

Ain Shams University  
Faculty of Arts  
Department of English Language and Literature

From existing to resisting: Re-writing the negative stereotypes of Arab women in Mohja

*Kahf's Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective*

Nada Maher Ebraheem El Beshlawy

Academic ID: 13 20 41 12

En 508: Multi-Ethnic Literature

Dr. Somaya Sabry

Fall 2016

E-mail: nadamaher.96@gmail.com

## I. INTRODUCTION

Arab women have been placed in the spotlight of the highly globalised world we live in today, especially after 9/11, as representatives of an area submerged in complicated conflicts and cultural collisions. Therefore, they have become a gold mine for thinkers and critics in ethnic studies, cultural studies, and gender studies. In spite of this, they are given very limited space on the global scene, and are very frequently victims of misunderstanding, misinformation and prejudice. According to Laurence Michalak, "One major reason why the "Arab" has come to represent "otherness" is probably that Arabs are the major world people that Americans know least about" (32). In these circumstances, literature has become a means through which Arab-American women are able to express themselves, reveal who they truly are, and what they believe in, as well as resist the stereotypes that were firmly established about them. Not only does literature give them a platform to speak up, it also helps with challenging and changing the misleading accounts of Arab women found in popular culture.

This paper examines an Arab-American woman's poetic exploration and successful attempt at resisting and undermining the prevalent negative stereotypes of Arab women; by relating the lines in the poem with Arab women's lives as they truly are, including the issues they encounter. Additionally, it discusses how Mohja Kahf's *Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective*, brings the exoticized figure of the 'Odalisque' from the past, in order to re-write the misrepresentations of Arab women that are perpetuated in Western popular culture.

## II. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

In this poem, Mohja Kahf creates an exquisite narrative through which she gives a voice to the voiceless Odalisques. They are brought together for the Matisse Retrospective, and they rise in rebellion against their century-long oppression by the eroticized

representation that Matisse offered to the world. Kahf imagines a melodramatic adventure where they try to gain back their freedom and reassert their real identity. The first line starts with “yawm min al ayam”, which signifies the long period of time these Odalisques lived through before speaking up about their suffering. It also brings in the element of traditional Arabic storytelling. Moreover, it conveys to the readers that the women in the paintings are still in touch with their Arabic language despite living all these years in foreign lands. Kahf uses Arabic words throughout the poem, including the title, to resist the Westernization of these women and to highlight their actual heritage, language, and culture. This also reflects something deeper about the writer, who is a product of several cultures as she is an Arab immigrant to the US from Syria, but is nevertheless true to her heritage and original culture.

The poet repeatedly states that these women are not responsible for their flawed representations in the paintings in “it wasn’t her, it was the way she was drawn”, and “it did no good to tell them we didn’t choose the poses we were painted in”. Moreover, Kahf mocks the situations in which these women were painted to ridicule them in “all she’d eaten in years was lemons”, referring to the fact that the Odalisque of Harmony in Yellow was drawn with lemons only, and later characterizes that as the cause of “citric overdose, and extreme puckering”. This mockery is extended in “sitting and staring at her gold fish swim in circles... till fish was woman and woman fish”. This line is particularly interesting because it also touches on a deeper issue, which is the complete reversal of roles in the situation; Matisse made the woman, the human being, an object by sexualizing her and focusing on her body, turning her into a mere decoration while the fish are the active beings in the painting.

Moving on to the Odalisques, Kahf offers some witty commentary on the ideas and concepts portrayed by Matisse to undermine the overly sexualized paintings. Such commentary is found in “most of us have very good legs”, which sarcastically criticizes what is seen in Matisse’s paintings, where he drew the women with very long curvy legs and paid

extra attention to their lower bodies in a shameless attempt to portray them as sexual objects. In the lines “She must be so uncomfortable in that position”, and “Everyone whose arms are numb from sleeping on them, raise your hands”, Mohja Kahf tries to convey the emotional and psychological suffering that Arab women endure as a result of misrepresentation and exoticism by using physical pain in order to make it relatable to the audience. This is also repeated with the migraine, the cold, icy breasts, and the coughing that is experienced by the Odalisques, which draws the sympathy of the reader. The use of sickness is one of many ways that Mohja Kahf uses to re-humanize the Odalisques after their objectification. Another way is having them do simple, everyday activities done by normal human beings like peeing, and braiding hair.

