

# Who Defines Me



Who Defines Me:  
Negotiating Identity in Language  
and Literature

Edited by

Yasser Fouad Selim and Eid Mohamed

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables .....	vii
Preface .....	ix
Yasser Fouad Selim and Eid Mohamed	
Introduction .....	1
Kevin Lacey	
Chapter One.....	3
Arab American Muslim Women and the Experience of Being “Irregular” in Muhja Kahf’s <i>Email from Scheherazad</i> Doaa Abdelhafez Hamada	
Chapter Two .....	19
The Making of Identity in Arab American Stand-Up Comedy Yasser Fouad Selim	
Chapter Three .....	33
Identity Politics of Color, Nation and Land in the Literature of Nubian Egyptians, with Special Reference to Muhammad Khalil Qasim’s <i>Al-shamandoura</i> Naglaa F. Mahmoud Hussein	
ChapterFour.....	49
“Either I am Nobody or I am a Nation”: Walcott’s Version of Creolization Doris Hambuch	
Chapter Five .....	63
Constructing Afro-Caribbean Identity through Memory and Language in Grace Nichol’s <i>I is a Long Memored Woman</i> Emira Derbel	

Chapter Six.....	77
A Postcolonial Reading of the Identity Construction in Flannery O’Conner’s “The Artificial Nigger” XueYufeng	
Chapter Seven.....	87
African Americans and the Great Migration: A Dream Deferred and the Rise of the New Negro Yamen Dridi	
Chapter Eight.....	107
The Cultural Diversity of the New American Studies: A Commentary on <i>Bread Givers</i> Eid Mohamed	
Chapter Nine.....	123
Language and Identity: Place Names and Ethnic Identity in the Hilali Epic Bahaa-Eddin Hassan	
Chapter Ten.....	137
Foreign Labor in the Arab Gulf and its Impact on Language, Culture and Identity: Oman as a Case Study Shaker Ali Al-Mohamadi	
Contributors.....	153
Index.....	157

## LIST OF TABLES

1. Total and Percentage of Population in the Arab Gulf Countries .....	140
2. Total and Percentage of Labor Force (National and Non-national) in the Arab Gulf Countries .....	141
3. Targeted Omanization % for Retail Selling Occupations in Big Outlets.....	148



## PREFACE

This collected volume is based on the BUC First International Conference held in September 2012 at Al-Buraimi University College, Oman, which focused on the theme “Negotiating Identity in Language and Literature.” The conference brought together a diverse group of scholars to think and talk about a timely and stimulating topic: identity in language, culture, and literature. This volume consists of selected revised papers presented at the conference and reflects a forum rich with controversial thoughts, ideas, and research on the conference theme.

In our globalized world of fast and continuous change, concepts of identity, difference, and commonality among world cultures have become a passionate theme in literature and language studies. Globalization, technology, and developments in communication cause our world to seem smaller, placing cultures and identities at risk and raising questions about newly forged relationships between individuals and between cultures. In literature and language studies, writers and scholars find the ideal means to negotiate, define, and redefine identity. Questions about who we are and how others perceive us are at the core of these studies, which attempt to draw connections between cultures and define newly forged relationships.

Unlike many other publications, this volume presents a full-fledged comparative perspective on the field. It yields insights that may have implications for current movements of people across our globalized world, with shared language and education as their intellectual passport and a confident sense of identity and belonging with the West and its culture, based on familiarity acquired through a shared language and images derived from ubiquitous media sources. The chapters in this collection are rooted in the interdisciplinary frameworks offered by literary studies, cultural studies, Middle Eastern studies, and American studies. Few books have focused on a critical analysis of negotiating identity that links critical readings of form and content to larger sociopolitical concerns.

This book could never have been published to its fullest without the support and help of many committed and visionary people. We would like to extend our thanks and gratitude to those who helped make this project a reality, in particular Sheikh Ahmed Bin Nasser Al Naimi, chairman of Al-Buraimi University College, who generously funded and supported the BUC First International Conference. We would like to show our deep

appreciation to Professor Kevin Lacey for his valued contribution in writing the introduction to this collection. We also highly value the patience, support, and help of the Cambridge Scholars Publishing team. We hope this volume is the first in a series of forthcoming collaborations.

Above all, we thank the researchers whose work appears in this volume. Their contributions, derived from various disciplines and contexts, add new dimensions to the theme of identity negotiation and create this ground-breaking volume.

Yasser Fouad Selim  
Eid Mohamed

# INTRODUCTION

KEVIN LACEY

The insightful articles assembled for *Who Defines Me* represent an interdisciplinary study of identity. They start from the premise that identity is—and always has been—unstable and mutable, which is to say that identity is constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed, only to be deconstructed and reconstructed again and again, *ad infinitum*. Time and place are variables. So, too—as *Who Defines Me* underscores—are ethnicity, religion, politics and power, race and color, nationality, gender, culture, language, and socioeconomic status.

