is marginalized within her community, therefore she resists forms of racial and religious prejudice and refuses to be invisible, demonized or dehumanized saying “Dammit, Jim, I’m a

Muslim woman, not a Klingon!” (25). Again, the character is seen through Takaki’s ‘Master Narrative of American History’ filter. The inability to recognize the speaker of the poem is one that originates from the inability to see America as a multicultural nation because “in the creation of our national identity, “American” has been defined as “white”, not to be “white” is to be designated as the “Other” - different, inferior, and unassimilable” (Takaki 4).

The Muslim head scarf is connected with negative stereotypical images of Arab Americans which “relegate this group to the margins of American society but also render them invisible, denying them access to unbiased representation” (Fadda- Conrey 155). The speaker rejects this marginalization and exclusion from her environment and offers a resolution for this dilemma as she asks a satirical question “Can we save the ship we’re both on, / can we save the dilithium crystals?” (25). The ship imagery refers to humanity that can be saved only by recognition and acceptance of each other’s differences.

In another poem, the speaker asserts that wearing the Muslim Hijab is not a barrier if it is accepted and recognized as an equal right of the freedom of choice. It is also a symbol of Muslim identity which links or joins the speaker to other minorities especially Blacks with whom she identifies herself as woman of color in “Hijab Scene #5”:

When you’re wearing *hijab*, Black men
 you don’t even know materialize all over Hub city
 like an army chivalry, opening doors, springing into gallantry.
 Drop the scarf, and (if you’re light)
 You suddenly pass (lonely) for white. (31)

The speaker is recognized by other communities of color, respected and treated with dignity and chivalry. She is not marginalized or invisible to them while the mainstream will accept her only if she decides to withdraw from her culture and tradition and take her scarf off. The speaker rejects the idea of losing one’s identity in order to be accepted into the white

mainstream and believes that in this case she will be admitted but will be lonely feeling alienated and displaced. The poetic voice offers images of the experience of what it means to be a veiled Arab American in the United States and impliedly demands recognition of her cultural and religious values.

In “Hijab scene #7”, Kahf counters the negative stereotypes linked to Muslim Americans; men and women alike. In this poem, Kahf answers imaginary questions asked by the majority who tend to demonize the unfamiliar or stigmatize the different ‘other’. For the poet, these stereotypes are divisive and contradictory to the reality of Arab Americans:

No, I’m not bald under the scarf

No, I’m not from that country where women can’t drive cars

What else do you need to know relevant to my buying insurance,
opening a bank account, reserving a seat on a flight?(39)

The speaker also denies those assumptions that Arabs are terrorists carrying explosives. She asserts that the only weapons she possesses are her words and her liberal ideas of equality that can change the world:

Yes, I speak English

Yes, I carry explosives

They’re called words

And if you don’t get up off your assumptions,

They’re going to blow you away. (39)

The poem rejects falsified social representations that provide a model of social relations acting as the lens through which other groups are seen and understood negatively. The poet/speaker represents a member of minority group who seeks to develop other forms of representation that decrease or prevent “stigmatizing representations about ‘others’ and about differences that function as barriers and pose constraints on inter-cultural exchange and

dialogue” (‘Howarth 329).

The hijab scenes poems offer real experiences lived by the poetic persona with glimpses of the tensions and uneasiness that accompany intercultural encounters as they are actually lived. These scenes stand out as efforts to translate social, and educational problems into the local context of Arab American society aspiring for a change in attitudes and ways of thinking of, perceiving and appreciating the ‘other’.

In “*Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective*”, Kahf construes another satirical and highly imaginative minority discourse which challenges orientalist stereotypical images about Eastern women. The speaker starts with Arabic words written in English letters:

Yawm min al-ayyam we just decided: Enough is enough
 A unique opportunity, the Retrospective brought us together
 I looked across the gallery at Red Culottes and gave the signal
 She passed it on to Woman in Veil and we kicked through canvas. (64)

The paintings are for Arabic and Middle Eastern women who revolt against stereotypical representations of oppressed women used for pleasure. The women in the portraits are naked, oppressed and kept in Oda or rooms to serve the sexual desires of men. They decide to leave their positions in the portraits and join the real world to show their true identity:

We woke up Harmony in Yellow
 Asia and Zulma, older, led the procession
 “Everyone whose arms are numb from sleeping on them,
 raise your hands”
 Blue Nude decided she was with us. (64)

The speaker uses names of the portraits like the Moroccan With Magnolias, Hindu Pose, Turkish Chair and Pink Nude to refer to the women who escape these portraits in the gallery to attack political institutions and authoritative regimes in both eastern and western countries.

