Testimonies of Resistance and Assimilation: A Postcolonial Study in Mohja Kahf's E-mails from Scheherazad

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Abstract
This study examines resistance and assimilation as postcolonial modes in Arab-American women's poetry after the 9/11, 2001. Here the intention is to clarify the modes of resistance and assimilation as two important aspects in Mohja Kahf's volume of poetry, E-Mails from Scheherazad (2003); and the forces that formulate and shape these modes, and the extent to which these modes reflect the complexities and difficulties that Arab-Americans face in their daily life in America. Kahf's poetry functions as a testimony that resists and challenges the stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as terrorist, ignorant, fundamentalist, naive and others, and the woman as an oppressed, belly-dancer harem; so submissive, passive, and subordinate to the dominant role of man; by engaging Bhabha's concept of the Third Space.

Key Words: resistance, testimony, marginalization and third space
Introduction

Arab-Americans in general and Arab-American women in particular have continuously resisted any type of marginalization and the formation of negative stereotypes. Thus, Arab-American literature is situated in a broader context altogether, as just one part of the cultural work that minority communities use as a mode of resistance. Arab-American writers have established their own space within mainstream American community generally defined as white and to a certain extent hegemonic in its systematic formation of stereotypes as binary tools to divide community to “Us” and “Them”. This space, referred to by Homi Bhabha as the “Third Space”, has enabled Arab-Americans to create their own narratives and rewrite their own history by which they have challenged the hegemonic image of them in Western discourses and have struggled to reinvent themselves in the American consciousness.

Articulating both sides of their heritage, Arab and American, becomes difficult when "Arabness" carries such negative connotations as harem girl, religious fanatic, terrorist, in mainstream American discourse, particularly after such traumatic events as September 11, 2001. Barbara Nimri Aziz asserts that " Arab-Americans have been 'colonized' to an extent: 'encouraged to forget [their] beautiful difference, [they] imbibe so many of the biases and distortions [of Arabs] around [them]'". Aziz's comment relates to W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of the "quasi-colonial" state of American minority groups (i.e., those who are not white). According to Du Bois, the problems of minorities in western locales, specifically large cities like New York, are similar to the discriminatory treatment of colonized peoples elsewhere in the world.

In addition to these obstacles of recognition and self-identification, the pressure some Arab-Americans feel to assimilate into mainstream American culture and to ignore or cover up their "Arabness" has created a tension between these two aspects of their identities. Du Bois' concept of a double-consciousness speaks to this tension: "this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others... one ever feels his two-ness,-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." Though Du Bois
focuses on the position of African Americans, his concept of double-consciousness can be applied to the Arab-American and other minority groups in the United States. Nathalie Handal's critical works, for example, invoke this double-consciousness on the part of Arab-American's experiences, particularly as they are manifested in creative works. Such writers suffer from what might be described as a "split vision of identity"5 in which he is torn between two different sides of his identity; the Oriental and the Occidental, each of which is trying to find a form of expression in his writing. Arab-American feminists also have found it impossible to disengage themselves "from the larger context of a hegemonic U.S. discourse that interprets all things related to Arabs as oppressive or 'backwards'"6.

Bhabha's discussion of national minorities and global migrants coincides with Du Bois' argument about the "quasi-colonized" and also the double-consciousness with which they negotiate their positions in the west7. The quasi colonized move between cultures and, in that space between cultural boundaries, articulate hybrid identities that belong wholly neither to one culture nor the other8.

This urgent task is complicated by a history of Arab-American erasure and assimilation in the United States that relates to what Bhabha defines as "mimicry" in the colonized subject. In the context of colonialism, "mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference "9. Mimicry, as engaged in the Arab-American literary works, confronts the stereotypes, such as ‘all Arabs are Muslims, all Muslims are terrorists’, that are applied generally to Arab-Americans and ignoring the American side of their identities.

