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RESISTING UNTOUCHABILITY: HIJAB CRISIS AND ARAB-AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN IN MOHJA KAHF'S *HIJAB POEMS*

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Abstract:

In such a Trumpian/American imperialist era which unfolds an openly Islamophobic and racist policies against Islam, hijab has transcended its traditional debates relating to Islamic obligations, modesty, male gaze and gender equality to resist the “war on Islam” and the targeting processes of dehumanizing, defaming and singling it as “the must be stopped” religion¹. Hijab has become a political and/or ideological battleground singling the clashes between the civilized West/America and the barbaric Orient. Hijab is a headscarf or covering that Muslim women wear to cover their hair and upper chest, and sometimes it also refers to covering face like 'Nigab/ Burqa',² which are clothes used to cover the face except or with the eyes. The present article considers the complexities of being 'Hijabi/Veiled' woman in America. It argues that Arab-Muslim hijabi women are in a continuous conflict with the public mind struggling for observing their religious freedom while seeking acceptance and regularity. Muslim hijabi women are suffering from the act of 'Othering' by mainstream America who considers them 'irregular'. The act, which renders them 'untouchable' who embodies a 'cultural threat' to the American liberation and civilization when considering untouchability as a social practice. Moreover, the article illustrates through a number of hijab-centered poems of Mohja Kahf in “Emails from Scheherazade” the resisting power of hijab that blows off all the misrepresentations and oriental assumptions of Arab/Muslim women, which have adhered veil with Islamic militancy, extremism, jihadism, and oppression of women, to present counter images of self-asserted Islamic women identity.

Keywords: Untouchability, Hijab, cultural threat, Arab-American, Mohja Kahf.

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
 My hair will not bring progress and clean water
 If it flies unbraided in the breeze
 It will not save us from our attackers
 If it is wrapped and shielded from the sun
 - *Emails from Scheherazad*, 58.

Introduction:

Women liberation in the American imperialism era has become the battleground upon which wars are set out. The war on Afghanistan mostly broke out under the pretext of liberating the oppressed Afghani women from the barbaric and uncivilized patriarchal and terrorist society. First Lady Laura Bush, in her November 17, 2001 radio address claimed, “The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and

dignity of women.” She adds, “Because of our recent military gains [...] women are no longer imprisoned in their homes”.

Moreover, the linkage between Islam and terrorism by the western media has long played a central role in stereotyping Arabs/ Muslims negatively to mainstream America who builds their relations with the immigrant Arabs/Muslims accordingly, translating their religious practices as a threat to their culture and civilization. The hijab wearing, for example, has been widely marketed and re-signified in western media landscapes as a symbol of patriarchal control and oppression of Muslim women by Islam. In a way, that enhances the pre-assumed gap between liberated western women and the orientalist model of the Muslim women re-emphasizing the need to extract them from their oppression and uncivilization. Yvonne Haddad notes,

The perennial issue of “the veil” was placed once again in the center of the debate between Muslims and their “tormentors.” To many Muslims, it appeared as though new crusaders had arisen, eager to “tear off the veil” and convert the Muslim masses into pliant populations. A new generation of liberators was once again eagerly repeating the mantra of the necessity to “civilize” the women of Islam (2007, 256).

Noticeably, non-Muslim American women consider Arab/Muslim-American women lucky to be far from their oppressed and violated societies as they find in America a chance to be more civilized and liberated. While it is more noticeable, the hijabi/muhajaba'sⁱⁱⁱ struggle to be accepted and passed in American mainstream context with full respect for her religious choices which seem to render her to an outcast and untouchable body bearing a visual marker of alienation, isolation and dehumanization. Hijab challenges the Americanization process, which demands full melting into the American culture and thus hijab is being judged as irregular.

