

Mohja Kahf's *E-Mails to Scheherazad*: A Riposte to the Parochial Perspectives of Identity

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Abstract

Identity is a sense of self compiled by an individual's constant negotiations with personal, communal, and national histories with continually shifting conjunctions and disjunctions, with socio-politico-cultural acceptances and rejections and invariably with others' perception of their self. It's a Sisyphean task to address identity as it involves an incessant process of deconstructing and re-constructing the signifying variables that answer the question 'Who Am I?' The situation is more complex for the diasporas as their conflict is twofold. They have to contest with both the sides of their hyphenated identity.

The Arab-American women writers are progressively and effectively contradicting the dogmatic and chauvinistic mindsets (both within and without the community) that are perpetually stifling their sense of dignity and identity. One such effort is made by Mohja Kahf through her jolting yet emotive poetry which is a counterstroke to all those who are trying to confine her existence in rigid patriarchal and racial enclosures. Kahf's *E-Mails from Scheherazad* is a collection of powerful enunciations that shatter the dual stereotypes of race and gender. The paper is an endeavour to analyse how Kahf's poems

challenges and pulverizes the rigid gendered bigotries? What are the complexities inherent in constructing an Arab-American identity? And how do Arab Muslim women negotiate their sense of self that is caught in a flux of belonging and non-belonging in a foreign land? The paper seeks to answer these questions by analysing the ways in which Kahf uses elements of storytelling in her poetry and makes her work celebrate the quintessential fabric of Arab womanhood.

Keywords: Identity, Arab-American Diaspora, Gendered Bigotries.

Introduction

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise¹.

-Maya Angelou

I am made and remade continually².

Virginia Woolf (Woolf, 74)

Identity of an individual is a conglomeration of various parts, it is like a glass mosaic painting wherein each piece has a reflection of the other yet has its own significance in making a larger picture. But that image is ultimately subjectively perceived by the other depending on numerous factors. This situation becomes complicated when the receiver interprets others identity through bigoted parochial perspectives. In the contemporary world, the victimised selves are seeking to refute these unfair claims on their

¹ The epigraph is taken from Angelou's 'Still I Rise'

² The line is extracted from Woolf's *The Waves*.

identity. The paper is going to analyse how Arab-American writer Mohja Kahf as a representative for the whole community frames a riposte to the narrow-minded prejudiced perspectives of identity through her poetry.

The historical discourse demonstrates the fact that the notion of identity and its defining parameters are in correlation with the hegemonic power structure of the socio-political edifice of the world. The race, gender and class that hold the core positions delineate the sketch of identity, not just their own, but of those relegated to margins as well.

The aggrandized influence of the core over the margins and the dissemination of radical ideas has commenced a significant shifting of the peripheries. The inward motion of the circumferential identities is constantly challenging the established discourses with nonconforming resistances and negotiations. The long suppressed tangential existences are now asserting hold over the tempo-spatial lineage, deconstructing it and re-inscribing both their collective and individual identity. The strenuous process of voicing the experiences, dismantling stereotypes and of reconstructing the representations is channelled through literature. Amidst the various literatures from the so called 'margins' is the narratives of the diaspora of the third world countries, whose writers are trying to grapple with the nuances of their hyphenated self and at the same time reclaiming the turbulent past of suppression with an essence of nostalgia, loss, anger and reclamation.

Last few decades have seen a considerable rise and recognition of Arab-American literature as in milieu of negative delineations of Arabs, there is a need for positive representations that shatter the prejudiced notions and simultaneously help to assemble affirmative images of the clan. Apart from the narratives of the self, Arab-American writers are composing poetry that seems a literary inheritance. The problematics and intricate dimensions of their identity, in a world of diametrically opposed and frequently

clashing Arab and American cultures, is tackled in their poetry. In addition, the works of women writers resist twofold marginalization. They struggle against the dual stereotypes of race and gender as they try to locate themselves beyond both the Arab and the American constructs of self while conceptualizing a blueprint of identity. In the context, writer Zeina Zaatari in the article titled "In the Belly of the Beast Struggling for Non-violent Belonging" says:

Racialization and discrimination may be most reflected in our marginalization as we become the margins of the margins, in our invisibility as subject, and in our denial of space, of self-determination. (Zaatari)

The paper is an effort to explore how writer Mohja Kahf addresses and challenges the pigeonholed notions, create new prototypes and at the same time negotiates the hyphen of her existence as an Arab-American woman writer.

