

## Re-inscribing Shahrazad: The Quest of Arab-American Women in Mohja Kahf's Poetry

**Safaa A. Alahmad**

English Department, College of Education-Jubail,  
University of Dammam, Dammam  
Saudi Arabia

### Abstract

The *One Thousand and One Nights* (1885) was introduced collaterally with Britain's nineteenth-century colonial endeavor and Orientalist practices relating to it. Pertinent to the Empire's goal was to interpret *The Nights* as an indication of Arab women's passivity and lack of agency to justify Britain's imperial project in the area. As the background of this narrative was fetishized and exoticised, so was *Shahrazad*, the heroine and narrator, whose intellectual and narrative powers were reduced to sheer sexual prowess. This disparagement of *Shahrazad*'s agency and subjectivity has instilled the early seeds of the dominant stereotypes of either a silent willing victim or a sensual seductress that have, for decades, beleaguered representations of Muslim/Arab women and, by extension, Muslim-American women. In her poetry collection *E-mails From Scheherazad*, the Arab-American poet Mohja Kahf revives the figure of *Shahrazad* to disrupt this Orientalist discourse through rewriting a twenty-first century *Shahrazadian* narrative to foreground her voice to represent herself, and to halt the representations of Muslim-American women in the service of the United States' imperial project in the Middle East. Informed by the works of Edward Said and feminists such as Meyda Yegenoglu, Suzan Gauch and Rana Kabbani, the paper depicts how the poet attempts to undermine the hegemonic digressive representations of Arab/Muslim woman rooted in nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse. Moreover, it also illustrates how the poet resists such Orientalist translation of her culture by reviving the figure of *Shahrazad* as a space of cultural interchange that opens a window on another culture in Arab-American diaspora.

**Keywords:** Arab-American women poets, Arab/Muslim women identity, cultural translation, diaspora, Muslim feminism

## Introduction

In her poetry, Kahf (2003) seeks to unsettle what Lowe (1991) describes as the “limiting nexus of various modes of representations” of Arab/Muslim women (p.2-3). Through the figure of Shahrazad portrayed in Kahf’s collection *E-mails from Shahrazad* Kahf attempts to undermine both oppressive and sensual Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women in discourses of Orientalist literature, in addition to the emancipatory feminist discourse that imposes Western cultural paradigms on Third World women.

Feminist scholars have written extensively on the significance of the tale of *One Thousand and One Nights* (1885) and its relation to liberation, desire and resistance. In *Liberating Shahrazad*, Gauch (2007) discusses how Arab women writers from the Maghreb revive the figure of Shahrazad as one of resistance, foregrounding her storytelling as a liberating agency. However, the Arab-American poet and writer Kahf explores in her work what happens to Shahrazad when she lives in the Arab-American diaspora, her ‘contested home in the present global, and political power dialectics’, resulting from the “war on terrorism” and the American occupation of Iraq (Lughod, 2003) states that global capitalist politics shaping translation and interpretation are rather significant in framing the configurations and portrayal of Arab-American women. Within such contexts, translation as a cultural interchange becomes central, because the translator’s gaze depicts women’s lives within Western lenses. These contexts have always portrayed Muslim/Arab women as standing outside history and confined in static social systems. Hence, in Arab-American diaspora, the tale of Shahrazad has become a translational narrative that opens a window on another culture.

Within the context of the cultural implications of translation, Iser (1996) discusses the inexorability of cultures translating each other. He writes:

[M]any different cultures have come into close contact with one another, calling for mutual understanding in terms, not only of one’s own culture but also of those encountered. The more alien the latter, the more inevitable is some form of translation. (Iser, 1996, p. 5)

Iser (1996) reinforces the importance of cultural translation as a means of communication, in addition to its significance in bridging the gap between different cultures. Accordingly, the story of Shahrazad can be viewed as a space for cultural negotiations. From this stance, Appiah (2010) explores the full import of narratives as translational and cultural linking space, particularly when they are not contained within politics. He identifies ‘cultural translation’ as:

A different human capacity that grounds our sharing: namely the grasp of a narrative logic that allows us to construct the world to which our imaginations respond, [...] the basic human capacity to grasp stories, even strange stories, is also what links us powerfully to others, even strange others. (Appiah, 2010, p. 257)

This ‘human capacity to grasp stories’ has urged Kahf and other Arab-American women writers to explore, through the figure of Shahrazad, “complexities of negotiating their actual lives in contrast to mainstream representations of themselves” (Sabry, 2009, p. 7). Therefore, it is pertinent to the purpose of this chapter to examine the figure of Shahrazad as a site of cultural

translation whilst tracing its transmutability throughout different translations that had contributed to instilling and reinforcing the images and stereotypes of Muslim/Arab women either as seductresses or helpless victims bundled in black.