### III. ARAB WOMEN IN THE CROSSFIRE

The objectification of women is one of numerous struggles that Arab women face both in the Arab world and in the U.S. In such patriarchal societies, a woman is objectified as a “property”, a breeding apparatus, or as a sexual commodity. Women are expected to remain limited to the role of “the angel in the house”; a person responsible for taking care of her family and nurturing it, without daring to pursue anything beyond that. Despite the notable advancement of women in the Arab world and in American society, this primitive patriarchal belief is still adapted by a significant number of people, who believe that a girl is “meant for her house and husband”. Another major problem women face is male guardianship, which is an ideology followed mostly by extremist religious groups/sects and can be found in such countries as Saudi Arabia. Human Rights Watch’s *Perpetual Minors* explains how Saudi government participates in the oppression of women:

The government’s role in establishing and enforcing male guardianship and sex segregation is often ambiguous. In most manifestations of these practices, there appear to be no written legal provisions or official decrees explicitly

mandating male guardianship and sex segregation, yet both practices are essentially universal inside Saudi Arabia. It is certainly the case that the government has done little to end these discriminatory practices and plays a central role in enforcing them. In doing so, the Saudi government chooses to ignore not only international law but even elements of Islamic legal tradition that support equality between men and women. (4)

Saudi women are not allowed to travel alone, work, drive a car, or even undergo medical procedures without permission from a male relative. There are also far worse problems found in Arab societies like FGM, child marriage and honor killings, where women are the primary victims.

On the other hand, Arab women in the US are not given the same space and privileges as ‘white’ women. The racist tone that is generally used against Arabs is especially aggressive against women. “Arab-American women, particularly those who are Muslim, face unique stereotypes and discrimination experiences that shape their identity development” (qtd. in Amer 122). They face difficulties getting employed due to discrimination based on their origin/ethnicity or religion, and the discrimination very likely extends to the workplace. This discrimination and racism is further amplified in the face of Muslim-American women who wear headscarves (hijab) as it has been manipulated into a symbol of terrorism in the media. Arab-American women’s dilemma regarding hijab is demonstrated in the *Handbook of Arab American Psychology*:

Arab American women may try to balance traditionally modest or religious clothing with the demands of the modern world’s professional attire. For Muslim Arab Americans, this challenge is tied to wearing the hijab. Dominant views in the U.S. see the hijab as oppressive and that wearing it is suggestive of female subjugation. (123)

The *hijabis* or women who wear headscarves are even rejected by some female rights groups due to the prevalent assumption that all women wear it out of oppression, not by choice. Islamic scholar Yvonne Haddad explains that “Women who dress Islamically insist that their choice affords them freedom, liberation, relief, and even great joy” (9). Despite repeated objections and attempted corrections of this inaccurate assumption, it continues to be perpetuated and even used by feminist groups as a part of their agendas on liberating Arab women in the East. Thus, Arab women are constantly a target in the crossfire of different cultures, traditions, norms, standards, and beliefs.