Hijab is the visible marker of Islamic identity that stands tangibly in conflict with American culture and Middle Eastern policies. It has been forcefully engaged in politics and in a very ironic atmosphere. In this sense, American Hijab policy has its unique experience which, unlike other western countries, guarantees the autonomous freedom that prevents the hijab's openly banning. Jen'nan Ghazal Read notes that America and France have different approaches in dealing with Muslims as minorities but, “policies in both nations discourage veiling, either by banning the practice directly (France) or by failing to protect the rights of those who veil (United States),” (2007, 232-233). In her article 'Unveiling France's *Border Strategies, Gender and the politics of the headscarf ban*' Angela McRobbie writes, “French governments have pursued a course of action which in effect racially punishes young Muslim women who wear the headscarf, culminating in a ban on it being worn in the classroom in 2004,” (102). According to Joan Wallach Scott, “the veil (voile), was considered inimical to French custom and law because it violated the separation of church and state, insisted on differences among citizens in a nation one and indivisible, and accepted the subordination of women in a republic premised on equality,” (2007, 2). She maintains:

If America permits the coexistence of many cultures and grants the legitimacy (and political influence) of hyphenated identities (Italian-American, Irish-American, African-American, etc.), France insists on assimilation to a singular culture, the embrace of a shared language, history, and political ideology (12).

It is also worth noting that, as a re-act of the American racist and imperialist policies, hijab has become a personal choice despite being compulsory in Islam. Tabassum Ruby notes,

Wearing the hijab in a western society may be read as a form of cultural defense, which women either take on or feel obliged to take on as cultural custodians to defend the “purity” of Muslim culture (3, 2003).

She also writes, “many Muslim women in general and especially those who live in North America claim that for them hijab is a mark of identity and resistance to western imperialism”, (10, 2003). Muslim women adhere to hijab to express their selves and assert their eligibility to present their faith and American loyalty.

They believe in the power of hijab together with their Americanness in sending their unspoken messages revolting against all misrepresentations and misconstrued of their Muslim identity.

The Syrian-Arab-Muslim-American writer Mohja Kahf used her strong humorous and satirical verses to affirm her above all Muslim identity in a very daring and assertive way, which deconstructs the homogenized identity attributed to Muslim/ Arab women by the western Orientalism and media that serves its political projects of recolonizing the East. More particularly, Mohja from within the American land is sending her emails to mainstream public, inviting them to tear off their western veils, which disrupt them from the reality. Her poetry as Suaad Alqahtani noted incarnate acute defense of Islam and Arab people (2017, 19). She embodies through her words the hardship of being an/the undesirable 'Other' in America. Sirène Harb^{iv} notes about Kahf's poetry, "She challenges stereotypes about Muslim women, the Arab world, America, and the Middle East, in a style marked by humor, anger, and confrontation" (65, 2009).

Her (2003) poetry volume *E-mails from Scheherazad*, explores themes of cultural diversity and identity. It resists the orientalist depiction of the Arab and Muslim women providing counter images for a new Scheherazade who is capable of expressing herself and sending her voice to contemporary world cleansing her oppressed and victimized image through her self-choices. Her emails draw an authentic picture of the so many experiences Arab/Muslim-American women are enduring to have a space for their multi-hyphenated selves within mainstream America. Her poems show how these women are celebrating their hyphenated identities and self-assert their Arab/Muslim-American identity in a strong tone altering the scene and creating rooms of their own for reconciliation with the sense of being and belonging. Samaa Abdurraqib notes,

Mohja Kahf ...writes about existing in limbostruggling to be a Muslim in America, while also struggling to balance her Arabness with Americanness. The crux of the issues the poetry deals with is: how much is she Arab and how much is she American? ...Much of E-mails deals with the construction of this in-betweenness the liminal place between Arab and American (2009, 450).