### Shahrazad as a Space of Cultural Translation

In her book *Arab-American Women Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race and the Idea of the Arabian Nights*, Sabry (2009) observes that in the original version of the tales, women were configured as ‘active participants in the events around them [and] not helpless victims of their circumstances’. This active participation was epitomized in the figure of Shahrazad, the narrator who decides to marry the king, against her father’s advice, to implement her plan of storytelling to save the lives of other women. Sabry, moreover, notes, “Shahrazad’s empowered intellectual abilities, in Arabic culture, were gradually diminished through extensive footnotes in the translations of Edward Lane (1839-1940) and Sir Richard Burton (1885-1888)” (2009, p. 13). These translations rendered Sharazad as the ‘exotic/oppressed stereotype’, and medieval Islamic societies as the ‘unchanging historically de-contextualized “Arablands”’ (Sabry, 2009, p 12-13).

Al-Musawi (2003), an Arab critic, states that ‘there is no trope that can accommodate the colonial desire better than the enormous taste for *The Thousand and One Nights* as signified in the title given to the tales by the anonymous Grub Street translator, *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments* (p.72). As Al-Musawi indicates, the change of the title symbolizes imperialistic ambition and desire as this text became a symbol of an Arab monolith. It is very important to note, though, that both Persian and Arabic titles do not include the word (Arabian) or even refer to it, because the text is a collection of tales and events from Persia, India and the Arab world. Therefore, attempting to confine and affix a particular culture within the frame of these tales can be viewed as an effort empowered by imperialistic motivation.

Critics affirm that the most well-known and influential English translations of *The Nights* were those of Edward Lane (1839-1840), John Payne (1882-1884) and Richard Burton (1885-1888). Nevertheless, through notes, prefaces and other insertions, these translators have blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction (Sallis 1999; Sironval 2006; Yamanaka and Nishio 2006). According to Sironval (2006), Burton’s translation was distinguished by its extensive notes signifying ‘the nineteenth-century craze for anthropology and ethnology’, which turned the text into Burton’s ‘personal East’ and not a ‘written account of an actual East’ (p. 240). In the same vein, Sabry describes Lane’s translation as shaped by his *Description of Egypt* (1828), although it does not consist of extensive notes. These insights are in parallel with Said’s discussion of the significant role of these translations in creating the image of the Orient ‘through a process of citation’ (1978).

In *Imagining the Holy Land: Models, and Fantasy Travels* (2003), Long shows how the vision of the Holy Land was shaped by American ideals of Christianity and Judaism. Through examining a wide range of material, including educational and theme parks models, photographs, books, maps and travelers’ accounts, the volume demonstrates that in the nineteenth century, these resources were responsible for firing the popular imagination with fantasies of the ‘Holy Land’. Through such accounts and representations, Americans sought to bring the Holy Land to America by transforming this place from a singular religious space into multi-layered spaces

charged with symbolism. Describing Chautauqua's Palestine Park, Long observes, 'Realism was the driving aim, fantasy the enabling impulse' (2003, p. 30).

In Arab societies, *The Nights* was mainly an oral form of entertainment, which aimed to provoke the imaginative fancies of its listeners. The nineteenth-century translations have transmuted these tales into an anthropological text. This text had become the main tool for objectifying an entire culture as it highlighted the objects representing the background of the environment of the tales, such as genii, magical lamps, flying horses and carpets. Though these objects were accessories to the meaning in the original text, they have become the main focus upon which Western readers fixated, which has made their cultural assumptions inadequate (Sallis, 1999 p 9-10). Sallis explains that 'if the reader is essentially ignorant of life in Islamic society, he or she tends to read for the exotic: to make a foreground...that which, for the text is a background' (1999, p. 10). Due to insufficient knowledge of the tales and its position in the source language, the imaginations of nineteenth-century Western writers and translators have created an image of the Middle East that is exotic.

As the colonial project was set out in its modern form, *The Nights* was introduced and perceived as a realistic account of the Middle East and all its peoples. Sabry (2009, p. 50) expounds that 'the manipulation of this text for purposes beyond its role—that is of entertainment—in the original culture, creates disjunction between its function in Arabic culture and its function as designated through nineteenth-century translations,'. For Sallis, a translation is rather a window on other literatures and cultures: 'a window, not a door—we look, but do not pass to the other side' (1999, p. 7). However, nineteenth-century translations of *The Nights* were perceived as an anthropological text that offered knowledge of the Middle East and its diverse populations. The nineteenth-century text was considered a source of knowledge on these people and their culture, and not a literary 'window'.