#### IV. ARAB WOMEN: STEREOTYPES IN WESTERN MEDIA

Portrayals of Arab women in the media have two tones: either sexual, exotic, fascinating creatures of mythic “feminine” proportions, or what Jack Shaheen refers to as “bundles in black”; the helpless, faceless, submissive, veiled women. Neither stereotype does them justice, nor do they faithfully represent Arab women’s lives. Such stereotypes are not only presented in American daily news, talk shows, and satirical sketches, but even in cartoons. One famous example of this is Disney’s *Aladdin*. Although the inclusion and representation of Arab culture might seem like a good, positive thing, it is actually quite the opposite. The depictions of Arab women in the movie refer to the first stereotype mentioned above. The main female character, Jasmine, is an eroticized figure, who lives her life in a belly dancing costume, with massive, luxurious gold accessories. Most minor female characters are also portrayed in a sexually-charged manner. One character, Meherunisa, a repulsively obese woman covered in make-up, picks up Aladdin and tells him she thinks he is “rather tasty”. The movie goes as far as portraying teenage Arabs as “Harem girls” or prostitutes. Such images and characters beg the questions: Who is the target audience of these portrayals? Why would the makers of the movie produce such offensive, demeaning portrayals of Arab women in a movie directed primarily to the American audience, most of

whom are children? These stereotypes might seem minimally harmful. However, upon closer investigation, we see that Disney movies are disturbed worldwide to various age groups and cultures, and even to Arab countries. So, the effects that these stereotypes have are two-fold. First, they exoticize and antagonize Arab women to the American audience, removing them even further from what is normal, and reinforcing the poisonous idea that Arab-Americans are “oriental” foreigners and outsiders who do not belong to American society. Second, they destroy the identity of young Arab girls, as they give a false account of Arab culture and history, and perpetuate the false belief that women are only valued in Arab societies as potential brides. In addition to that, these stereotypes manage to pollute and distort the image of Arab women in the eyes of other cultures.

The female characters mentioned above are reminiscent of the Odalisques of Matisse. Matisse himself was not faithful or fair in his portrayal of women, which he claimed to have seen in Morocco. His paintings were rather dehumanizing, offensive, and he used them merely to broaden the scope of his works. They were also outrageously intrusive. If, indeed, these “odalisques” were seen by Matisse, he did not fully comprehend the complexity of the lives they lead, the beliefs they had, or the circumstance they fought through; therefore he had no right to reduce their identity to some desirable body parts, or commodify them for the sake of his paintings. He had no right to pick some specific “exotic” practices or actions, like belly dancing, and misuse them without knowing the story behind them or truly appreciating their cultural value. Despite the fact that there is roughly an eighty year difference between the paintings and the movie, it seems that Western artists are unwilling to let go of these stereotypes, as if they are a precious stock to take from either for dramatic effect, or for “heating up” their work. When artists are not investing in Arab women as sensual, seductive creatures dressed in jewelry, they portray them as helpless, oppressed individuals who suffer at the hands of religion and tradition. They also have a tendency to paint Arab societies as

primitive individuals, with old-fashioned beliefs, living in primitive circumstances. An example of this is found in *Independence Day*, a 1996 movie. The plot is simply about aliens invading the planet, and the attempts of the American government to fight them. To show the impact of the invasion, the movie contains scenes of different countries such as Russia, and, indeed, the US. However, the scene that takes place in, presumably, an Arab country, portrays a group of people living in a tent in the desert, with a camel, and the woman is fully-clothed in black. She does not utter a single word, and her facial expression is not shown to the audience. The scene is reductive of the Arab lifestyle, as well; Arab countries have huge, modern cities with massive buildings, malls, and industrial areas, not to mention the fact that a rather limited number of Arabs still lead the Bedouin lifestyle. Yet, against all facts, the media chooses to belittle Arabs and portray them in a humiliating way.

## V. BREAKING THE STEREOTYPES

In the poem, Mohja Kahf tackles the problems discussed above in the process of discrediting the negative stereotypes of Arab women, using a unique blend of her experience as both an Arab and American. First, the issue of modesty; the poet had her Odalises tear down the museum banners because they wanted clothes. They did so almost immediately after breaking out of the canvases, illustrating the need of clothes as a basic human instinct, and making an allusion to the biblical and Quranic narratives of Adam and Eve, who cover up their bodies with leaves. Second, Kahf criticizes the way media handles Arab women; they try to benefit from them through commercializing their suffering, manipulating their stories to fit their own agendas and using them to generate controversy, instead of helping them or actually listening to what they have to say. The same is done by groups and organizations that are concerned with these issues, who make statements on their behalf, instead of supporting them.