Mohja Kahf's *E-mails to Scheherazad* is a collection of poems that engage in exploring the manifold complex and intricate dimensions of the diasporic experience: the idea of home and exilic identities, the presence of alternatives in an immigrant experience, the disparity between idyllic beliefs and harsh and detached existential realities of the new home that land an immigrant or refugee into a socio-cultural conundrum, a continual process of deconstructing and reconstructing the self through an exhausting fight against stereotypes and prejudices. For all the constrictions of time and space the paper is going to focus especially on those poems that are vehement answer to the narrow-minded stereotyped outlooks that compress the identity of Arab-American woman.

The title takes after the legendary queen Scheherazad, the master storyteller who weaved stories to save her clan from a prejudiced king. She is the prophesied mythical muse for the contemporary Arab-American woman writer, ushering her into the 21st century to shatter the biased and chauvinist dispositions from both east and west and create

an individuated niche for her identity, based on the freedom of choice. In accordance with the title of the compilation, Kahf drafts the modern woman as the fabled Scheherazad with corresponding assurance but hers' was a fight for survival of self and her counterparts, while the contemporary Arab woman's struggle is multifaceted and complex wherein she needs, besides astuteness, strength to take a stance, to show rage and, to objurgate all those who furnish orientalist view of Arab woman. In his book *Orientalism* Critic Edward Said says that Arab women are seen as "...usually creatures of a male-power fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid and above all they are willing" (207). The likes of Scheherazad, Aisha, and Cleopatra who are revered in east for their power, creative adroitness, intelligence, and education have been reduced to either unintelligent controversial beings or as Darraj say "harem sex kittens" (2).

To grapple with such stereotypes Arab-American women have to struggle on both personal and political front as the new age Scheherazad, residing in New Jersey, taunts-

So you think you know Scheherazad

So you think she tells you bedtime stories

x x x

Scheherazad invents nothing

Scheherazad awakens

The demons under your bed (Kahf, 44)

Here the poet is challenging the pre-set notions and putting the listeners into a doubt that what they hold to be true are just ignorant and impolite delusions that are about to be shattered as the awakened woman is voicing her lived realities and individuality from the threshold between east and west refuting the bigoted assumptions of both. To counter the extremes of both race and gender Arab-American women have decided to break the silence and speak for themselves and not let others, whether western feminist or Arab patriarchy, misconstruct their

images. Amal Abdelrazek critically evaluating this two forked struggle states that Arab-American women must resist both the American opinions of women and also Arab fundamentalist who see women's bodies as a symbol of procreation and communal dignity, which can be manipulated and codified. The thought resonates in the words of the narrator of the poem 'Ishtar Awakens in Chicago' holds:

My arrogance knows no bounds

And i will make no peace today,

And you should be so lucky

To find a woman a woman like me

x x x

Today I crawled out of the human pit

x x x

Today neither will the east claim me

Nor the west admit me

x x x

All I have is my arrogance

x x x

No I will make no peace

Even though my hands are empty

x x x

And I will saw off my leg at the thigh

Before I bend one womanly knee

I am poison

And you will drink me

And you should be so lucky (63)

The poem is aggressive and unsettling as it takes the assuming reader immediately out of the conjectures. And we realize that these poems are not a collection of pleas or sophisticated explanation for presuppositions of the others. The refrain 'you should be so lucky' sounds like a belligerent antiphon against the secluded perceptions of woman's identity based on race and gender. The persistence of rage is suggested by the absence of full stop in the poem. The violent corporal images like 'I will cut off my breast and slit the throat of my child... Before I make peace with you today' (63) are in sharp contrast with the commoditisation of woman's body. Here there is a declaration to the phallogocentric society that it should feel blessed at this much anger as woman has potential to do more destruction. The tone is continued in another poem where the narrator snaps that both, the eastern fundamentalist and the western feminist need not concern themselves with her and definitely not over her. The Arab American woman like any other, is first a human who must access her privilege of choice in her life:

My body is not your battleground
My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,
Neither the cause of your disarray
Nor the path to your liberation. (58)

It is an enunciation that says- let me live and you need not pledge war for my sake. Here the poet holds that the Arab woman need not be a topic of debate or negotiations, and hints at the justification made up by the west to wage a war by holding that Muslim women are oppressed and in dire need of help and rescue.