Throughout history, these tales underwent substantial changes that had transformed them from an oral tale of entertainment into an anthropological text. In the tenth century, they were recombined in Iraq for the first time. Four centuries later, they were expanded in Egypt with other tales. By the end of the eighteenth century, new manuscripts were created, and since then, the text took its modern form. Sironval explains how '[m]anuscripts, translations, [and] editions of [T]he Nights bring new variants as the story passes on from one translator to another, from one edition to another, and from one illustrator to another. This transmission is linked to historical, cultural and social developments' (2006, p 219-220). Early translators of the tales were definitely influenced by Britain's imperial interests in the 'Arablands'. Obviously, their approach to the text was influenced by the understanding that 'an influential translation between substantially polarized cultures is a political act, sometimes, even an act of sabotage or cold war (Sallis 1999, p. 9). This 'politically-driven' reception of *The Nights* in England strongly impacted its reception in the United States. As the text travelled across the Atlantic to the United States, it became more evident that 'malleability was the governing characteristic' that has shaped the interpretation (Sabry 2009, p 50-51).

Just as the background of *The One Thousand and One Nights* was fetishized and exoticized, so was Shahrazad, the heroine and narrator. Sallis maintains that Shahrazad's physical beauty is never mentioned in the original, and that she is 'a matchless beauty'. But this is a 'European interpolation', which implies a lack of appreciation of the heroine's intellectual

power (2006, p. 102). Sketching Shahrazad as ‘a matchless beauty’ diminishes her intellectual and narrative powers, reducing them to sheer sexual prowess, from which the seductive belly dancer stereotype has originated. In addition, through these various translations, Shahrazad was mistakenly interpreted as a victim who strived through storytelling to save her life. Not only does this misreading make Shahrazad a willing victim, but also, more importantly, denies her the agency and intellect to devise an agenda of reformation. All these translations have ignored the fact that it is Shahrazad who insisted on marrying the king, despite her father’s disapproval of her scheme and wishes.

As mentioned earlier, Shahrazad’s story was introduced collaterally with Britain’s nineteenth-century colonial endeavor and Orientalist practices relating to it. Pertinent to the Empire’s goal was to interpret *The Nights* as an indication of Arab women’s passivity and lack of agency to justify Britain’s imperial project in the area. Arab women were imprisoned by their culture, just as Shahrazad was captured by the king, Shahrivar. Within this context, Kahf argues that the Muslim/Arab woman became ‘a glamorous, shining prize to be sought for and acquired through virile competition with other members of the male world’ (1999, p. 153). Orientalist renderings of Muslim/Arab women demonstrate how these women epitomize the effeminacy of the Islamic world that British imperialism strove to conquer. Kahf further elucidates that the Muslim/Arab woman became ‘a diaphanous non-being who reveals what Islamic despotism does to effeminate “Oriental” man. She is a lesson in what Enlightened Western man congratulates himself he has been able to avoid—although he is not above deriving voyeuristic pleasure from her, both as a narrator and reader’ (1999, p. 138).

Sallis states that Edward Lane’s translation intentionally disempowers Shahrazad to fit her into the model of ‘Victorian Miss yearning’, which led ‘the text to read either [Shahrazad] will die, saving only the girl she replaces, or the women will be saved with her... either noble or a martyr, whereas the real Scheherazade is a woman determined to end an intolerable situation by persuasion, cunning or force’ (1999, p 104-105). This disparagement of Shahrazad’s agency and subjectivity has instilled the early seeds of the dominant stereotypes of either a silent willing victim or a sensual seductress that have, for long decades, beleaguered representations of Muslim/Arab women and, by extension, Muslim-American women. According to Malti-Douglas, an Arab-American feminist critic, one of the most unique features of Shahrazadian narrative is how she controls the relations between desire and the text (2006). She further argues that ‘[t]his manipulation of narrative desire is far more than merely a means of gaining time [...] it is a key pedagogical tool [enabling] Shahrazad shifts the problem of desire from the area of sex, the realm of Shahrivar’s trauma, to the superficially more distant and more malleable world of the text’ (2006, p. 22).