Metaphorically, they have been frozen in their eternal postures for years in these paintings and they want to cover their naked bodies and leave their demeaning positions in the orientalist presentations of western art. Symbolically, the poem challenges established forms of representations in western art and orientalist stereotypical images about Eastern women. These women rebel against inscribed images imposed on them and thus defy a long history of western manipulation of the east (Said 56):

I helped With Turkish Chair rebraid her hair
Most of the Culottes and With Magnolias wanted clothes
Their nipples were icy and they were coughing,
The next thing everybody wanted to do was leave
The guards were understandably upset but we noticed
many of us were larger than life. (65)

The exhibition is far from being honest and totally degrading for the women in the portraits who rise to defend their rights and demand the recognition of their true identity. They reject the way they have been represented to the western culture as silent, exotic, exploited and oppressed. Kahf draws her characters as strong, educated, successful and responsible women possessing agency and refusing marginalization as the speaker asserts that they were “larger than life”. The women in the poem cover their bodies with “museum banners” and choose upon their free will to wear ‘hijab’ in an assertion of their refusal of western nakedness. After they leave their positions in the portraits, they immerse in modern life showing their free will to participate in political, social, religious and educational endeavors:

The world we woke to is full of countries
most of us have never heard of before:
The Lame Robe immediately got involved in the Algerian civil war.
The Persian Model went on Hajj,

I, Small Odalisque in a Purple Robe decided to study law, all of it:
English Common, Napoleonic Code, German, Russian, Turkish,
Egyptian civil, Islamic shariah, American constitutional, one by one. (67)

In the poem, the museum represents a western discourse that portray Arabic women who are seen and treated by their communities as ignorant, weak and silent. Kahf's imagery turns the women in the paintings into modern women who rebel against their positions and demand to be seen for what they really are. The poem deconstructs this stereotypical vision which transformed Eastern women into exotic 'Harem'. The poet reconstructs knowledge about these eastern women offering images of competing truths between the past and the present. They are strong-willed, educated and daring women:

I in my Purple Robe gave the closing argument
"We're not anti-art, we love Expressionists.
And Impressionists, and Cubists even, Why,
We just don't want to be made something we're not
It's a lie. The paintings lie about us. We were made to live a lie." (68)

Kahf rejects the representation of Arab women as oppressed, ignorant or marginalized in western art. Her unique choice for the museum setting and the paintings of the naked women to represent the Middle Eastern women in western eyes is symbolic of the relationships between these two cultures. According to Mackey, the function of the museum is to represent cultures and nations, and to represent relationships with others, both inside and outside its borders. Museums are involved in defining the identities of communities or in denying them identity (414). The poem implicitly attacks western culture which deliberately tarnishes and denies the true identity of the Arab and the Middle Eastern women by its dishonest representations. For Kahf, museums are not isolated cultural spaces where images are shown as pure history. Rather, they reflect present modes of perception exactly as those presented in

cinema, television and media channels. The poem links the representations of the past with present reflections of current thinking and events and uses the exhibit to send ironical messages that criticize the western representation of women denying a singular and fixed truth about them. Kahf's imagery is subtle and creative and her use of irony is highly appropriate to correct the idea of misrecognition and misrepresentation. Her imaginary odalisques symbolically stand for misrepresented Arab women who refuse to submit to the white cultural model imposed on them and decide to make a "Thawrah" or a revolution. Furthermore, Kahf introduces a hybrid text as she fuses Arabic with English letters like the Arabic word "Thawrah". The poem is characterized by a recurrent use of Arabic words into its lines, which makes it linguistically hybrid in order to assert the importance of both sides of identity. This linguistic hybridity betrays two different linguistic forms of consciousness inherent in the poet's identity reflecting a deep desire to share one's language and culture and an urgent need for recognition.