With all of these variables in mind, *Who Defines Me* focuses on language and literature as the portal through which identity is explored. The overarching rubrics under which the explorations are conducted are Arabs and Muslims, race identity in the United States, and language identity—the last with special reference to examples involving Arabic.

Identity in today's world is especially affected by human migration, although migration is not a particularly new phenomenon. The distinguished American writer and public intellectual Gore Vidal once remarked during a radio interview—somewhat blithely dismissing concerns for people being overrun and displaced by others—that all of human history can be seen as little more than the story of great waves of human migration, with the displacement and marginalization of identity an inevitable outcome. Globalization, however, is intensifying the speed, volume, and diversity of migrations (migration, incidentally, is a type of globalization). With this intensification, questions of identity are likely to remain as relevant as ever, and, in many instances (e.g. where race or religion or ethnicity intersect with politics or power or nationality and citizenship), as provocative or contentious as ever. Notwithstanding the veritable franchising of the planet—what Deborah Williams sees as an “Ikealand” where the lingua franca is “Ikeanese” (the UAE daily, *The National*, October 11, 2013)—hybridization (a topic touched upon by Doris Hambuch in Chapter 4) and not homogenization and, indeed, multiple identities, not only the double identities that Eid Mohamed sheds light on in Chapter 10, are likely to be the order of the day in the

hyperglobalized community of nations the formation of which now seems irreversible. Despite the best efforts of the great levelers—corporate, individual, or state—the world will not be entirely flat. Specificities of race, language, religion, and culture will continue to matter. In fact, the relocation of large numbers of people at an unprecedented pace, and to environs remarkably dissimilar to those they leave behind, may reinforce these specificities as coping—or even survival—devices.

Whether this means that differences will be peaceably and constructively negotiated and accommodated within larger as opposed to smaller organizing or structuring entities and not lead to fissures and fault lines and fragmentation that are even more destabilizing and destructive than those that currently exist (if in fact the latter cannot be eliminated altogether), remains to be seen. As Edward Said has pointed out in his seminal studies on defining others, the challenge for all of us who hope for a less strife-torn world is to acknowledge difference and learn how to accept and appreciate it while working toward the day when in the process of identifying others—whoever they may be—we instinctively find certain categories such as race, religion, and color decidedly secondary or incidental.

In this vein, particularly given that Eid al-Adha (the Islamic high holy day of sacrifice) is only a few days away as I write, and given the thematic common denominator of most if not all of the articles in *Who Defines Me*, I cannot help but recall a particularly noteworthy passage from the Prophet Muhammad's last pilgrimage sermon before he died. It is commonly recalled during Eid al-Adha:

All humankind is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab and a non-Arab has no superiority over an Arab; and a white has no superiority over a black and a black any superiority over a white—except in terms of piety and good deeds.

## CHAPTER ONE

# ARAB AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING “IRREGULAR” IN MOHJA KAHF’S *E-MAILS FROM SCHEHERAZAD*

DOAA ABDELHAFEZ HAMADA

Once a journalist who was supposed to be reviewing my poetry reading reviewed my mode of dress code instead. All she could find to say was “Here’s this woman in hijab who reads poetry! Look, she’s in hijab and reads poetry!” (Kahf 2004, 14)

As told by Mohja Kahf, these words illustrate that some Americans, even the highly educated among them, have a reductive perception of an Arab American Muslim woman such as Kahf regardless of any literary talent or intellectual uniqueness she may possess. This restrictive way of thinking about Arab American Muslim women confines them to a long history of negative views of Arab and Muslim women, a history shaped mainly by misrepresentations of Islam and the East.

In this chapter, I am concerned with analyzing Kahf’s feminist and Islamic stand on the difficult and complex position of Muslim women in American society. I consider how Kahf approaches the problems experienced by Muslim American women through these two angles—feminism and Islam—in her volume of poetry *E-mails from Scheherazad*. I investigate Kahf’s defense of the rights of Muslim women to be Muslim and American in their own way. I also explore Kahf’s parallel criticism of America and Muslims and reflect on the attempts by Muslim women to define their own understanding of America, Islam, and feminism. I show how Kahf criticizes the reductive view of Muslim women in America as much as she defends them against the male-biased interpretations of Islam in Muslim communities. I highlight the way in which Kahf employs

Islamic feminism to prove that Muslim women strongly adhere to the cause of women's rights while maintaining an equal commitment to Islam.