Gauch (2007) explains that Shahrazad’s eroticization and victimization have become obstacles in the way of Muslim/Arab-American women writers because ‘their images have been so over- determined’ and these writers ‘crossing the imaginary frontier between Orient and Occident always reverberate bi-directionally’ so that ‘unequal distributions of wealth and power [...] create seemingly insurmountable divisions out of religious, cultural and social differences’ (2007, p. xii). Attempting to rewrite Shahrazad in twenty-first century America, Kahf seeks to challenge the stereotyping of Shahrazad as a monolith of Muslim/Arab women for two reasons: firstly, and most importantly, to foreground her voice and agency to represent herself; and, secondly, to halt the co-option of the representations of Muslim-American women in the service

of the United States' imperialism. As Gauch argues of Maghrebian women writers, who have revived Shahrazad in their writings, Kahf attempts to 'elaborate complex relations to those [she] represent[s] as well as to [her] audience, [her] stories like Shahrazad's, call for boundary-crossing, multi directional, ever-evolving analysis' (2007, p. xiii).

### Reviving Shahrazad in Arab-American Diaspora

In the poetry collection *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003), Kahf revives Shahrazad as a twenty-first century poet, divorced writer and lover to refract attempts at paralyzing Shahrazad within dominant racist and Orientalist frames dating back to nineteenth-century colonial translations of *The Nights*. Paul Gilroy warns against the immobilizing effects of freezing identities. He points out that if identities do not undergo a constant process of development and social interaction, they soon become close to 'the possibility of communication across the gulf between one heavily defended island of particularity and its equally well fortified neighbors' (2004, p. 103).

The poem "So You Think You Know Scheherazad" emerges as a literary mimicry of the Oriental configuration of the figure of Shahrazad in Western translations. It aims to unsettle and trouble European translations of *The Nights* that portray Shahrazad as a seductress relying on her sexual prowess to manipulate the king. Addressing Western audiences of readers, Orientalists, feminists, scholars and media tycoons who think they know Shahrazad, the poem opens with the question: 'So you think you know/ Scheherazad' (Kahf 2003, p. 44). The poem proceeds in its interrogation whilst mocking its readers: 'So you think she tells you/ bedtime stories/...invent fairy creatures/ who grant your wishes' (Kahf 2003, p. 44). In her critique of phallogentrism, Irigaray explains:

There is...perhaps only one "path" the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it...To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible"... in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by masculine logic, but so as to make "visible", by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible. (1985, p. 67).

Obviously, Kahf's mimicry of the Orientalist depiction of Shahrazad seems to emerge from the same feminist consciousness that produced Irigaray's critique of phallogentrism. In Kahf's poetry, Shahrazad the victim becomes in control of her stories, Shahrazad, the phallogentrism in Irigaray's term, and, more importantly, her destiny. Seeking to problematize the mainstream perception of Shahrazad, Kahf manipulates, as a Muslim woman, 'with mimesis' to recover her agency, subjectivity and her status in history. In Kahf's poetry, Shahrazad appears in different contexts and shapes that are unnoticed or ignored in Western discourse of the Muslim woman.

Kahf's contemporary Shahrazad, nevertheless, does not tell stories to please the king, or fulfil his fantasies. Instead 'Scheherazad awakens/ the demons under your bed' and 'She locks you in with them' (Kahf 2003, p. 44). The power of Shahrazad's tales, or writing, in Arab-American women's case, liberates the Muslim woman that drives Shahrazad to:

landing in a field where you wrestle with Iblis,  
 whose form changes into your lover,  
 into Death, into knowledge, into God,  
 whose face changes into Scheherazad— (Kahf 2003, 45).

Instead of being a fantasy vehicle, Shahrazad's stories become self-confrontations. Majaj argues that in this poem, Shahrazad assumes the role of Muslim/Arab-American women writers awakening the demons that are present within the mainstream culture (2012, p. 2). The poet reinforces the role of writing as an empowering tool that enables Muslim/Arab-American women to challenge different forces as the word 'Iblis' suggests. The use of the word 'Iblis'—the proper name for Satan in Arabic and Islamic traditions—and his appearing in different forms seems to allude to Islamic thought and, particularly, the idea of regarding some powerful villains worse than devils, which facilitates the collaboration between human and jinn devils to control vulnerable beings. The use of anaphora reinforces this notion of Iblis as taking different shapes of the forces that attempt to confine and control the subjectivity of the Muslim woman, such as patriarchal and religious institutions, Orientalist discourses, nationalist movements and Western feminism, to mention some. Paradoxically, Iblis can also be Shahrazad, as the last line suggests. Here, the poet problematizes the perception of the figure of Shahrazad by placing her in Iblis' position; a powerful position of mimicry, according to Irigaray, which 'convert[s] a form of subordination into an affirmation' (1985, p. 67).