Moving on to the third issue, which is the headscarf (hijab). By making some of the Odalisques choose to wear a headscarf without any external pressure, Mohja Kahf reinforces the idea that many women deliberately and voluntarily choose to wear it. She also criticized the rejection Arab women get by feminist groups if they wear headscarves:

“The National Organization for Women got annoyed  
after some of us put on *hijab*  
and wouldn’t let us speak at their rally,  
but wanted us up on their dais as tokens of diversity” (66)

These organizations claim to be working for the equality and liberty of women from oppression, but at the same time, they *are* oppressing women. They would rather not have the ‘narrow-minded’, ‘old-fashioned’ Muslim *hijabis* among them, yet they like to keep them as “poster girls” representing their progressive, inclusive philosophy. They are also not aware of the fact that some Muslim women wear the headscarf to empower themselves and take control of their bodies, femininity and sexuality, or to gain opportunities and influence in their societies. This argument is further elaborated in *Women’s America: Refocusing the past:*

Muslim women choosing the hijab or the veil have emotional, socio-political, and religious rationales for this. The hijab can be functional, providing safety and generating respect. Observing the hijab can serve to gain access to resources and opportunities. Some women use the hijab as a means of “negotiating with patriarchy” and appropriate it to their own advantage. Observing the hijab can secure conservative families’ consent, allowing their female members to get an education and seek employment, which in turn can lead to the empowerment of Muslim women. Wearing the hijab can serve as a symbol of political and cultural resistance against the West, as has been the case in Egypt, Turkey and Iran. Some women may use the hijab to challenge

the tyranny of fashion and the sexualization of the female body. And last but not least, wearing the hijab can be based on Muslim women's strong beliefs and their piety. (780)

From the previous quotation, it can be deduced that the headscarf (hijab) is a complex multi-dimensional idea, and all the personal purposes of its usage must be taken into account before passing judgment and creating false stereotypes. In the following lines, the poet tackles a sensitive and crucial subject concerning women, which is victim-shaming or victim-blaming. This issue is particularly popular in the Arab world, but is also widely found in the US. It shifts the blame to the victims of a certain attack or offense and gruels them with questioning and doubting the truth of their side of the story as well as belittling their suffering. In the poem, the Odalisques are victim-blamed by Arab men. Instead of helping their fellow Arab women, they shame them for their sexually-charged portrayals. They also question their silence all this time, implying that they are complicit and somewhat accepting of their situation because they did not rebel earlier.

One of the methods Mohja Kahf used to refute the stereotypes of Arab women is by breaking them up and putting them on different careers and paths, giving them different interests and fields and involving them in various socio-political activities. One of them joined the Algerian uprising, another joined protests in Saudi Arabia, and an odalisque who studied the laws of different lands and time periods, then proceeded to sue Matisse's estate. This helps with shattering the prevalent stereotype about Arab women being submissive and irrelevant in their societies. It also challenges the false idea that Arab women are one solid unit crippled by passivity and oppression, when in fact they are different, diverse, distinct, individual beings who have divergent dreams, ambitions, struggles and purposes in life. Moreover, she made them aware of their problems and willing to act on them and solve them as evidenced in the line: "we just don't want to be made something we're not"; and by doing

so, she challenges the idea of the “poor, passive, oppressed” Arab woman that is waiting to be saved by the ‘open-minded’ ‘white’ West. She also undermines the image of Arab women as mothers and caretakers who are only concerned with their families and their domestic issues, by making them knowledgeable and politically active; they know about different cultures and countries, and they are aware of the major political changes in the world like the Cold War or the Arab-Israeli conflict. She also challenges the de-humanizing and de-feminizing of Arab women by giving some of them problems that are distinctly and unequivocally feminine which are breast cancer, pregnancy and childbirth.