The volume creates characters which authentically echo the difficulties and sufferings of the immigrated Arabs and Muslims to the United States. Kahf's women characters have their special American space and present different American experiences that show their struggle to balance their *Islamness (or Muslim-ness)* and American-ness. She is carving a space for Arab, Muslim and Hijabi women to refute their othering with a full sense of pride. She writes out of her awareness to the way by which Americans see Muslims and Islam. This enables her to shape her defending weapons accordingly. She presents different poetry of Muslim- American women who are authentic and courageous enough to voice and resist racist profiling. Nadine Sinno notes, "In the context of Kahf's poetry, hostile encounters represent those interactions in which the speakers of Kahf's poems experience racialization as a result of their Islamic dressed bodies" (2017, 120). They are practicing a religious-based racialization as Naber argues, "Arab Americans are 'racialized through religion' rather than phenotype" (2000, 55). This suggests that their religious practices including wearing Hijab signed them as non-white outsiders, who are mostly undesirable by the collective public mind.

The collection contains 'Hijab poems' appeared Non-sequentially in a scenic form. The poems criticize the timeless negative treatment of veil, which resurge again and again with each political encounter between the West and the East. It questions the alienation and segregation veiled/hijabi women are practicing due to their choices of dressing, which insert them within two Parentheses rendering their American belonging to "cultural threats". Samaa Abdurraqib sees in kahf's volume a challenge to the Americanization process, which demands a total assimilation and requires removal of the hijab. She writes, "Kahf creates a different immigrant trajectory, one that includes veiling as a particular expression of Muslim Americanness, rather than foreignness," (2009, 36).

The poems embody the religious racialization these women are going through and the process of

defaming and keeping them away from passing as true American citizens. In this sense, it shows how hijab prevents these women from being received and contacted easily by American main stream. The contempt tone of the American speakers in the poems put hijabi/muhajjaba women in the untouchable corner, giving them no chance to negotiate or prove their Americanness. However, kahf's veiled protagonists resist such untouchability by providing new images of self-asserted, active and feminist women who are able to defend their Islamic-American identity. In "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women." Homa Hoodfar argues, "the assumption that veil equals ignorance and oppression means that Muslim women have to invest a considerable amount of energy to establish themselves as thinking, rational, literate students/individuals, both in their classrooms and outside" (1992,421). Hijab, in Kahf's poems, has invested new meaning and crossed all boundaries to visualize its dignity and liberation of Islamic women.

The poem "Hijab Scene #3," (25) shows the inability of the Muslim woman and more especially the muhajjaba to pass easily in the American social context. The Muslim hijabi woman is seeking acceptance by trying to join the school assembly:

"Would you like to join the PTA?" she asked,
tapping her clipboard with her pen.
"I would," I said, but it was no good,
she wasn't seeing me.
"Would you like to join the PTA?" she repeated.
"I would," I said,
but I could've been antimatter. (1-7)

The speaker, Muslim woman has self-transcended her invisibility by gripping the hijab to indicate an affirmed and definite Islamic self but there are no touching/ contacting intentions from the side of the Muslim woman's opponent who means to enforce invisibility to the Muslim women by ignoring her insistence to be engaged in the PTA (ParentTeacher Association). The teacher is only seeing the irregularity of Muslim woman incarnated with her irregular headscarf dressing. She is incapable of tearing off her stereotypical assumptions and accepting the idea of perceiving a woman wearing hijab as an active, educated, initiating, and outspoken person. The Muslim hijabi woman affirms "I would," to the opponent's under estimating three-times repeated question "Would you like to join the PTA?" but her replies pass intentionally unnoticeable "she wasn't seeing me". She resolves to get the teacher's attention at any cost but in vain. Nadine Sinno notes:

Running out of options, the speaker resorts to every form of communication she can muster, even making references to the American science-fiction television series, Star Trek. She recounts: ...I sent up flares/beat on drums, waved navy flags,/tried smoke signals, American Sign Language,/Morse code, Western Union, telex, fax (10-13) (2017,122).

The principle woman has blocked all means of communication. Doaa Abdelhafez Hamada writes, "Preconceived ideas prevent any possible communication between Muslim Americans and the American collective mind. Stereotypes make being a "regular" American difficult for Muslim American women. For Americans, a woman in a hijab symbolizes a harassed, oppressed, and submissive woman" (2014, 5). They see hijab as a mind's scarf not merely a piece of clothes. Pazargadi notes, "hijab becomes more than just a symbol of religious devotion, but a paradoxically visible/invisible barrier surrounding the wearer" (2009, 39). What makes the Muslim woman in this poem send her satirical cry, which is the climax of her attempts to gain visibility and says, "Dammit, Jim, I'm a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!" (16).