Majaj opines that in *E-Mails From Scheherazad*, Kahf re-inscribes Shahrazad and brings her to the twenty-first century United States as a storyteller and a writer who pens messages in e-mail format to a world that 'is unprepared to recognize her wit, humor, lyricism, passion and intellect, and all too ready to negate her worth as a Muslim woman' (2012, p. 1). Referring to the poems as e-mails is significantly pertinent to achieving the poet's aim, as e-mails are perceived to be a technological, fast and pervasive means of communication. The concept of e-mails offers the poet a communication space in her diaspora, and brings Shahrazad to the third millennium, since her concise narratives travel all over the web-connected globe. The opening line announces the big return of this mythological figure into the twenty-first century:

Hi, babe. It's Scheherazad. I'm back  
 For the millenium and living in Hackensack,  
 New Jersey. I tell stories for a living.  
 You ask if there is a living in that.

You must remember: Where I come from,  
 Words are to die for. I saved the virgins  
 From beheading by the king, who was killing  
 Them to still the beast of doubt in him. (Kahf 2003, p. 43).

Majaj suggests that the image conjured up by the title—Shahrazad bent over her computer keyboard typing e-mails to her American readers—is quintessential of Kahf herself (2012, p. 1). Like Shahrazad, the poet also uses words to transform her life and the lives of many other Muslim women living in diaspora by challenging racial hegemonic and nationalist patriarchal discourses. In this poem and collection, Shahrazad is not some exotic woman, or

stranger; rather, she lives in the heart of the United States, New Jersey, Arkansas, amid the 'motley miscellany of the land' (Kahf 2003, p. 40). Despite her engagement in modern life, she has not forgotten the power and the weight of words: they are 'to die for', and therefore, she cannot be easily domesticated. Alluding to Shahrazad's narrative, the poem aims to undermine Western assumptions about Shahrazad, but in the process, it highlights aspects of the traditional narrative that have been often ignored in Western translations of the story.

Whereas in *The Nights* Shahrazad narrates stories to save her life and the lives of other virgins in the city, Kahf's Shahrazad uses her narration to follow through on her feminist cause, fighting for her rights and those of her fellow sisters. Through the power of her narrative, Shahrazad succeeded in taming the king and averting his desires for revenge, whilst curing his complex. Her tales bewitched Shahryar: 'I told a story. He began to listen and I found/ That story led to story. Powers unleashed, I wound/The thread around the pirn of night' (Kahf 2003, p. 43). In addition to re-inscribing Shahrazad as an active subject capable of engendering transformation, the poem aims to emphasize the reciprocal change and development instigated by her storytelling: 'I taught him to heal/His violent streak through stories, after all/ And he helped me uncover my true call' (Kahf 2003, p. 43). 'A thousand days/ Later, [they] got divorced' because he 'wanted a wife and not so much an artist', who teaches 'creative writing at Montclair State' (Kahf 2003, p. 43). Shahrazad has succeeded in curing her man and helped him transform his macho pensiveness into constructive output, to 'do workshops now in schools/ On art and conflict resolutions' (Kahf 2003, p. 43). In return, he has helped her discover her true calling, which she identifies as 'wanting a publication'. The Muslim/Arab-American Shahrazad refuses to be eternally captivated within the walls of orality. In the twenty-first century, she declared her entrance into 'the public realm of the written/published word' (Abdelrazek 2005, p. 144) so that her art and achievements will never be subject to forces of alteration, manipulation or erasure from history. Like Shahrazad, Arab-American women writers, such as Kahf, use their art and storytelling as a powerful tool of resistance to kill 'the beast of doubts' in their readers and critics and teach them how 'to heal/ [their] violent streak' (Kahf 2003, p. 43).