In *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Kahf illustrates the fact that Muslim women are rejected by the collective American mind as outsiders, merely for being different from the majority of American women. Kahf views this attitude as an attempt to establish Muslim American women as "the other" to non-Muslim American women. Islam is not perceived as an American religion; for this reason, Americans consider Islam a barrier to the full assimilation of Muslims into Western culture. Samaa Abdurraqib suggests that Islam "is a culture that needs to be left behind because it does not correlate with being American" (2006, 55). Thus, the West sometimes believes that Muslim women need emancipation from the shackles of Islam, which may not be true. Muslim women in America experience more prejudice than their male counterparts because the hijab distinguishes them from other American women. Furthermore, women are always "assigned the role of bearers of cultural values, carriers of traditions, and symbols of the community" (Moghadam 1994, 4). Muslim women are therefore expected to continue to wear the hijab and maintain their role as tradition keepers, regardless of how they are perceived when they move outside the realms of their community.

In her poem "Hijab Scene#3," Kahf records the moment when a Muslim American woman feels she is the opposite of everything a "regular" American woman represents. Kahf poeticizes this feeling of being an "irregular" identity in the context of the American nation. In the poem, Kahf creates an analogy between the sense of irregularity and the experience of being an alien in a Star Trek movie: "I'm a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!" (2003, 25). The poem explains the difficulty some Americans may experience in taking American Muslim women seriously because of "the stereotypes of Arab women as uniformly similar: silent, acquiescent, unthinking" (Kahf 2004, 4). The poem portrays a confrontation between the persona and a teacher in her children's school. The teacher cannot accept that a Muslim mother would want to join the PTA (Parent-Teacher Association). The teacher appears deaf to the Muslim woman's three-times repeated "I would" to confirm her desire to join the association. As Kahf writes, "she wasn't seeing me." The teacher is incapable of perceiving a woman wearing hijab as an active, initiating, and outspoken person. Kahf perceives the female teacher's closed mind to such a possibility as if "the positronic force field of hijab / jammed all her cosmic coordinates." The hijab blocks all means of communication with the teacher:

. . . I sent up flares,  
beat on drums, waved navy flags,  
tried smoke signals, American Sign Language,  
Morse code, Western Union, telex, fax,  
Lt. Uhura hailing her  
for me on another frequency.  
(Kahf 2003, 25)

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. Chandra Mohanty illuminates that women in hijab are always struggling to deconstruct preconceived ideas about themselves (1991, 52). Kahf reveals this struggle in her poem “Descent in JFK” in which she writes:

They’d never know Khaleda  
has a Ph.D.  
because she wears a veil they’ll  
never see beyond.  
(Kahf 2003, 37)

Khaleda is reductively perceived, stereotyped. In this poem, Kahf sheds light on a recurring situation that Islamic feminists deals with; the Western mind cannot grasp the idea that the hijab is a cover of the hair, not of the mind. Leila Ahmed proposes that “veiling—to Western eyes . . . became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam” (1992, 152). Due to this misconception, Muslim women are far from being identified in terms of their individuality, uniqueness, and distinguished success. Rather, each is defined collectively and judged according to the social status of her community of Muslim women.

To be an American in a scarf causes people to look at you differently, sometimes accusingly. That compels the persona in “Hijab Scene #7” to start responding verbally to the questioning looks around her:

No, I’m not bald under the scarf  
No, I’m not from that country  
where women can’t drive cars  
.....  
I’m already American.  
(Kahf1995, 39)

After 9/11, women wearing scarves became a source of doubt and fear for ordinary people. In this poem, the persona challenges people's fears and confronts them:

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  
 (Kahf 2003, 39)

According to Kahf, “asking the disturbing, subversive questions is a noble jihad, fear is not the basis for any art and never can be” (2004, 15). Islamic feminism embraces such attempts to employ art and writing to serve the cause of Muslim women to be themselves—in the East and in the West. Art can be used to explain Islam and its realms of forgiveness and humanity. Islamic feminism urges the West to learn about Islam from its authentic sources rather than judge it according to the behavior of individual Muslims who may be good or bad. It also urges Muslim women to establish their own understanding of Islam rather than rely on readymade interpretations of Islam from people who may or may not be biased. Kahf calls for a kind of art that fears nothing, that raises all of the submerged questions in the minds of Muslims and non-Muslims. Kahf knows that Muslim women need to interrogate their identities and their religion in order to reach the point of balance between being Muslim and being American. She also understands that art can be a weapon to confront the American society's fear of Muslims and to stress that it is possible to be simultaneously both a Muslim and a good American. “Hijab Scene #7” presents a real-life situation frequently faced by Muslim women.