I. The Revival of Scheherazade

Setting off her mission as a representative of Arab and Muslim-American women in the U.S., Mohja Kahf’s first book of poetry, E-mails from Schehrazad (2003), "is intensely focused on how Arab women work to make America a home without losing those markers of identity that they hold sacred, or at least important"10. But Muslim identity in the diaspora is not the only subject that Kahf explores in order to imagine a more hospitable place for first and second generation immigrants. In fact, Kahf has herself insisted, "I don't want to be identified as a Muslim poet
so much as an American poet or just as a poet"\textsuperscript{11}. As a result of such a standpoint, E-mails from Scheherazad reflects a wide range of critical discussions that are certainly informed by Kahl's interest in how Muslims function in the U.S. mainstream, but the issues she works with reflect the multiple varied concerns that shape the diasporic experience of Arab immigrants in America.

E-Mails from Scheherazad offers the most articulated example of the challenges facing Arab-American women and the resistance they practice. It is composed mostly of short poems, each with its respective speaker. The poems are narratives of women, assuming the role of Scheherazad in taking the lead of telling their stories touching upon sensitive issues facing these women in contemporary America. These stories, however, are not to be told without the help of the Scheherazad character and the sense of sacrifice that is usually attached to her in saving her peers from the psychic king. "The vizier's daughter, Scheherazad, volunteers to marry the despotic king, Shahrayar, and to save the kingdom's women from the cycle of his violence"\textsuperscript{12}.

Following the example of Scheherazad, the speakers of the poems analyzed here use their art to correct America's biased view of Arab women. In doing so, they assume that Shahrayar is the main stream American community which forms certain stereotypes of Arab-American in general and Arab women in particular, distorting their image as backward, oppressed, harem, belly dancers, and so on. These women play the role of Scheherazad in her courage to face the tyrannical king who oppressed them. "Depicted as feminists, these Arab-American Scheherazads not only seek to alter the frozen American misconceptions of the Arab woman as the exotic sex object or the oppressed victim. They also critique the view that a woman's expressions of desires and the pursuit of her interests contradict the interests of man and challenge the patriarchic eastern society"\textsuperscript{13}. The different speakers in E-Mails from Scheherazad also focus on the challenges that an Arab woman confronts in her decision to leave her original homeland, her hyphenated identity, the bias and discrimination she encounters and continues to encounter in her adopted homeland, and her attempts to build a new future. These speakers also announce their strategies of resistance, which include their introduction of a new and more encompassing concept of difference, their notion of hybridity, and more crucially, their own poetry.

E-mails from Scheherazad is a" text that admits the reality and potency of multiple intersecting exclusionary forces in the lives of
migratory subjects, but works to unsettle dominant structures through acts of reinterpretation and resistance”\(^{14}\). Taking on the role of poet-seer, Kahf seeks to forge new forms of inclusion out of the vestiges of war-torn and intolerant cultures. In her poem "Fayetteville as in Fate" she poses the question of "who will coax" two hostile cultures "close enough" toward reconciliation and communication (p.7), she suggests "that it is up to language-workers to close the distances between us. In a sense, this might be the purpose for Kahf's revival of the figure of Scheherazad, whose skill is to "use dialogue to disarm"\(^{15}\). In The Thousand and one Nights, Scheherazad is a hero because she "commands words, not armies, to transform her situation and liberate the kingdom"\(^{16}\). In E-mails, Kahf expands Scheherazad's project to a larger scale by positing that the "fate" of the poet is to be an agent of redemption for a global community sick with prejudice and violence.

Lisa Suheir Majaj sees that E-mails from Scheherazad conjures up an image of Scheherazad, "bent over a computer keyboard, veil flung behind, manicured nails clacking as she types missives to American readers, is quintessential Kahf"\(^{17}\). And notices that "Kahf makes clear Arab and Muslim women are part and parcel of the contemporary landscape, living American lives in the heart of the U.S. amid the motley miscellany of the land"\(^{18}\). Indeed, Scheherazad, in Majaj's view, is an exemplar not only of oriental women but "of storytellers everywhere"\(^{19}\). She is in Majaj's words "Kahf herself" taking on different speakers each represent a fragment of the life of an Arab-American women.