The Muslim hijabi woman, in this poem, reflects the dilemma of the immigrated Arab/Muslim-American women in general, who are being politically, culturally and religiously racialized and received

as alien, subaltern^y and threatening ethnic other due to the media's misrepresentations and the pre-assumed stereotyping. The scene humorously concludes with condemning the closed mind of the regular American women noting:

“___ but the positronic force field of hijab
jammed all her cosmic coordinates.” (25).

The Muslim speaker woman is aware of her Hijab crisis and knows that it has been connected as Mir notes “with competing notions of race, class, sexuality, and femininity— the scene of intense body politics”, (Shabana Mir 2014, 89). Hijab makes it difficult to connect with mainstream public. It makes the hijabi woman an outcast who is not being easily accepted by the host country's cultural norms which consider hijab a symbol of women's oppression, uncivilization and a suicider's mask. According to Mir, “Hijabis were associated with victimhood but, paradoxically, also with “terrorist-related things” --- As a public symbol, Hijab is a chilling reminder of Muslim women's vulnerability in the United States post-9/11” (2014, 91-92).

Kahf's poems have transcended the matter of being too Muslim or not Muslim enough, too modest or not modest enough, fashionable or not. They become voices of reformation, correctness and change, “So you think you know Scheherazad/ So you think she tells you bedtime stories/....Scheherazad invents nothing/ Scheherazad awakens/ the demons under your bed” (So You Think You Know Scheherazad, 44). They illustrate the way by which veiled women are being rejected by the collective American mind who cannot understand the inner reasons which motivate these women to clutch the hijab though they are far from their oppressed societies. The majority of Americans criticizes the veil building on orientalist assumptions and cannot transcend the media's misrepresentations, which depict the veiled women as negatively different from the majority of American women. Kahf poeticizes these closed opinions of the western public everywhere through her collection and perhaps “Descent into JFK” poem reveals many of the racialized live experiences Arabs and Muslims go through and the suffering of the consequences of these misinterpretations:

If they saw Uncle Shukri
In his checkered headscarf,
Like when he let her ride
Behind him on his motorbike,
They'd think he was a terrorist.
They'd never know Khaleda
has a Ph.D.
because she wears a veil they'll
never see beyond.

Kahf makes juxtaposition between the way Muslim identity is expressed and the way American identity is also expressed enlightening the different perceptions of each by mainstream public. She does so tackling different issues of ethnicity, gender, racism and religious diversity reflecting on different situations, which touch the sensibilities of being Arab/Muslim-American. “Hijab Scene #2,” poem reads:

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. (p.42)

The speaker reflects the public view of Muslims and Muslim women in a sharp tone affirming the gap between oppressed Muslim women who are dressed according to religious oppression and patriarchal norms, and Western women in general and American women in particular who have the right to dress fashionably though most of the times abnormally. Kahf is doing so in a very satirical and economic language, which highlights the effects of the stereotyping of Muslims on the general opinion of mainstream public who sees Islam a barrier to the full assimilation of Muslims into Western culture and

thus makes their assumptions and racialization accordingly. The scene perfectly embodies the unwillingness of the speaker women to negotiate her 'act of othering' when she hobbles away, leaving no chance for building bridges and expressing realities. Sinno notes, "By making a hasty statement and rushing off, she herself displays a "restrictive" attitude as she denies the other woman any opportunity for self-representation." (124).