Such situations were not unusual for Muslim American women even before 9/11. In fact, they grew with this feeling of “irregularity.” In “Hijab Scene #1,” Kahf describes a young schoolboy's response to hijab in school: “‘You dress strange,’ / . . . / his tongue-rings clicking on the ‘tr’ in ‘strange’” (Kahf 2003, 41). This boy forgets the strangeness of his “bright blue hair” and focuses “on the ‘tr’ in ‘strange’” because the strangeness of the hijab is relevant to religion rather than to anything else. The same irony is repeated in “Hijab Scene # 2” in which a woman “hobbling away in three-inch heels” disapproves of Muslims’ “restrictive dress for women,” oblivious of the restrictions imposed by her high heels (Kahf 2003, 42). The point here is not the veil itself but the expectancy that “the basic faith of an American will, in a significant way, be ‘just a religion’”

(Voll 1993, 206). However, this might not be possible in practice. Islamic feminism criticizes this attitude and calls for the application of the American principle of personal freedom, which gives every American the right to choose to practice his or her religion. For Americans to realize the nature of Islam requires a certain level of understanding and broadmindedness on their part. Traditional Americanness should incorporate tolerance of the differences between Islam and other religions. Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis (1987, 3) assert that Americanness is unattainable for totalitarian Muslims, who view Islam as a complete way of life. Accordingly, American Muslims are pressured to choose between being a true American and being a true Muslim to avoid accusations of fundamentalism.

Negative attitudes about the hijab are part of an inner rejection of Islam as a religion relevant only to third-world people, whose cultures and behaviors are not in accord with Western values. Thus, the hijab is perceived as a form of ethnic dress rather than personal dress. The descendants of European cultures tend to identify Islam as an oriental religion. This is exemplified in the idea that “if there is such a thing as a European outlook on the world, a sense of what is European as distinct from not-European, it began to develop and define itself in opposition to Islamic civilization” (Kahf 1999, 14). Western representations of the East tend to enhance the historical process that dichotomizes cultures into good and bad, superior and inferior. To prove its superiority, the West needs an inferior “other” against which to be compared.

Even Muslim children are not welcome, unlike other American children. In her poem “The Passing There,” Kahf recalls that when she and her brother were children, they were insulted by their neighbor out of religious and ethnic prejudice and expelled from playing on his land. He threatened them, and his words:

. . . expressed his concerns  
about our religion and ethnic origin.  
He had a rifle. . . .  
(Kahf 2003, 18)

Kahf and her brother were treated differently from other American children, the “. . . Mathews and Deborahs, / Toms and Betsys, Wills and Dots. . . .” (2003, 18). Muslim children feel unwelcome every time they face such hostility.

It seems that this hostility stems from Americans’ intolerance to difference. Americans’ understanding of the concept of the “melting pot” makes assimilation a mandatory prerequisite to citizenship. Americans

expect newcomers to “melt” into the new culture to the point where they lose their original culture. Muslim migrants are expected to part with their origins and detach themselves from their religion—to relinquish anything that may prevent them from melting into the American pot. However, this tends to be impossible in practice. In spite of the societal negative attitudes, hybrid Americans and Muslim Americans cannot forgo either of the two cultures to which they belong, because it is impossible for them “to choose one over the other” (Kahf 2003, 20). Kahf confirms that if migrants believe in the goodness of their original culture and religion, they can make it workable in America. In her poem “Lateefa,” Kahf writes:

If we love what we are we can make it  
survive here: George Washington, meet  
Harun al-Rashid. . . .  
(Kahf 2003, 23)

This opens a new outlook for migrants from the East to participate in the enrichment of America.

In the poem “Fayetteville as in Fate,” Kahf presents herself as an example of this ability to entwine the cultures of her origins and her upbringing to form an amalgam of both. Many voices reiterate in her mind: “some from Damascus, some from Fayetteville, they meet / in my head like the walls of the Red Sea crashing together” (Kahf 2003, 6). Yet, Kahf is cognizant that the many contradictions between the two cultures cause a restless state of mind for any bearer of the two cultures. She is aware of how dangerous this mixture can be: “hoping they don’t explode when they touch each other” or “turn bitter when the heat rises” as both cultures “believe improbable, vile things about each other.” The poem closes with remnants of hope, describing future communication between the two cultures:

May their children e-mail one another and not bomb one another  
May they download each other’s mother’s bread recipes  
May they sell yams and yogurts to each other at a considerable profit  
May they learn each other’s tongue and put words into each other’s mouth.

The poem concludes with “Amen” in both Arabic and English:

Say *Amen*  
Say آمين  
Say it, say it  
(Kahf 2003, 7)

This concluding word of prayer has the same meaning and pronunciation in both languages. Regardless of the difference in alphabet used, for Kahf’s persona, this simple word can be a common link between the two cultures.