At the very beginning of Kahf's Emails from Scheherazad the story of the first wave of Arab-American immigration begins. The first poem is entitled "The Skaff Mother Tells the Story". The narrator of the poem is a mother as a symbol of the Arab tradition and culture and also to give a kind of simplicity to the story as she is not so well-educated and speaks more passionately about her sons. In doing so, the story is told in a manner analogous to the stream of consciousness in fiction in which the ideas flow unconsciously through the mind of the speaker. This technique adds a kind of credibility to the story and charges it emotionally as the reader may sympathize with the mother narrator. The technique of telling stories is also one of the main "surviving" techniques used by the Native Americans to keep their traditions and culture specifics to the way of life that these Indians find suitable for them. The effectiveness of the technique, however, is not in writing these stories, but in narrating them orally from generation to generation. So narrating becomes a kind of
survival and a way of living; for the main role of Scheherazad here is to narrate stories of Arab-American women, if for no aim at all, but to bear witness to the oppressions practiced on them by mainstream America. This "bearing witness" is in fact one of the strategies used by Kahf in her poetry as a technique of resistance in exposing the stories of these women and the difficulties they encounter in their everyday life.

Kahf, in a way or another, is documenting the story of the first immigrants, who were obliged to escape the oppressions of the Ottoman Empire at that time which used to conscript the young boys and send them to fatal wars. The poem starts then from the very beginning; people make a kind of information network telling of the movements of the Turks and their search for the young boys in the different areas in the Arab world. By the time the "Word came", the mother starts wrapping a "bundle" for her sons and the father supporting them with some "liras" to escape conscription into the unknown. The bundle of wool and the liras in the poem are not to be taken literally as the poet repeats them all over the poem. Of course any deserter would need a bundle of wool to keep him warm and some money to survive, but even surviving is ambiguous here. Is it only living, or keeping up with the family, or by maintaining the way of life of their original culture, or all of these together? Hence, the bundle is a materialistic entity, but charged with culture, tradition, familial closeness and solidarity, and all the abstract things that a man needs for his "survival". This is why the mother reminds them before leaving:

...."Survive"
I whispered in their ears the night they left, "Survive
And come back to us." We wanted life for our boys
So desperately we didn't think to ask how far away
The ship was bound. "Come home to share the bundle
Of mother, father, kin, house, bread, and wool,"
(The Skaff Mother Tells the Story, ll. 12-17)

The poem, then, if not the whole book, is about survival, or means of survival in life and in a totally different way of life and culture. Is surviving the Turks' conscription the main concern of the mother as well as the sons? Or is it finding the way of life in the new world in which they settle? and the kind of tools or equipment they have for such kind of survival for the mother believes that "Their lives' small bundle/ must have wasted smaller." And they have "Sold off the liras". The sons in
their new world have wasted the bundle and the liras; the only things they have brought from their motherland. In a sense, they have lost all kinds of homeland roots attaching them to their family as symbolized by the mother. The poem, from another perspective, is more concerned with the people who stayed home, not those who have immigrated. In other words, the immigrants' story is told from the point of view of the mother, the one who stayed home and the internal conflict that she suffers from. The poem, it seems, is a kind of justification for immigration; as the mother is giving reasons for, what she believes her own decision, of sending them abroad. In a way she is convincing herself that what she did is the right thing for her sons, and to assure this she repeats the word "survive" about seven times in the poem, and in one of them she "swear[s]/ to keep them with us" for " they [are] only boys/ Fourteen and fifteen is too young to suffer war/ And maybe die"(ll. 33-35).

The mother speaker then wonders about the very essence of survival "but what is it to survive/ Like grafts cut off a tree/ a child without a bundle"(ll. 36-37). These sons, the mother thinks, have been displaced from their own homeland and they have been implanted into a totally different one without the means to survive there. This is clearly shown in the poem when she says " had no more wares/ Nor skills to make a living". But the question is not merely about certain skills to make a living as it is about surviving in a totally different space other than their own homeland and the attachment, whether cultural, familial, to the homeland which they seem to have lost gradually by being away. Thus the mother's burden is the homeland's burden which fails to provide its people with security and protection they need to survive. This loss of security and protection is manifested in the absence of the father figure from the familial scene, and it is again a consequence of the war " The end of war/ brought cholera that took their father"(ll. 24-25), this metaphorical representation of the father figure as a representative of the cultural security is one of the markers of eastern familial life. The absence of the father figure, then, denotes an absence in the continuity of the cultural and familial attachments of the immigrants to their homeland, it also connotes that even if they return, they would not find the security they need as the father is absent. Hence, these immigrants lose contacts to both cultures, the original and the new. Here one may refer to Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space as discussed in his book, The Location of Culture.
II. The Growth of the Third Space