In "If the Odalisque" and "Thawrah de Odalisque at Matisse Retrospective", Kahf articulates the carnality problem of representation facing Muslim women, whilst pointing to the fact that the odalisque figure is central in freezing Muslim women within the passive portrayal of the odalisque in the paintings of European Orientalist artists. The word 'odalisque' is a French word derived from the Turkish word 'odalik' referring to a harem slave servant. The word consists of two syllables: (oda) means room, and odalisque means the woman in the room, or the concubine of the Sultan confined to an enclosed space, whereas (jariyah) is the Arabic equivalent of the word, meaning a female servant. Obviously, the Western rendition of the word indicates how Orientalist leaning has shaped Western representations of Middle Eastern women. Mernissi (2001) compares the connotations of the word in the two languages: 'while odalisque refers to a space, jarya refers to an activity...it comes from [Jara], to run' (2001, p. 36). According to Jane Miller, the odalisque is the space where the Muslim/Oriental woman's body has become an exotic object, to be explored by, and exposed to, colonial gaze. Miller elaborates, 'The East also is a woman, however: a womb, female in its vulnerability and weakness and otherness and in its seductiveness, fertility and profitability' (1991, p. 115).

In “Thawrah de Odalisque at Matisse Retrospective”, these odalisques have decided to cover their bodies and heads, revolting against their fabricated images that have reduced them into fetish objects. This five-page poem links a melodrama of ‘thawrah’ (a revolution), a comic and inventive revolution forced by all the odalisques in Matisse’s paintings. An odalisque describes this revolution:

Yawm min al-ayyam we just decided: Enough is enough  
 A unique opportunity, the Retrospective brought us all together  
 I looked across the gallery at Red Culottes and gave the signal  
 She passed it on to Woman in Veil and we kicked  
 through canvas  
 [...]  
 “She must be so uncomfortable in that position”  
 these two museumgoers murmured in front of Two Odalisques  
 Suddenly I felt my back aching  
 A seventy-five year kind of ache  
 I scattered the chessboard I had been painted with (Kahf 2003, p. 64)

After two hijab-wearing women passed the paintings in the Matisse exhibit and uttered comments sympathizing with these odalisques for their uncomfortable poses, the contingent of these painted odalisques decided to break away from their painterly and patriarchal captivity. In these paintings, the odalisques are portrayed as sitting in harem rooms, lounging idly as part of the colorful background and, consequently, epitomizing available sexuality. Kahf expounds that in Western cultures and discourses, Muslim odalisques have been viewed and rendered as ‘intimidating seducers, ... “wanton”...completely emptied of volition, [and] ready to submit erotic conquest’, (1999, p. 152). Frozen in these paintings and positions, Muslim women serve as ‘bearer[s]’ rather than ‘maker[s]’ of meaning: ‘the meaning that the Muslim woman bears in the Romantic text is apparent from the unmistakable fetishizing nature of the gaze directed at her’ (Kahf 1999, p. 161). Kahf also notes that for European artists such as Matisse, Muslim women—emptied of volition and drained of subjectivity— became ‘the limp shimmering object of a fetishizing male gaze’ (1999, p. 8).

The poem depicts a contingent of Matisse odalisques who felt tired of being nailed to the wall in positions that did not suit them. After long years of silenced torment and anguish for being left ‘uncomfortable in that position’, they have decided ‘enough is enough’ and, hence, revolted against this situation. The first phrase in the poem, ‘Yawm min al-ayyam’, meaning once upon a time, indicates the narrative style that sets the poem in a web of narratives through which the narrator tells (her story) of objectification and misrepresentation. The poem depicts the physical suffering these odalisques have endured throughout history as a result of being frozen in these postures for long decades. Whilst some of them now have ‘icy nipples’ and are ‘coughing/ the draft in the gallery had gone straight to their chests’, others feels their ‘back aching/ a seventy-five year kind of ach’ (Kahf 2003, p. 64). Also, one of them has ‘a migraine...from.../ sitting and starrng at her gold fish swim in circles/ around, around, around, around/ till the fish was woman and woman was fish’ (Kahf 2003, p. 65).

These lines illustrate how the Orientalist gaze and perceptions have objectified Muslim and Oriental women, ripped off their agency and individuality and reduced them to exotic sexual objects. Capturing Oriental odalisques in Western paintings symbolizes their position in Western culture. Kahf mentions that the portrayal of the Muslim woman constitutes clusters of elements in which the following are the keys: 'irredeemable difference and exoticism; intense sexuality, excessive ornamentation and association with fetish objects; and finally, powerlessness in the form of imprisonment, enslavement, seclusion, silence, or invisibility' (1999, p. 8). Therefore, by capitalizing the words 'Woman', 'Veil', 'Two Odalisques', the poet aims to disrupt this representation and narrative of the Muslim woman, offering her agency that transforms her from being an object into an effective subject who is capable of change.