Kahf reads Walt Whitman’s panoramic parade of American people and wishes Muslim Americans were included in the album. However, she knows well how difficult it is for American society, because Walt Whitman and his fellow American poets did not know her or other Muslims in America:

No one here knows how to pronounce our names  
Walt, how do you pronounce our names?  
Emily, Carl, Langston, Hart,  
Allen, Adrienne, Coleman, Sonya,  
Amiri, Marge, Joy, Sandra,  
how do you come to America?  
(Kahf 2003, 94)

Kahf knows well how it feels to be an outsider because of one’s Arab Islamic culture: “I wished I could invite friends to my parents’ house without getting slightly alarmed looks from them when grape leaves, magloubeh, and foul appeared on the dinner table.” She wonders, “How could I tell anyone that I owned cassette tapes of both Fairouz and Madonna and sang to the lyrics of both with equal zest?” (Kahf 2004, 1). Muslim Americans’ “irregularity” is unavoidable because it is derived from the cultural heritage they brought with them to America—their “voyager dust.” In the poem “Voyager Dust,” Kahf contemplates the moment each new immigrant reaches America:

When they arrive in the new country,  
voyagers carry it on their shoulders,  
the dusting of the sky they left behind.  
(Kahf 2003, 1)

It is an inevitable heritage, which the first generation of Muslim immigrants brought with them in their garments. Now, second and third generations find this dust on their “shoulders too” (Kahf 2003, 1). Younger generations of Muslim immigrants find that this ancestral dust is noticeable in their features and perceptible in their characters.

This “voyager dust” is the lens through which other Americans view Muslim American women stereotypically as “nothing more than a harem sex kitten.” They disregard the probability that a Muslim woman can be “an intelligent woman schooled in literature and philosophy” (Kahf 2004,

2). Kahf wonders “who would be able to understand that I was a feminist, though not completely certain because Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinmen seem to be talking to my white classmates, not to me?” (Kahf 2004, 1). Kahf refers to the way in which Muslim women were not included in feminist debates, as if feminism were of no concern to them. This attitude stemmed from many misrepresentative writings by Western writers about Muslim women and the East. In fact, Western assaults upon Muslim women can be traced back to the European invasion of the East and to orientalism. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many in the West:

used the trope of “oppressed Muslim woman,” a set piece of orientalist discourse, displaying a feigned concern for her “plight,” in order to justify colonial and neo-colonial incursion of Muslim societies, or simply to make a show of arrogant superiority. (Badran 2009, 1)

Western texts claim that Islam is against women’s rights and that Muslims are therefore incapable of producing feminist texts. Islamic feminism targets such claims to prove their hollowness.

From an Islamic feminist position, Kahf defends the image of Muslim women from Western prejudices and orientalist allegations. She criticizes the secular feminists’ assumption that Muslim women in hijab cannot be defenders of women’s rights. In the poem “*Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective*,” Kahf expresses her disapproval of superficial judgments and negative attitudes about hijab:

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  
Like, why had we hung around so long? In the capitals  
of the Western world so long? . . .  
(Kahf 2003, 66)

The persona revolts against Western feminist attitudes and reproaches their conceit. In this poem, Kahf writes back to the history of long-standing misrepresentations of Muslim women in hijab. She calls for an in-depth view of Muslim women that goes beyond the way they look or the way they dress. Kahf summons feminists to unite with all women, regardless of their origin, religion, or appearance. She demands diversity

in practice, and full inclusion in feminist thought. Every woman is a feminist in her own way. There cannot be one version of feminism to apply to all women everywhere; feminism can be as varied as are the experiences of women. Each woman has a story that qualifies her to deconstruct any theoretical frame of feminism because every woman has a voice to be cherished and echoed.

It is not too late for even the deceased generations of women to restore their lost voices through the writings of their granddaughters. In “*Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective*,” Kahf restores the voice of her ancestral Muslim women. She develops an argument against Western orientalist texts and paintings that silenced her ancestors and exploited them as a theme. Kahf proves that Muslim women, past and present, can produce their own feminist discourse. She attacks the orientalist tradition of studying the East through Western perspectives. Her poem endows life to the models in the paintings to evolve as voiced, vibrant, and strong. Kahf denounces the orientalist works of art in Western museums and galleries. These works portray Eastern women as odalisques in Ottoman palaces. Kahf poeticizes the boredom of the subjects in these works and gives them voice to against their misrepresentation. The phrases “*Yawm min al-ayyam*” (one day) and “enough is enough” suggest the models have long been patient and cannot wait any longer to revolt against their confinement in the shackles of orientalist thought:

*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 to a Woman in Veil and we kicked  
 through canvas  
 (Kahf 2003, 64)

The models in Henri Matisse’s paintings of odalisques are delighted to be brought together in John Elderfield’s *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (1992) to cooperate and rebel against the way they are portrayed and to escape from the positions in which they have been imprisoned for many years. They make a *thawra* (revolution) against the artist who painted them. Both the nude in “Red Culottes” and the woman in “Woman in Veil” are up for this revolution. Both are dissatisfied with the way in which Matisse and other artists have defined them. Here, Kahf illuminates the idea that the problem is not with Muslim women but with the way in which the West falsely perceives and portrays them. Kahf herself is an example of a veiled Muslim woman who can produce her own feminist text.