Mohja Kahf's poems engage this "in-between" space Bhabha describes through rhetorical strategies such as first-person narration, ethical appeals, and signifying. The third space is an in-between space in which people of two or more cultures live. They have created this space on the bases of what they have kept from the old world and what they have gained from the new one. That is; they reject certain cultural principles from their homeland, basically the ones that do not suit their new world and they have taken from the new one what suits them most. However, this is a relative process, for the choice is not random and in most cases it is not theirs to make, rather it is the result of many cultural factors in the new environment they live in. The mother speaker in Kahf's poem is aware of that and this is why she blames herself for displacing them. She knows that "They [are] far away/ For passage back" and she knows that one day the" Word stop[s]" and she would no longer be able to hear from them. The tone of the poem also suggests this ending. It starts sad and slow with general presentation of the circumstances that forced the mother to send off her sons far away to "survive" and then culminates when she realizes that the "Word stopped" and that they have grown old and got married and will never come back again.

In the second poem, the same story is narrated from the point of view of the son, the one who immigrated. The poem is entitled "Word from the Younger Skaff" and it emphasizes the attachment of the first immigrants to their homeland. Abdulrazek believes that the poem is " elaborating on the themes of the exile-home relationship, introducing a more positive and constructive view of home rather than a nostalgic one". This poem carefully describes the painful experience of a war refugee or an exile living in the border zones, neither completely in his new or old homeland and feeling at home in neither. Lavie and Swedenburg claim that "Borders are zones of loss, alienation, pain, death…. Living in the border is frequently to experience the feeling of being trapped in an impossible in-between". The speaker asserts that circumstances forced him to leave his home "at dinnertime," a time when the whole family usually gathers and shares their stories:

I was still hungry
When I left home, mother,
To disappear from the one piece
Of earth I knew. The Ottoman liras
Father gave us and the mincemeat pies
You wrapped in a woolen bundle
Were everything I and my brother
Had from home. They had to last
A lifetime. I was fourteen
The night we left, and
It was dinnertime.
(Word from the Younger Skaff, ll. 1-11)

Yet, before satisfying his hunger for his mother's food and his thirst for his home's warmth, he had to leave and "disappear" from the "one piece of earth I knew." The sense of taken-for-granted family cohesion now dissipates. The word “disappear" adds to the suddenness and quickness of his departure for which he has not prepared. He manages to take from his home only the money his father gave him and the woolen bundle with his mother's mincemeat pies. Since he brought only these things from home, the younger Skaff knew that they "had to last/ a lifetime."

The sense of loss the speaker of the poem is undergoing underlines the ongoing confusion of spatial location or social belonging that foreshadows his future life as an immigrant living in, and suffering from, an in-betweenness that would (re)shape his identity. The speaker describes powerfully the agonizing feelings he goes through as a war refugee. He explains that, even though he hardly contacted his mother, he never forgot about her or about his home. He has always hungered for the sustenance of his home and his mother. After forty-one years in Brazil, his hunger for his home:

… still lurches
Inside me, like the sea voyage
From Beirut to Brazil.
Sometimes I think
I could eat the house out,
Hearth, oven, gate, and all.
(ll. 17-22)

He addresses his mother using the endearing Arabic word "Yumma" to show his deep love for her and for his motherland, emphasizing that he has not cut off his relationship to them despite the distance that separates him from them. Indeed, children use "Yumma" not only when they want cuddling, but also when they call their mothers to save them from danger
or when they do not feel well. Even though the younger Skaff is fifty-five years old, married, with a daughter of his own house, deep inside he still feels like a child who needs his mother's warmth to alleviate the pain of exile that eats him up.