## VI. CONCLUSION

As a result of all the above, Mohja Kahf brilliantly succeeded in resisting and defying every major aspect of the negative stereotype of Arab women. By bringing the Odalisques from the past, she was able to change their situation from ‘merely existing’ to ‘actively resisting’ the recurrent “oriental” “exotic” false image. After this long and difficult journey, the Odalisques reach the final stage: hope for a better future. The birth of the baby at the end represents this hope and a chance at starting again with the new generation of girls. The poet also expressed her fears about Arab women and their future being poisoned by other oppressive narratives like the one Matisse presented. However, that baby symbolizes the new energy that Arab women currently have, and their successful rebirth after decades of silencing, oppression and discrimination both in the Arab world and in the West.

Nowadays, there are many powerful, influential, outspoken and successful Arab-American women in the world. In comedy, there is Maysoon Zayid, a Palestinian-American. She is an actress, comedian, disability advocate, and writer, who suffers from cerebral palsy. She is the co-founder/co-executive producer of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival and The Muslim Funny Fest. Maysoon had the number one TED Talk of 2014 and was named 1 of 100 Women of 2015 by BBC. In the government, there is Donna E. Shalal, a

Lebanese-American. She is President and CEO of the Clinton Foundation. She held several positions in the government, most notable among them is U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) where she served for eight years, becoming the longest serving HHS Secretary in U.S. history. She was also the President of the University of Miami from 2001 to 2015. In sports, there is Ibtihaj Muhammad, who is not an Arab-American, but a Muslim-American whose achievements help undermine the false notions perpetuated in popular culture about hijab as a tool of oppressing women. She became the first Muslim woman wearing a hijab to represent the United States at the Olympics. She also became the first female Muslim-American athlete to win an Olympic medal when she took home the bronze in the team sabre event at the Summer Games in Rio. In literature, there is Mohja Kahf, a Syrian-American award-winning writer, poet, and an associate professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas.

Despite the attempts to have them “killed by paint fumes [in this] era”, these women have managed to succeed and become outstanding role models and advocates of change, as well as exceptional examples of Arab-American and Muslim-American women. Not only does their success affect the world positively, it also challenges the discrimination against Arab women and disrupts their negative stereotypes. Their stories and achievements will motivate Arab-American women to stand up to discrimination and participate more in American society. They will also eventually help Arab women all across the globe to break out of their canvases and achieve their full potential.

## WORKS CITED

Amer, Mona M., Germiné H. Awad, eds. Handbook of Arab American Psychology. New York: Routledge, 2016.

<<https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=Bcf4CgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover>>

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore. Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today. New York: Oxford UP, 2006.

<<https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=7A77E1aBrucC&printsec=frontcover>>

Human Rights Watch. Perpetual Minors: Human Rights Abuses Stemming From Male Guardianship and Sex Segregation in Saudi Arabia. USA, 2008.

<<https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=nFv4d6LdyFEC&printsec=frontcover>>

Kahf, Mohja. E-mails from Scheherazad. University Press of Florida, 2003.

Kerber Linda K., Jane Sherron De Hart, Cornelia Hughes Dayton, and Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, eds. Women's America: Refocusing the Past, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2015.

<[https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=\\_Li6BwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover](https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=_Li6BwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover)>

Michalak, Laurence Cruel and Unusual: Negative Images of Arabs in American Popular Culture, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Washington, DC: American Arab Anti Discrimination Committee, 1988.

<<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED363532.pdf>>

Shaheen, Jack, writer. *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Directed by Jeremy Earp, Sut Jhally, written by Jeremy Earp, Jack Shaheen, Media Education Foundation, 2006.

Biographies from:

Maysoon Zayid: <<http://www.shesource.org/experts/profile/maysoon-zayid>>

Donna E. Shalal: <<http://president.miami.edu/history/donna-e-shalala/index.html>>

Ibtihaj Muhammad: <<http://www.biography.com/people/ibtihaj-muhammad-071416>>