Kahf challenges the Western idea that Muslim women lack dignity and self-respect. She confirms that Muslim women are clearly able to address women's pursuit of equality. This pursuit is in harmony with Islamic feminists' "compelling argument that the patriarchal model of the family does not conform to Qur'anic principles of human equality and gender justice" and its promotion of an "egalitarian model of both family and society" (Badran 2009, 4). This is clearly evident in Kahf's poem "The Woman Dear to Herself (*Azizatu Nafsiha*).<sup>2</sup> The title is presented not only in English but also in Arabic—the language of the Qur'an. This signifies that Islam is not against women's dignity. This is what Margot Badran regards as the "intellectual endeavor or *ijtihadic* project of articulating a coherent model of an egalitarian Islam, and one that can serve as a template for religious and socio-cultural transformation" (2009, 5). Kahf identifies "the woman dear to herself" as a woman who is proud of being a woman; this is ordained by divine law. A Muslim woman can maintain her self-pride if she ". . . lives in the heart, / alive to the everywhere presence of divinity." According to Kahf, this divinity does not contradict a Muslim woman's insistence to ". . . not lose herself / in the presence of man, / woman, or child" (Kahf 2003, 55). A Muslim woman should be herself—not what others want her to be.

As a Muslim feminist, Kahf supports women's independence and pride as much as does any other Western feminist. For Kahf, *Azizatu Nafsiha* does not lose her wholeness when she falls in love:

In love she remains whole  
 She doesn't chop herself like an onion  
 She doesn't peel herself and sweep away the dry peelings  
 (Kahf 2003, 55)

According to Kahf, *Azizatu Nafsiha* is proud of all that she is—body, mind, and soul. She is able to take care of herself health-wise, dress-wise, and beauty-wise: She:

gives herself breast exams and running shoes  
 and eats well and washes her face in the river  
 and cherishes the beauty in other women as in herself  
 (Kahf 2003, 55)

Kahf emphasizes the fact that such a woman is capable of pleasing herself and others and as a result she:

... lives  
in the heart  
of every man,  
woman, and child  
(2003, 56)

Thus, a Muslim woman in hijab does not necessarily symbolize self-sacrifice and surrender to others’ wishes. In this poem, Kahf highlights the strength of Muslim women in the realms of their religion. This has qualified many of them for success in various careers.

Kahf asserts that Muslim women should not be excluded from feminism simply because they may look “irregular” to Western eyes. Kahf poeticizes many feminist themes from an Islamic perspective, such as glorifying women’s solidarity, calling for women’s freedom, responding to patriarchal misrepresentations of women, and denouncing male-centered authoritative thinking. Kahf illustrates that it is not Islam that is against feminism; rather, it is male-biased minds. Islamic feminism helps Muslim women writers such as Kahf to “untangle patriarchal customs and religion. It gives them Islamic ways of understanding gender equality, societal opportunity, and their own potential” (Badran 2009, 249). Thus, they can balance their belonging to both Islam and America and negotiate possibilities of convergence.

Accordingly, Kahf draws on the Islamic feminist concept of equality that “insists on full equality of women and men across the public–private spectrum” (Badran 2009, 250). This pursuit of equality is evidenced in Kahf’s poems in which she urges women to claim their rights to dignity and self-expression. Kahf’s stand is enhanced by a broad spectrum of women’s rights in Islam, as highlighted by Islamic feminism. In her poem “The Marvelous Women,” Kahf clearly demonstrates that she writes about and for women and that she defends their self-defiant language. She affirms that not all Muslim women are silent sufferers and subservient victims:

All women speak two languages:  
the language of men  
and the language of silent suffering.  
Some women speak a third,  
the language of queens.  
They are marvelous  
and they are my friends.  
(Kahf 2003, 51)

In this poem, Kahf expresses pride in strong women and considers them as elegant as queens. These women are “well equipped by education and experience to think and answer back” (Badran 2009, 303). These kinds of women help Muslim women to have a voice and be visible in society. They prove the aptitude of women and their ability to work in all fields. They are women who can “fix engines,” and “teach gynecology and literacy,” and “work in jails and sing and sculpt” (Kahf 2003, 51). These women have their own perspectives from which they approach their own stories and experiences. They are sources of inspiration for Kahf’s poetry, and their concerns fill its lines:

it is from you I fashion my poetry.  
 I scoop up, in handfuls, glittering  
 sequins that fall from your bodies  
 as you fall in love, marry, divorce,  
 get custody, get cats, enter  
 supreme courts of justice,  
 argue with God.  
 (Kahf 2003, 51)