However, in the last stanza, he calls his mother "O mae" (mother in Portuguese). Although part of him longs hungrily for his mother and the Arab home that he still remembers, he cannot deny the changes that he has undergone after having spent forty-one years in a new world, with a wife who speaks no Arabic, where he lives a completely different life. The connection to his home now is not the woolen bundle that he has "wasted smaller" but, rather, his daughter who has inherited her grandmother's Arab features; "hair" and "eyes", and who knows how to cook Syrian food, both of which remind him of his mother and his childhood home. He comforts his mother by telling her that:

There's a twelve-year-old Brazilian girl
With your hair and eyes, who,
Though she's never seen
You or your kitchen fire, makes
Syrian meat pies proper
Baked golden and sealed
With your same thumbpress,
Precise as an Ottoman coin.
(Word from the Younger Skaff, ll. 37-44)

The concept of the third space is clearly manifested in "Fayetteville as in Fate". Here in this poem the poet herself is the third space in whom different kinds of people and different races and cultures meet. The first space, that of the poet's origin al homeland, and the second space, that of her immigrant's one, find their own locations within the poet's mind and soul; sometimes they look so different but a deeper thought would set them so similar.

Kahf shows such kind of attitude towards cultural translation in her poems as she weaves English and Arabic words in a hybrid format in poems like "Fayetteville as in Fate". In this poem she contemplates what unites and divides people in Damascus and people in Fayetteville, a small town in Arkansas:

I hear that people pick "poke" here
And my family memory stirs with people
Who picked the wild herbs, the khibbeze, of other mountains
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
I roll dizzily toward them
Like the bowling ball of a very bad bowler.
(Kahf 2003: ll. 23-30)

Through paralleling the people and landscapes of these places that either pick 'khibbeze' or 'poke', wear 'overalls' or a 'sirwal, and knead the same bread though shaping it differently, she describes 'the joint' that is her diasporic experience which both links and separates.

The title of the poem, in a sense, carries the metaphorical weight of the poem as it is based on the pun between the first part of the name of the city, and the poet's fate to carry the burden of finding a common ground for all these people. The poet, however, seems to accept her fate from the very beginning of the poem and she learned to say "Fay'tteville as in fate" and she approaches her new location in "the American way" and "the immigrant way". She seems to be adjusting to both cultures without any explicitly internal conflict, though she carries the roots of her Arab descent with her as she admits that she misses "Abifawq el-Shaggara" and some other cultural things. This kind of nostalgia to the past cultural history is made easier when she hears one of the Wal-Mart clerks saying "Shukran" and she believes again "that's fate".

Her new location then is bound with different people from all races, and she can recognize their difference "around the rims of peoples' eyes":

There is Spain and France left in the names of things
There is Wild West and Old South here
Sometimes the music of the Ozarks
Spills down the mountainside
And it is green and brown, and I think I hear it.
(Kahf 2003: ll. 18-21)

The conception of people of different races and colours dashing through the mind and memories of the poet and the similarities and differences she could recognize among them testifies to the concept of the poet as a 'joint' in whom two or more cultures meet and hence formulating a new space that belongs to all these cultures and at the same time does not belong to either. This sense of peaceful contradiction that the poet feels within herself leads to the use of paradoxical metaphors as
the most effective device in describing the 'third' space in which the 'self' and the 'other' meet:

Their names and their languages are wildly different
And they believe improbable, vile things about each other
But see the turn of wrist when a woman from here
Or a woman from there kneads dough
Although the bread will be twisted
Into different shapes for baking,
The hands move with a similar knowledge
See how a farmer takes up a handful of dirt
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.
(Kahf 2003: ll. 35-45)

All these different peoples share similarities in the essence of their different cultures and traditions; the 'dough', then, is the same, but they shape it differently. However, all these similarities and differences need a kind of articulation, what Stuart Hall calls 'the diasporic articulation', and the poet wonders about the possible medium of articulation that may bring them all together emphasizing the similarities and subsiding the differences "but who will coax them close enough to know this?"(l. 46) the answer to her question lies in the poet herself and she is aware of that fact "Darling, it is poetry/Darling I am a poet/ It is my fate"(ll. 47-49).

