

Book Reviews

E-mails from Scheherazad, by Mohja Kahf, Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 2003. 102 pages. \$24.95 (cloth); pb. \$12.95.

REVIEWED BY SIRÈNE HARB

In her poetry, Mohja Kahf skillfully weaves details from her lived reality with a global, transnational vision. She challenges stereotypes about Muslim women, the Arab world, America, and the Middle East, in a style marked by humor, anger, and confrontation. In addition to her poetry collection, *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Kahf is the author of one novel, short stories, creative non-fiction, essays, and literary criticism. Kahf also contributes poems and essays to the web site *Muslim WakeUp!*

As a Syrian-American, a Muslim, a feminist, and a woman writer, Kahf entertains a complex relationship with figurations of Arab-American ethnicity, sexuality, memory, and Islam. Her work is involved in the creation of new practices which mediate the reinterpretation of individual and collective experiences from hybrid and multiple perspectives. The dialogic nature of Kahf's writing emanates from her awareness of the necessity of negotiating modernity and traditions by stressing the intimate connection between multivalent strategies of inscription capable of resisting hegemonic networks of power.

Such forms of resistance pervade the author's poetic rendering of her familial, communal, and personal landscapes in *E-mails from Scheherazad*. The richness of these landscapes is reflected through the variety of themes presented in the book, including immigration, the trauma of September 11, "mysteries" of the headscarf (*hijab*), historical revision, cross-cultural clashes, Arab manhood, and the revolution of the Odalisques. The author's treatment of these themes ranges from the philosophical to the humorous; Quranic terms, American idioms, Biblical and pagan references, Assyrian and Babylonian goddesses, and Egyptian movie titles, commingle in her work.

Reflecting this carnivalesque blend, Kahf's poems also revel in the touching and exuberant diversity embraced by the United States. Her appreciative stance, however, does not make her blind to manifestations of mainstream America's xenophobia and its privileging of "white" norms and dominant cultural paradigms. For instance, in "Lateefa", Kahf celebrates "New Jersey sling[ing] us all across that hip,/that hip thrust out, and hop[ing] to manage" (p. 23), the spaces necessary to accommodate Connie Mustafa's marriage to Muhammad Smith, and the teaching of Omar the Great at Roosevelt Elementary. Despite such signs of diversity and intercultural dialogue, the poem ends with a character putting in question the authenticity of this form of Americanness. In fact, when an officer asks Lateefa, one of the wedding guests, to tell people to move their cars in order not to get tickets, she says, "Officer, if you could wait for the wedding to ...". Interrupting her, he asks, "What wedding, lady? I don't see no priest. Where's the priest?" (p. 24). Despite her attempts to explain that not all wedding ceremonies need have a priest, Lateefa is unable to get the message through to the officer blinded by his assumptions about American weddings.

Other poems by Kahf, such as "Voyager Dust", "The Skaff Mother Tells the Story", and "Word from the Younger Skaff", examine the consequences of moving to a new country, either to explore new opportunities, or to flee historical oppression. For instance, in "Voyager Dust", an encounter with

a Chinese woman, whose clothes carry the smell of dust from the homeland, reminds the poet of her mother and the smell of her scarves. For the mother, this smell stands for the promise to “meet again in Damascus,/in Aleppo” (p. 1). Stubborn and enduring, the legacy of memory is passed on to her son and daughter, who, not unlike other descendents of immigrants, are haunted by “[t]he dream of return” (p. 15). This dream drives “a granddaughter [who] turns thirty” to go back to her ancestral home and to reclaim “the curlicued/stories hanging in the air like dust” (“The Dream of Return”, p. 17).

However, this return does not negate the importance immigrants attach to the new country, as they try “to leap the gulch between two worlds, each/with its claim” (“The Passing There” p. 20). Literal and figurative processes of crossing abound in the poet’s and her family’s attempts to negotiate their relationship to the new and the foreign. Specifically, Kahf relates an episode from her childhood in Indiana in the seventies, when she and her brother “crossed through a field./Its golden music wasn’t ours. We listened/to its cornflower choirs and tried/to feel like Hoosiers” (p. 19). The purity of these efforts to become American was “contaminated” by aunts and uncles who “fed us Syrian pastries .../We sang the anthems/of their remembered landscapes on request/... At school, we pledged allegiance,/trying not to feel like traitors” (p. 19).

For the adult Kahf, the bridging of the two traditions or the anthems of Syria and the United States is possible through the redemptive and infinite possibilities of poetry. This function of poetry is not limited to the individual realm, but it also works on the collective level to bring together geographically distanced groups including “seed sowers and herb knowers, women kneading dough, and farmers in overalls and sirwal” from Fayetteville and Damascus (pp. 6-7). As Kahf puts it, these people who “believe improbable, vile things about each other” (p. 7), will discover commonalities among their experiences through the poet’s words: “Darling, it is poetry/Darling, I am a poet/It is my fate/like this, like this, to kiss/the creases around the eyes and the eyes/that they may recognize each other” (p. 7).