With the same dramatic irony in "Hijab Scene #1," a tenth-grader boy with a blue hair comments on the Hijabi Muslim girl dressing: "You dress strange,.../ his tongue-rings clicking on the 'tr' in 'strange'" (41). Like many other Americans, the boy is expressing his discomfort with Hijab, which appears to him strange. The poem speaks about the Muslim women dilemma of reconciling and balancing their Islamic Identity with the host country's culture. The poem emphasizes on the act of othering the Muslim women whose style of dressing does not fit the American norms and thus is being judged "strange". It also shows the struggling of Muslim women to self-express themselves if compared with the freedom other citizens are having. Kahf's poem in a very ironic scenario invites the reader to interrogate the meaning of strangeness, which is being attributed to the Muslim woman's head cover as a counterculture to the speaker's body piercing which seems to be stranger.

You dress strange," said a tenth-grade boy with bright blue hair
to the new Muslim girl with the headscarf in homeroom,
his tongue-rigs clicking on the "tr" in "strange (41).

Both the boy and the girl are supposed to have the same level of freedom according to American principle of personal freedom, but the American negative attitude towards Islam as a religion that is not in accord with their secularism and culture, prevents the acceptance of hijab as a personal choice.

Kahf's hijab-centered poems have reflected authentically on the many encounters Arab and Muslims are experiencing and their every attempt to pass with equal measures in the American mainstream. In "Hijab Scene #5", The poem affirms the role of Hijab in visualizing the Islamic identity of the Hijabi women countering the assumption that, Hijab is obliterating women's identity. It makes the Hijabi women more visible to others and highlights her Islamic faith. It has altered the meaning of passing into the American tissue to reject the American norms of identification, which grants Arabs an honorable 'White' category that is no more than a label. They, Arabs and Muslims, are subject to racial, religious and ethnical violence and the mohajaba chooses not to pass as an unmarked white persona who has no rights to survive such discriminated practices. Hijab shapes her own Muslim identity which motivates self-respect to her choice invoking other minorities to stand by her side. Through this poem, Kahf builds a bridge between Muslims and Blacks who share the status of being racially oppressed and shows how they sympathized with the case of Muslim/Arab-American women who as Joanna Kadi, in her anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, notes, "Not Black. Not White. Never quite fitting in. Always on the edge" (xvi). The poem shows how the Hijabi Muslim/Arab-American women are being welcomed and celebrated by Blacks who are being regarded as outcast too. In the sense, they are building coalitions and have one issue to struggle for. The poem states:

"Assalam-O-alaikum, sister"
"Assalam-O-alaikum, ma'am"

.....
When you're wearing hijab, Black men
you don't even know materialize
all over Hub City
like an army of chivalry,
opening doors, springing
into gallantry.
Drop the scarf, and (if you're light)

you suddenly pass (lonely) for white (1-2, 5-12).

Black men accept the speaker's undesirable attire and find in it a sense of community regardless of the skin color latent underneath the veil. They call her sis and open the doors enthusiastically. A sense of belonging with the colored people is built, welcomed and celebrated. The veil prevents an easy passing to American mainstream but it attracts the Blackness of the Blacks. While, passing as 'Honorably White / non-hijabi Muslim' enhances the isolation and alienation of the speaker which will make her even more invisible and unnoticeable for the African American group. Therefore, she prefers not to pass as an unmarked body among the other invisibles but prefers to pass as a person of color keeping her faith visible embodied in her Hijab. Building such a multi-ethnic affiliation serves to protect one's self-identification and belonging.

Hijab is a crisis in itself because it embodies the clash between the western and Eastern civilizations. It imposes an intervention between the immigrant Arab/Muslim American body and the American policies of exclusions and inclusions as well as the entire reflections of isolation, alienation and dehumanization this group is experiencing. The veil stands in-between Muslimness and Americanness from one hand and the "war on terror" and American neocolonialism from the other. Rosi Braidotti argues that the war on terror has contributed in constructing the "threatening migrants and alien others" broadening the process of negative racialization. Nouri Gana notes,

the task of Muslim and Arab American writing is nowadays to wager more programmatically on formal adventurousness in order to wrest the universal humanity of Muslim and Arab suffering from the grinding machinery of the war on terror (1580).