The concept of in-betweenness is presented in the "Voyager Dust". This poem functions as a brief introduction to the whole collection as the "I' speaker, probably Kahf herself, the mother, and the third space are introduced. The poem's title suggests the dream of return of a traveler and the burden of diaspora he carries on his shoulders. The poem starts with a general statement about the immigrant's experience and then focuses on her own experience as the daughter of an Arab immigrant woman. First the "speaker in 'Voyager Dust' says that immigrants, whether Chinese like the Chinese woman she sees on the bus or Arab like her mother, never fully distance themselves from their homes although they are no longer physically there"22. The difference in the immigrants' identities emphasizes the sameness of the diasporic experience; all immigrants seem to be shattered between two worlds, the one they left, but still carry within themselves, and the one they emigrated to, although they have not found their way in it yet:
When they arrive in the new country,
Voyagers carry it on their shoulders,
The dusting of the sky they left behind
The woman on the bus in the downy sweater,
I could smell it in her clothes
It was voyager's dust from China
It lay in the foreign stitching of her placket
It said: We will meet again in Beijing,
In Guangzhou. We will meet again.
(Voyager Dust, ll. 1-9)

Although the speaker never speaks to the Chinese woman, she could still "smell it in her clothes" that she carries the dream burden of return and the hope of meeting anywhere in China, being it in Beijing, Guangzhou is not important as far as they meet again. The image of this Chinese woman stimulates Kahf to think about her mother when she first came to the States. She also carries "voyager's dust in her scarves" and also dreams of "meet[ing] again in Damascus/ in Aleppo/ We will meet again" (ll. 23-24).

At stake in E-mails from Scheherazad is a sustained examination of the problem of belonging and the way Kahf looks at how both the host community and the country of origin complicate belonging. In "The Cherries", an adult speaker who "left Syria many years ago" begins the poem by seeing the world from a child's perspective. She insists, "Syria is saving some cherries/ in a bowl for me/ at the back of the refrigerator"(ll.) because she is "sure of" the fact that "Syria remembers" her. However, the poet is aware of the political situation that leads her to seek shelter in other lands. She depicts Syria as:
…a poor woman with a cruel master
Who wouldn't let her care for me
As a child deserves to be cared for
He wouldn't let her feed me cherries
And dress me in Aleppan wool
He wouldn't let her pin little gold trinkets on me
To protect me from the evil eye
So she had to send her child far away.
(Cherries, ll. 83-90)
Being a poet, however, Kahf resorts to her imagination to solve all the political crises in her country of origin. Driven by her nostalgia to everything and everyone in Syria, she is able to imagine that they will celebrate her coming back each in its own way, "I am sure that if I went back to Syria/ there would be music/ and all the melodrama of a Hindi movie"(ll.29-31). Simultaneously, the poet is aware that it is only an imaginative world she is talking about. But nonetheless she affirms that "This is my poem and I can do what I want/ with the world in it"(ll.73-74). Kahf, then, seems to be rejecting the two locations of belonging that she has, and chooses instead a third location, though imaginative, to live in temporarily and release herself from the tensions of diaspora.

In the next poem "The Passing there", Kahf discusses the concept of in-betweenness from the point of view of the second generation of immigrants who do not make the choice of leaving their homeland and who get trapped in the third space. The speaker of the poem, Mohja, and her brother, Yaman, at the ages of nine and ten, cross a field of soybeans. The experience of crossing the field alludes to the children's immigrant experience. Even though the field, like the speaker's new homeland, is "golden" and filled with "golden" opportunities, she asserts that she and her brother do not belong there:

It wasn't ours. It was golden.
I remember raspberry bushes
Way at the back, and rusted wire,
Once a fence, a defunct now and trampled under
By generation of children who belonged
To this Indiana landscape in the seventies,
Sixties, forties, tens: Matthews and, Deborahs,
Toms and Betsys, Wills and Dots. Here we were,
Yaman and Mohja.
(The Passing There, ll. 1-11)

The description of the experience reveals the difficulty of assimilation on the part of Arab-American as their new home poses obstacles in the way of this assimilation as it has concerns about their religion, culture, tradition, and the colour of their skin:

The man who owned the field was no Robert Frost
Although he spoke colloquial. "Git
Off my property," he shouted," Or I'll-

The rest of what he said I do not care
To repeat. It expressed his concerns
About our religion and ethnic origin.
He had a rifle. We went on home.
(ll. 16-22)