Asia (1946) and Zulma (1950) decided to lead the revolution:

Asia and Zulma, older, led the procession  
 "Everyone whose arms are numb from sleeping on them,  
 raise your hands'  
 Blue Nude decided she was with us  
 a because of her eyes and her posture  
 Pink Nude wanted in though she wasn't an odalisque  
 because "that bastard, my ass is cold from these blue tiles/ and I can't love a man who  
 made my head smaller than my tits  
 almost an afterthought" (Kahf 2003, p. 64-5).

Many odalisques joined, including Pink Nude (1935), who was not an odalisque. She was Matisse's model and studio assistant, Lydia Delectorskaya (BBC). The participation of Pink Nude reflects the poet's genuine feminist preoccupation. She articulates her political resistance through the prism of feminism. Also, it can be interpreted as a plea for Western feminism to acknowledge the positions and struggles of Middle Eastern women, despite their difference as part of the world's feminist cause, since all women are subjugated to the male's gaze. Embracing their powers, these angry odalisques 'tore down museum banners' for their unrealistic and unjust labelling, and used them to dress nude odalisques who wanted clothes.

Matisse's odalisques, nevertheless, realize that their revolution passes unnoticed and that the public would always prefer to embrace mythology rather than lived experiences. Therefore, soon 'Pink Nude got the most movie offers/ Playboy tried to talk off the pants off the Culottes/ Vintage offered a lucrative advance to With Magnolias/ for a book deal/ with promos on Good Morning America' (Kahf 2003, p. 266). Instead of acknowledging their struggle and quest for freedom, these women continue to be objectified and commoditized by mainstream media in the United States.

The odalisque narrator expresses her frustration because their voices went unheard:

No one wanted to know about us  
 Statements were issued on our behalf  
 by Arab nationalists, Iranian dissidents, Western feminists  
 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  
Then someone spread conspiracy rumors about us  
among the Arabs (Kahf 2003, p. 66).

Neither Arab nationalism, nor Western feminism or ideologies of any stripe, would be able to subjugate Kahf's self-liberated odalisques. In the lines above, the narrator highlights the predicaments facing Arab and Arab-American women, who are torn between the prejudices of Western feminism and the patriarchy of Arab nationalism. The Arab-American feminist Darraj echoes a similar ethos:

[T]he battle against sexism fought by Arab women is more layered and intricate than the one fought by Western feminists because Arab women are simultaneously fighting patriarchy in their own societies, colonialism by the West, and nationalist forces in their own societies who interpret feminism as another branch of imperialistic domination (2003, 193).

On the one hand, the narrator denounces her Western feminist comrades for dismissing the agency of Muslim/Arab women, who are deemed inadequate and unqualified to represent Western feminist values because of wearing hijab. Although Western feminism and, particularly, the third wave, uses the existence of these women as a 'token of diversity', it refuses to acknowledge wearing hijab as an act originating from Muslim/Arab women's subjectivity and symbolizing another version of liberty and freedom of choice. On the other hand, the poet or narrator critiques the socio-political contexts in the Middle East that judge these women and criticize their feminist quest as Westernized and Americanized attitudes, and view them as betraying their national struggle against imperialism and jeopardizing their cause.

The poem proceeds by revealing the quandaries Muslim/Arab-American women face in their homeland due to the turbulent socio-political conditions, and the prejudices in the new home, which have left them victims of: 'Cruel and unusual contortions, unhealthy and unfair/working conditions at nonexistent wages' (Kahf 2003, p. 67). In addition to subverting Orientalist stereotypes and denouncing the politics of Arab patriarchy, Kahf also registers an assured feminist stance as she bridles at the topic of the Muslim/Arab female sexuality and declares that exposing it concerns no one but women themselves: 'Or that anyway, our sexuality, / When we choose to put it into play, / Is our business' (Kahf 2003, p. 67).

The odalisques, however, refuse to give up their cause of freedom to be 'contained within narrowly-defined revolutionary frame works, whether Western or Middle Eastern' (Majaj 2012, p. 3). They all joined to form 'a support group' to sue 'the pants off the Matisse estate and the museums...' (Kahf 2003, p. 66) and announce a powerful comeback: 'Hi I'm Odalisque with Big Breasts/I was painted by Matisse/ but I'm in control now' (Kahf 2003, p. 68). They decided to work together to reclaim identities on their own terms, and according to their own version of feminism:

That when we found out With Magnolias  
had been painted pregnant  
so we all got together for her delivery  
[...]