Kahf encourages women to fight for women’s causes, no matter how difficult that might be. She describes these women as “. . . swimmers / in dangerous waters” and “defiers of sharks,” indicating that male prejudices are the enemies of women (Kahf 2003, 52). Those enemies include the narrow-minded Muslim men who misinterpret Islam. Essentially, the problem is that “the principle of gender equality in the Qur’an” has been “lost sight of as male interpreters constructed a corpus of *tafsir* promoting a doctrine of male superiority reflecting the mindset of the prevailing patriarchal cultures” (Badran 2009, 248). This is why the struggle for equality by Muslim women is noble and important for religion: it can correct the misinterpretations of Islam. Kahf asserts that this is “the last hope of the shrinking women everywhere” (Kahf 2003, 52). Kahf’s Islamic feminist stand drives her to probe the thinking of Muslims themselves to correct their male-biased interpretations of religious texts. She confronts some of the long-standing misunderstandings in Muslim history. Kahf believes that “the dark side of who we are will not stay covered up” and considers “the subversive questions a noble jihad” because “fear is not a basis for any art” (Kahf 2004, 15). She attacks and criticizes some Muslim men for being backward and restrictive toward women. In her poem “Men Kill Me,” Kahf shakes the foundations of the biased patriarchal system and attacks its unfair arrogance and greed. The persona shouts:

Men Kill me  
How they think the sun is all for them  
and the water is all for them  
How they accept the wind at their backs  
as if the wind was the handmaid of their father  
and they inherited her without a murmur  
(Kahf 2003, 61)

Her persona condemns “how they feel generous in leaving one small spot / between four walls for all the women of the world” (Kahf 2003, 61). The poem attacks male arrogance and criticizes men’s possessive attitudes and greed. She is fed up with patriarchal assumptions of domination and supremacy throughout the world. She accuses men of overlooking the fact that women are of no less importance than men. For this persona, the whole world is like “. . . a drop of sweat” dangling “from the temple of the woman scrubbing the floor / under the feet of Copernicus . . .” (Kahf 2003, 61). This cleaning woman is more important than her famous master, Copernicus, the discoverer of the solar system. The poem implies that women, through their womanly powers, are the real originators of the world.

These womanly powers are symbolized in “Ishtar Awakens in Chicago.” In this poem, Kahf uses the Assyrian goddess of fertility and beauty as a symbol for all women. Ishtar here is proud, arrogant, elegant, and strong. She addresses men with her superiority:

My arrogance knows no bounds  
and I will make no peace today,  
and you should be so lucky  
to find a woman like me  
(Kahf 2003, 62)

Ishtar in Chicago is an example of Muslim American women whose hybrid identities make them atypical of both the East and the West. Ishtar asserts her freedom: “Today neither will the East claim me / nor the West admit me” (62). She is proud of herself and her refusal to conform to known norms. Ishtar rebels against male supremacy and writes back, refusing to compromise:

No, I will make no peace  
even though my hands are empty  
.....  
And I will saw off my leg at the thigh  
before I bend one womanly knee  
(Kahf 2003, 63)

Ishtar is self-confident and strong. Kahf revolutionizes her feminist discourse to awaken men from their obsession with supremacy:

Today, I talk big  
 Did you think that all the big talk  
 was for you?  
 Did you think the big death  
 and the big love  
 was the world's big gift to you?

I will talk big as I please  
 I will be all or nothing  
 (Kahf 2003, 63)

Ishtar in this poem represents Muslim American women's persistence and determination to maintain their self-integration rather than adapt themselves to conform to the norms of any particular community to which they belong.

This protest against male supremacy in Muslim communities is supported by Islam itself. True readings of the Qur'an are necessary for Muslim women to know their status in their religion. They should develop their own interpretation of the Qur'an. Some Muslim men claim a right to absolute power and freedom based on a false understanding of the Qur'anic verse that reads, "Men are responsible for women because God has given one more than the other" (Qur'an 4: 34). However, this verse obligates men to provide for women in pregnancy, breast-feeding, and childrearing; it does not give them absolute power to control women. Such men disregard other verses in the Qur'an, such as, "The believers, male and female, are protectors of one another" (Qur'an 9: 71). Instead, they choose to take from the Qur'an whatever suits their way of thinking.

Out of this egalitarian understanding of the Qur'an, Kahf urges women to be rid of all the false misunderstandings of the Qur'an. She proclaims Muslim women's complete freedom—of mind, soul, and body. Kahf speaks from a Qur'anic view that agrees with many of the values of Western feminism. For example, in her poem "My Body Is Not Your Battleground," the persona declares the freedom of her body from male dominance. The poem deprecates men's exploitation of women's bodies, including when these women are their wives:

My body is not your battleground  
 How dare you put your hand  
 where I have not given permission  
 Has God, then, given you permission

to put your hand there?  
My body is not your battleground  
Withdraw from the eastern fronts and the western  
(Kahf 2003, 59)

Kahf uses the language of war to show how determined this persona is to set herself free from any Eastern or Western exploitation of her cause. She is the one with the right to cover or uncover her body. She confirms that God gives her this freedom. The persona announces that when she wears hijab, it is her own free will to do so, and it is not to be part of Muslim men’s wars for any purpose:

My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,  
neither the cause of your disarray  
nor the path to your liberation  
.....  
Untangle your hands from my hair  
(Kahf 2003, 58)

Kahf’s poem calls for a free, liberated Muslim woman in the face of all forms of exploitation. Muslim women are free to wear hijab regardless of what Western feminists might say, and to remove it without considering the wishes of Muslim men. For Kahf, hijab is a matter of free will. Kahf endorses a further dimension of hijab that is beyond the religious. She suggests a feminist rather than an Islamic motivation for her own commitment to wearing hijab:

I like hijab; it connects me sensuously and sartorially to worlds of women  
(including my mother and my mother’s mother) with whom I would not  
give up that mark of connection. (Kahf 2004, 14)

Kahf appreciates hijab as a link to her maternal ancestors.

*E-mails from Scheherazad* defies the misrepresentation of and prejudice against Muslim women, both inside and outside their communities. Kahf invites us to consider that “Islamic Feminism means to have a difficult double commitment: on the one hand, to a faith position, and on the other, to women’s rights both inside the home and outside”(Cooke 2007, 59). Kahf observes several moments in the lives of Muslim women in America in which they tend to negotiate their identities. Kahf creates a trajectory “that includes veiling as a particular expression of Muslim Americanness, rather than foreignness” (Abdurraqib 2006, 62). She also poeticizes an argument that extends to many issues relating to Islam, feminism, and America as they intersect in Muslim women’s lives.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# THE MAKING OF IDENTITY IN ARAB AMERICAN STAND-UP COMEDY

YASSER FOUAD SELIM

### **Stand-Up Comedy: Origins and Developments**

Stand-up comedy is a kind of dramatic performance that takes place on a stage where the performer gives improvised or scripted humorous monologue before a live audience. American professor Lawrence E. Mintz defines the term in his insightful article “Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Meditation”:

A strict limiting definition of standup comedy would describe an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic device. Yet standup comedy art’s roots are . . . entwined with rites, rituals, and dramatic experiences that are richer, more complex than this simple definition can embrace. (1985, 71)

Mintz argues that stand-up comedy, although undervalued by critics and researchers when compared with humorous literature, is “the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression” (1985, 71). The art of stand-up comedy has achieved noticeable popularity in recent decades due to the remarkable advancements in technology. The increase in television channels and in video-sharing websites such as YouTube has made stand-up comedy more accessible, with people now able to watch performances from the comfort of their sofas.

Although only recently popularized, the art of stand-up comedy is an old tradition. Mintz traces the art to the jester and clown performances of the Middle Ages. However, a clear and direct connection exists between stand-up comedy and the nineteenth-century British music-hall performances, which involved a mixture of comedy, songs, and entertaining action on

stage. Stand-up comedy can also be traced to the American vaudevilles, minstrel shows, and burlesques of the nineteenth century. These arts aimed to both entertain and ridicule through humor. The origins of stand-up comedy can also be found in the individual humorists of the lecture circuit, such as Mark Twain and Norman Wilkerson who performed humorous monologues mocking certain ethnic groups.

In his PhD dissertation, “Laughter in Revolt: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Construction of Stand-Up Comedy,” Mathew Daube argues that comedians such as Lenny Bruce, David Gregory, Bill Cosby, and Richard Pryor “were the vanguard of those who altered the older traditions of comic joke-telling into an extended direct conversation with the audience, creating a space of extraordinary intimacy” (2009, 1). The comedians selected for Daube’s study were Jewish and African Americans, who proved his argument that

stand-up’s style and subject are intractably linked to issues of race, ethnicity and the production of identity. Arising in the midst of the Civil Rights Era, the form lent itself to racial and ethnic minorities who queried the evolving relationship between the individual and the society-as-a-whole. (2009, 1)

In *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, the first study of stand-up comedy as a form of art, John Limon states that in the 1950s and 1960s, the profession was dominated by “Jewish, male, heterosexual comedians,” which paradoxically has been recently used by “female, homosexual, black, Christianizing” comedians (2000, 6). I suspect Limon would have made mention of Arab American stand-up comedy if he had written his book after 2001. Arab American literature and art have often been ignored in the American literary and artistic scenes, and stand-up comedy is no exception. After September 11, 2001, stand-up comedy discovered Arab Americans, and Arab Americans discovered the humorous art of stand-up. Stand-up comedy performed by Arab Americans performers are extensions of the American tradition in that they are linked to issues of race, ethnicity, and identity. Early American stand-up comedy rose from the civil rights era and the quest by minorities for recognition in America, while Arab American stand-up comedy appeared after the traumatic experience of 9/11 to (re)define the Arab American identity.

In 2003, the Arab American Comedy Festival was founded by lawyer-comedian Dean Obeidallah and comedian Maysoon Zayid, two second-generation Arab Americans. The festival presents stand-up comedy and comic plays and films concerning the Arab American community. Its