The speaker, then, partly blames her parent's "cruel kindness" for her plight, because they brought her to the new world and yet expect her to live as a Syrian without being influenced by the American culture. The children in "The Passing There", feel in their own hearts what W.E.B. Du Bois invoked: two souls, two thoughts in one dark body. Their parents with their
…alien expectations,
the cruel kindness of parents who,
coming from the Syrian sixties,
thought they had succeeded
in growing little hothouse Syrians.
(ll. 25-29)

Indeed, the speaker goes through a dilemma that many second generation immigrants experience. She and her brother live a double life. At home the parents, in an attempt to preserve their original culture, try to rear the children as pure Arabs, feeding them Arabic food, teaching them the Arabic language, and telling them stories of their Arab culture and heritage. Yet, outside their homes, the children live as Americans, go to American schools, befriend American children, and learn American ways of life. These children's parents do not teach their children how to live as hyphenated Arabs, overlooking the fact that a great part of their children's identity, unavoidably, is American. They do not realize that these children spend most of their time at school where they "pledged allegiance / trying not to feel like traitors."(ll. 56-57) These children who grow up to be Arab Americans live between two worlds, trying "to leap the gulch between two worlds, each / with its claim," yet it is "impossible for us to choose one over the other".(ll. 60-62)

The speaker in “The Passing There”, and her brother, undergoes the same identity fragmentation and they are set between inclusion and exclusion. They are neither Arabs nor Americans, and they are not able to identify with either. They are taught by their families to:
[sing] the anthems
of their remembered landscapes on request
for visitors and foreign guests.
At school, we pledged allegiance,
Trying not to feel like traitors.
(ll. 53-57)

The feeling of treason to any side of the hyphen is a kind of an inner struggle within the Arab Americans as they are torn between two different worlds in which they are unable "to choose one over the other".

III. Assimilation as a Mode of Resistance

The question of assimilation becomes even more drastically important when the immigrants face the rejection and misunderstanding due to the cultural and religious specifications of that specific ethnic group. It is not only a matter of the immigrants’ ability and readiness to assimilate, but it is the ability of the host homeland to accept these immigrants as pure Americans. These ethnic people, then, are trapped between an old land which they never know, and a new one which seems to reject them. This specific matter is tackled in the next poem "Lateefa". In this poem the focus falls on the life of Arab-American woman experiences in America and the cross-cultural tensions she experiences.

The speaker of "Lateefa" starts the poem by an announcement of an Arab-American Muslim girl marriage ceremony. An occasion which establishes an atmosphere of a natural, happy, and satisfactory life, and a sense of full assimilation in the new homeland. This scene brings up memories of her childhood seeing her mother in kitchen cooking and asking her to take care of her brother:

… she's holding a baby
with her left arm and with her right
heaping chicken and Hungarian potato salad
onto a paper plate and at the same time calling
"Lateefa, help your brother with that soda
before he spills it all over himse- Lateefa"
(Lateefa, ll. 9-14, italics original)

The components of this scene she still remembers, but she admits that she no longer remembers her Arab homeland, or that she does not really know it, and that the only place she really knows is the United States, and so the focus shifts to her life in America. Though still proud of her Arab
roots, the picture of her Arab country gradually fades and recedes from the scene:

(Daddy, you can talk to me
All you want about Palestine
And I'll be faithful to the end
But I don't know it, never
Smelled its rainwet streets, don't know
Its stoops and backyards and chicken coops
and those neighbours standing beside that old Ford
in the black & white photograph. My Aunt Cauthar,
Daddy, I love her – I think of cougar,
Sleek, black-haired, and courageous-
but I don't know her, or the abundant rivers
of what she really means)
I know New Jersey.
(Lateefa, ll. 40-52)

These words, printed in italics and placed between parentheses, indicate the private thoughts and feelings of the speaker, who faces the dilemma, like many second, and third-generation Arab-Americans, that she has no actual connection to the Arab world since she never lived there. The only home she really knows is America. However, because of their racial, ethnic, and at times religious differences, immigrants, like this speaker, tend to become marginalized in their new homes. As an Arab-American woman, coming from a different religious and ethnic background, the speaker recognizes the differences between Arab and American cultures that seem poles apart. Nevertheless, the speaker's identification with the American culture and her mistaken assimilation to it is faced with the truth of her difference; she is not American. The end of the poem establishes the disillusionment clearly:

"Officer, if you could just wait for the wedding to-
"What wedding, lady? I 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?"
"But Connie's getting-this is a wedding! Just wait one sec
Till the ceremony-
"Lady, move these cars or I give them tickets.