As a response to western feminists Kahf has penned a series of poems titled 'The Hijab Scene' numbered after the prime numbers from 1 to 7 but placed non-sequentially in the book. The prime numbering given to the day to day scenes concerning Hijab hints at the significance of this highly debatable and controversial issue that circumscribe the life and identity of Arab-American woman. The first poem, i.e., scene number

3 is located at a school wherein a white mother is forming a PTA but doesn't asks the mother in hijab to join it and in fact neglects when she advances to be a part, as the mother says:

"Dammit, Jim, I'm a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!"

--but the positronic force field of hijab

jammed all her cosmic coordinates.(25)

Being treated as unseen or as bereft of an identity is a silent form of violence. Veil is a poignant mark over which Arab women are homogenized, despite differences based on religion and class, either as the faceless exploited Muslim female or as the exotic and sexually permissive female of the orient. As Evelyn Shakir puts it in the essay 'Mother's Milk':

According to popular belief, all Arab women can be divided into two categories, either they are shadowy nonentities, swathed in black from head to foot, or they are belly dancers- seductive, provocative, and privy to exotic secrets of lovemaking. The two images of course, are finally identical, adding up to a statement that all Arab women are in one sense or another, men's instruments or slaves (39).

Veil has also been used to serve political configurations of the west against the east. Writer, HV Brasted, discusses the image of veil as a symbol of Islam. He says that, since 1990s veil became an "all-encompassing metaphor for Islam itself- a kind of shorthand for every negative perception about Islam, from excessive virtuousness to endemic violence" (220). As I have analysed in my doctoral research, veil along with terrorism became an epicenter of Islamic debates post 9/11. The picture of burqa clad Afghan woman under Taliban regime made veil a symbol of oppression and in this context it was used by the U.S. government as one of the justifications for its "war on terror", the invasion of Afghanistan. These dominant paradigms are based on the view that Arab societies are inherently misogynistic and oppressive and are another way to brace the notion that Arab states are backward, uncivilized, and inferior to west. Hence, west has natural right and duty to civilize them and speak for Arab women,

reinforcing the concept of 'white man's burden'³ as coined by Rudyard Kipling. The miserable condition of Afghan women caused by Taliban became a false reality of every Muslim woman. Moreover, it became synonymous with Arabs and Muslims, in the psyche of average American who failed to see the fact that Afghan women are not Arab women, and all Arab women are not Muslims.

Talking about veil, Amira Jarmakani says that it is a cultural marker whose efficacy as a symbol is multi-dimensional:

...it serves as a useful and accordingly prolific articulation of female oppression in the Middle east; it reinforces and solidifies a monolithic and flattened understanding, of Muslim and Arab womanhood; and it presents itself as an indigenous, and therefore authentic, example of the oppression of Muslim and middle eastern women (Jarmakani).

The distinction of any cultural mark is actually a positive sign but can be a result of lack of knowledge. Another hijab scene depicts a mere clash of ignorance, which many a times is taken beyond limits to 'clash of civilization'. As a white woman says:

"you people have such restrictive dress for women,"
she said, hobbling away in three-inch heels and panty hose
to finish out another pink-collar temp pool day.(42)

The lines keep the reader thinking that who has a more restrictive code or social pressure? Why people fail to recognize the other for what they are with due acceptance of one's different and contextualized identity paradigms?

³ Imperial poet Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden' was published in 1899 with the subtitle, "The United States and the Philippine Islands" to reflect the event of American colonization of Philippines after the Spanish-American war. The poem was originally written for the occasion of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, in order to justify the colonialization as essentially a noble enterprise to civilize the colonies.

Emails to Scheherazad is the ardent and exasperated voice of Arab-American women against the constricted identity politics by both east and west who bounded "mind forged manacles" characterize the parameters of Arab women's lives. The poetry manifests the Arab-American woman's refusal to be framed by the patriarchal and religious constructs of womanhood and her rejection to be victimized by the west. Arab-American women writers are trying to resist the politics of identity by accepting hybridity and this in turn opens a new boulevard between the east and the west, that fluid in-between space from where they gladly assert their identity.

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