Another striking characteristic of Kahf’s poetry resides in its playfulness and sense of humor. “Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective” exemplifies this approach; in three languages, English, Arabic, and French, it depicts the revolution of the Odalisques triggered by the remarks of two veiled women at a museum. As Kahf explains in a tragi-comic tone, this revolution is the result of the constraining conditions imposed on the women in the paintings. They feel their backs aching, “a seventy-five year kind of ache” (p. 64) and their “ass[es] ... cold from ... blue tiles” (p. 65). Another model, “The Woman with Goldfish” “join[s] them since she had a migraine from all those years/sitting and staring at her goldfish swim in circles” (p. 65). Arab nationalists, Iranian dissidents, and Western feminists try to hijack the revolution of these women and are eager to speak on their behalf. Ironically, “[t]he National Organization for Women got annoyed/after some of ... [them] put on *hijab*”, but they still wanted these women “up on their dais as tokens of diversity” (p. 66). The Odalisques resist these forms of silencing since they have learned from their historical experiences to cherish self-representation and the power of their own voice. However, they do not deny the importance of learning man’s language; in fact, one of them studies law and “sue[s] the pants off the Matisse estate and the museums” (p. 67).

Some of the themes developed in “*Thawrah*”, such as the seminal importance of women’s self-empowerment, self-knowledge and refusal of commodification, are refined and developed in other poems that operate on a more personal and intimate level. The titles of these poems are telling; they include “The Marvelous Women”, “The Woman Dear to Herself (i.e. *azizatu nafsaha*)”, “To My

Queenly Daughters”, and “My Body Is Not Your Battleground”. In “The Marvelous Women”, for instance, Kahf reclaims women’s bodies and words expressed in a “third language, the language of queens” (p. 51). The poet sees herself as a privileged, hungry transcriber of these exceptional women’s experiences and of the “conjuring recipes ... [they] hoard/in the chests of ... [their] great-grandmothers” (p. 52). “[S]wimmers/in dangerous waters, defiers of sharks ...”, these women have a matrilineage anchored in the Eastern and the Western traditions. They are “thirsty Hagars and laughing Sarahs,/... slinky Zuleikas of desire,/gay Walladas, Harriets/parting the sea, Esthers in the palace,/Penelopes of patient scheming” (p. 52).

For Kahf, these women’s lives reflect the characteristics of the “woman dear to herself”, who preserves her wholeness and belief in her self-worth, refusing to “chop herself like an onion/ She doesn’t peel herself and sweep away the dry peelings” (“The Woman Dear to Herself”, p. 55). Understanding the power of her natural rhythm and cycle, this woman “knows the geography of her body/and how to give good directions home” (p. 55). She is an inspiration to every man, woman, and child. Empowered by her model and strength are many women, including the poet, who reclaims her body from the colonizing and patriarchal pressures coming from both “eastern and western fronts and armaments” (“My Body Is Not Your Battleground”, p. 59).

In this quest for self-fulfillment, the poet’s experience echoes that of Scheherazad, the protagonist who gave her poetry collection its title. In *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Kahf recounts a different story about Shahrayar’s wife. She comes back from ancient narratives to live in Hackensack, New Jersey; she gets divorced and shares with her husband custody of their little girl. She “teach[es] creative writing at Montclair State,/And ... [is] on ... [her] seventh novel and book tour” (p. 43). Through the power of her storytelling and writing, modern-day Scheherazad, not unlike Kahf, catalyzes processes of penetration into the labyrinth of the self. As Kahf asserts in “So You Think You Know Scheherazad”, “And suddenly you find yourself/swimming through the sea to the Reef of Extremity,/ flying to the Valley of All That Is Possible,/... landing in a field where you wrestle with Iblis,/whose form changes into your lover,/into Death, into knowledge, into God,/whose face changes into Scheherazad/And suddenly you find yourself” (p. 45).

Not unlike Scheherazad’s stories and narratives, Kahf’s poetry collection carries readers on its wings to reach the “Valley of All That Is Possible”, characterized by its original, recuperative reading of feminine, feminist, Arab, Muslim, Muslim-American, and Arab-American identities. In this respect, *E-mails from Scheherazad* constitutes a rich addition to the body of works by young Arab-American writers seeking to place Arab-American literature on the ethnic map of United States literary production. This book’s examination of questions of identity, ethnocentrism, gender, and self-definition, aligns it with the concerns of the younger generation of Arab-American women such as Nathalie Handal, Suheir Hammad, and Dima Hilal. Along with these authors, Kahf does not only problematize unrevised assumptions and misrepresentations, but she also celebrates the complexity of the Arab-American borderlands.

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