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"But, Officer-"
"Lady-!
(Lateefa, ll. 101-111)

The Arab-Americans' wedding seems at odds with the usual wedding ceremonies of the U.S, and thus the officer, a symbol of authority, refuses to identify it as such. The differences in the cultural and religious norms seem to pose obstacles in the face of any attempt at full assimilation in the host homeland. What is made clear also in these last lines is the loss of communication between the officer and the lady; she is not able to explain to him that this is a Muslim wedding and that they do not need a priest. This piece of information never finds a way out of the mouth of the speaker either because of the officer's interruptions or because of the difficulty in explaining them. One may wonder here whether the speaker is afraid of telling the officer that this is a Muslim wedding, as she seems so hesitant to articulate it. One may also conclude that the hesitation of the speaker is due to the American stereotypes of the Muslim Arab-Americans which would pose another obstacle.

In her poem “So You Think You Know Scheherazad,” Kahf faces the Arab Stereotypes, but instead of shying away from them she reflects them to the dark side of America and plays with the images representing them as a means of resisting them:
Scheherazad invents nothing
Scheherazad awakens
The demons under your bed
They were always there
She locks you in with them.
(So you think… ll. 5-9)

Scheherezad, according to Kahf, is back with no “bedtime stories / That will please and soothe” but she is going to resume her old task again and “Save the virgins” of the modern times from the tyranny of mainstream America. The speaker of the poem assumes that the west is not aware of the crucial role that Scheherazad plays in healing Shahrayar, the psychic king. She believes that they misread her role as a woman who entertains and relieves the king by telling him amusing stories. The title of the poem “So You Think You Know Scheherazad” has the sense of confrontation that Kahf emphasizes in highlighting the west’s ignorance and misreading of Scheherazad. The re-reading, or re-telling, of history is
one of the strategies used by Kahf in her poetry collection as a mode of resisting the misrepresentations of Arab-Americans in general, and Arab-American women specifically. The unleashing of the counter-facts here are not pleasing or soothing, but they are the “demons” that haunts the westerners:

the demons she unleashes,
the terrors that come from
within you and within her
And suddenly Scheherazad is nowhere to be found
But the stories she unlocked go on and on-
(So You Think… ll. 19-23)

By telling her own story and writing her own poetry, the speaker aspires to resist oppressive Arab and American systems and asserts her own independence.

**Conclusion**

Arab-Americans suffer from various kinds of misrepresentations that aim, deliberately or not, at distorting the image of the Arabs in the American mainstream. What aggravate the situation are the negative stereotypes of Arabs in the media and in popular culture. Images of Arabs as backwards, religious fanatics, terrorists, oil Sheikhs, and of Arab women as harem or belly dancer and in the best cases as a helpless woman oppressed by the patriarchal society and by religion. These images and stereotypes are more strengthened by the attacks of 9/11 on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in which waves of hate crimes and Arab profiling were increased and encouraged by certain extremist organizations and TV channels. The aftermath of September 11 attacks also consolidate the conflation of the notion that Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans in general are potential enemies of the United States. This paved the way for more oppression against them, such as hate crimes, deportations, spying on them, Arab profiling and so many other illegal practices without any evidence of criminal activity.

This study has shown how contemporary Arab-American woman writers have responded to all these challenges with various modes of either resistance or assimilation. Kahf’s poetry is characterized by its cultural resistance to any Americanization of the Arab identity in the US. Her collection of poetry *E-Mails from Scheherazad* (2003) features
different Arab women assuming the role of Scheherazad in defending the women of her kingdom from the psychic king Shahrayar.

Notes
5. Handal, 45
8. Bhabha, xii
9. Bhabha, 124
10. Bahareh, 160
11. Qtd. In Twair, 39
12. Fatima Mernissi
15. Mernissi, 55
16. Bahareh, 160
17. Lisa Suhair Majaj. "Supplies of Grace"
18. Ibid
20. Abdelrazek, 76
22. Bahareh, 158.

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