Mohja's poetry serves to illuminate that human side of Muslim identity. However, it is worth noting that, she does not merely denounce the stigmatization of Arab and Muslim women but also, presents average Arab/Muslim-American women who are engaging in everyday life deconstructing Islamophobic narratives and asserting an ethnic and Islamic identity. A kind of identity that is capable of transforming positively and with full pride the 'Otherness' to be a motive of self-assertion and self-identification as well as a negotiating force of shared humanity.

In "Hijab Scene #7," Mohja responds to the accusing looks of the public Americans by answering their predicted questions rejecting stereotypes while affirming her regularity and normality accusing their minds of being irregular.

No, I'm not bald under the scarf
No, I'm not from that country
where women can't drive cars
No, I would not like to defect
I'm already American
But thank you for offering
What else do you need to know
relevant to my buying insurance,
opening a bank account,
reserving a seat on a flight?
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" (p. 39).

She has built her responses according to the collective American assumptions and more especially to their fear and doubt of Muslims and Hijabi Muslim women after 9-11. Mohja has soothed their fear while affirming her rejection of their predictions as she has her unharmed but strong weapons that are her

words, which could defend and protect her from their misrepresentations. In doing so Mohja is confirming Amin Malak's emphasize of the crucial role that Muslim authors play in transforming English from a language of colonization and Islamophobia into a medium of constructive dialogue through their literary productions. Malak refers to this process of language transformation as the "Muslimization" of English,

An instrument for demystifying and de-alienating Islam and Muslims, muslimized English, like African or Indian English, becomes a site of encounter for cultures and peoples on equal terms, by peaceful means, and through intelligent at times humorous, at others touchingly humane discourses whose modes and modalities shift from antagonism to understanding, from exclusion to interrogation, from contest to compromise, and, more importantly, from resistance to reconciliation (2004, 11).

Moreover, planting Hijab among American clothing and dressing phenomenon enhances an urgent need to know more about Islam far from the fabricated orientalist images. Hijab has built an awareness of Islam and created a space for negotiations whether positively or negatively but it proved its efficiency in bringing visibility to the most invisible of the invisibles (kadi, xix). Hijab has challenged the Americanization process and reject the full assimilation to have its own designed fabric of mixed Americanness and Muslimness. Pazargadi argues that Kahf, "can forge new works from a fluid, tertiary space that refuses closure. Cultural production from the in-between space of the diaspora can act as a mode of resistance that creates new meaning about identity that in this case, fuses Muslim and American identities together"(43).

Conclusion

Mohja's treatment of the various themes in her volume are ranging, as Harb notes, "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" (2009, 65). Her collection leaves a mixed impression of everything: love/hate, fear/safety, belonging/displacement, home /diaspora and her Hijab poems are a revolt against the orientalist deception and misrepresentations as she announced in "*Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective*": "*Yawm min al-ayyam* we just decided: Enough is enough,"(64). Every now and then the word 'hijab' included in her Emails, it says 'Enough' we can bear no more and will stand firmly against rendering Hijab to a 'cultural untouchable'.

Mohja's women characters have crossed the liminal political space Arabs/Muslims are sieged within to carve a space for hijabies to negotiate their Muslimness, Americanness and above that their humanity with a full sense of pride. She has provided new images of Scheherazad:

Hi, babe. It's Scheherazad. I'm back
For the millennium and living in Hackensack,
New Jersey. I tell stories for a living.
You ask if there is a living in that ("E-mail from Scheherazad", 1-4).

Through her art of telling the stories of her American oppressed hijabi protagonists, she challenges the notion of a monolithic presentation of Muslim women from a more flexible and fluid position in the diaspora. Her Hijab poems prove to be timeless, lively and motivated with every arousing debate about Islam and Muslim Women. She sends a clear message to Western feminists that if Muslim women are veiled by that debating piece of clothes, Western feminists are veiled by the stereotypes ingrained in their minds which prevent them from accepting that other and seeing beyond that piece of cloth. She has transformed her hijabi women characters to active ones capable of motivating their racialization to achieve visibility and acceptance while resisting 'othering' and 'untouchability'.

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