We held her hands, Bayadere, wiped her brow  
 We were all wondering ya allah, ya Fattah but afraid  
 Would the baby be smothered by the same aesthetic forms?  
 Would it be killed by the paint fumes from another era  
 before it had a chance to breath its options?  
 She screamed She pushed She crowned She gushed And then!  
 It was like nothing any of us had ever seen. Pure life,  
 Pure energy.  
 It was a girl! She waved her fists. She let go  
 with a high-pitched protest to the world (Kahf 2003, p. 68-9).

The contingent of Matisse odalisques got together for the delivery to express feminist solidarity and receive together the newborn baby girl, who waves her tiny fists ‘in protest to the world’ (Kahf 2003, p. 69). Seeking God’s help—‘ya allah, ya fattah’ is an Arabic expression that denotes praying for God’s help—the odalisques were hoping that the newborn baby girl would escape their destiny. In her book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, Kahf states that from the eighteenth century to the present, Western discourse portrays the Muslim woman as ‘innately oppressed’. It depicts Muslim women who substantiate this portrayal by being either ‘submissive nonentities or rebellious renegades’, revolting against their Islamic culture whilst conforming to Western gender roles (1999, p. 177). The birth of the baby girl symbolizes the rebirth of the new Muslim/Arab-American woman, who has learned from history not to be ‘smothered by the same aesthetic forms’ that had smothered her ancestors, and fixed them in static positions.

Only towards the end of the poem we meet the narrator of the anecdote:  
 I, Small Odalisque, drew up my purple robe and ululated  
 and we all ululated  
 in post-odalisquesque  
 jub-jube-jube-jubilation (Kahf 2003, p. 69).

This newborn girl has become the twenty-first century Mestiza, a ‘Pure life’ and ‘pure energy’ that seeks to formulate a new feminism that helps her create a diasporic space that is neither Arab, nor American. With the odalisques’ ululation—the traditional articulation of Middle Eastern women at moments of great joy—the poem concludes with a note of joy and hope for a better Muslim/Arab-American feminist future.

Reviving these odalisque, eroticized figures can be regarded a form of resistant mimicry. Discussing the ‘power of mimicry’, Yegenoglu writes, ‘The re-articulation, reworking and re-signification of the discursive characteristics of phallogocentrism can open the possibility for an in-between ambivalent zone when the agency of the female subject can be construed’ (1998, p. 65). As these figures of the odalisques are re-inscribed and revived as distorted imitations of Matisse’s Odalisques, they displace the Oriental representation of them and, hence, disrupt dominant stereotypes of Muslim/Arab women. Accordingly, the act of mimicking them becomes an active act of resistance.

## Conclusion

As a diasporic narrative, Shahrazad has become a space of translation through mimicry, in which Arab-American women inscribe so that they become ‘actively involved in the process of the political language of identity’ (Sabry 2009, p. 144). Such involvement aims to distinguish between the chosen translation of themselves and the ones that have framed them. From this stance, Kahf utilizes the Shahrazadian narrative as an experience through which Muslim/Arab-American women can negotiate belonging and affiliations, whilst simultaneously accomplishing in the process an agency and cultural pronouncement from which a new Muslim/Arab-American identity can emerge.

In Kahf’s poetry, Shahrazad seeks to assume ‘control of her narrative through the power over its production’ (Sabry 2009, p. 142), unlike the Western version, in which Sharayar dictates Shahrazad’s stories. Also, the poems reveals another remarkable transformation to the original tale as it stresses the reciprocal development that both Shahrazad and Sharayar gained from their relationship, instead of solely emphasizing the role the tales played in Sharayar’s healing. In her poetry, Kahf speaks for all Muslim/ Arab-American women who seek to pronounce narratives of subjugation and objectification to challenge deeply-held American misconceptions of their identities and culture. Reviving Shahrazad in the diaspora epitomizes the potential of Arab-American women artists and writers to emerge as subversive figures who seek to disrupt the authoritative mainstream discourses from within.

## About the Author:

**Dr Safaa A. Alahmad** is an Assistant Professor of Arab-American Studies at Dammam University, Saudi Arabia. She currently holds the position of Vice Dean of Academic Development and Quality and Head of English Department at, College of Education. Dr. Alahmad completed her BA and MA in English in Saudi Arabia, and as a full scholarship student later earned a PhD from University of Stirling, United Kingdom. Dr. Alahmad is engaged in Arab-American Studies, minority women writing, Saudi women writing and women leadership research, in addition to cultural translation.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter the short title *The Nights* will be used from this point on.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.henri-matisse.net/paintingssectionthree.html>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbccone/modernmasters/virtual-exhibition/matisse/8-pink-nude.shtml>