Kahf's modern version of the legendary Scheherazad is a multiplicity of characters: she is an Arab immigrant, an Arab American hybrid, a revolutionist and a Muslim feminist. She is loyal to her family, to her birthplace and her new home as she represents a state of embracing two different cultures. Her modern e-mails involve multicultural characters embracing ideals of acceptance and tolerance of the different 'Other', celebrating her Arabic culture and religion and asserting her hybrid Arab American identity. These characters are strong women who define their history, identity and heritage powerfully. They are intelligent and daring women who liberate all women from injustices and tyranny of both east and west (Sabry 119).

In her poems, Kahf wishes to maintain what Michel Wieviorka calls an "individual subjectivity" as one constructs his/her own existence and define his/her own choices without being subjected to predetermined norms or roles. The poet finds no paradox or contradiction between her assertion of her individuality and what multicultural thinkers refer to as

“collective cultural identity” (Fadda-Conrey 176). She wishes that she could be able to participate in her new home and simultaneously “to be identified with a specific collectivity, a memory, a language, a religion, a collective experience...and not to be despised for this identification, disqualified or stigmatized” (Weivoirka 893). The poems provide a clarifying illustration of how the individual subjectivity and freedom of choice is by no means contradictory to ‘collective identity’ or the identity of the group. Similarly, there is no contradiction between multicultural respect of the group’s traditional practices, if they are compatible with human rights and dignity, and particularly to the individual’s subjectivity.

To conclude, Kahf’s *E-mails from Scheherazad* contributes to the recognition of the Arab culture and Arab American identity as the poems construct knowledge and correct preconceived ideas about Arab Americans as an ethnic minority group. The poet celebrates her Arab origin, tradition and language in an attempt to limit Islamophobia and racism. The poems portray Arab Americans in their new home, negotiate their identity, enhance their visibility and challenge prejudiced views about them. Kahf’s poetry is representative of multicultural literature that seek the recognition and inclusion of the history of Arabs as an ethnic minority in the United States through immigrant stories. The poems are considered as successful attempts to discover the identity of the Arabic woman, limit her marginalization and emphasize her agency and strength.

Kahf’s Scheherazadian narratives merge the self and the other and make cultural barriers and social divides fade away as the characters in each poem attempt to discover and recognize each other. They succeed to deconstruct and destabilize the orientalist negative stereotypes about Arab identity and Arab women in particular. Moreover, they conceptualize an idea of Americanness that includes all cultural groups into one national story. Kahf’s poems challenge the ‘Master Narrative’ that excludes minorities from the history of multicultural America and assert their citizenship and belonging to the nation.

The analysis of the poems shows that the e-mails from the new Scheherazad are messages to represent models of the Arab culture symbolized in dress and language and insisting at the same time on resisting oppression, rebellion against stereotypical images and rejection of marginalization. The poems are calls for acceptance of difference and diversity. Kahf's *E-mails from Scheherazad* construes a comprehensive vision of multiculturalism that includes a celebration of difference, and an attempt to inclusiveness that will guarantee a cohesive society. They also offer an illustration of multicultural ideals which discourage xenophobia, racism, fear or rejection of the 'Other' opting for open-mindedness towards otherness.

The speakers of the poems are individuals in a multicultural society who are encouraged to think and believe of the importance of harmony and tolerance because they have a shared destiny of their nation. The poems clearly illustrate hyphenated identities, which are closely related to multiculturalism, as they reflect a state of diversity of cultures marked with fluidity and sometimes alienation. Kahf's poems try to draw the many faces of the nation, a nation that is amazingly made of varied races, ethnicities and religions. They offer 'a different mirror' where minorities are reflected in a new light and a new vision. They present Arab Americans' belonging to their nation and their citizenship demanding equal rights of recognition and inclusion. Kahf celebrates difference and considers it as an integral component of the American national identity and she definitely succeeds in making her poems a 'photo album of America'.

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