THE QUESTION OF FOREIGNNESS IN MOHJA KAHF’S E-MAILS FROM SCHEHERAZAD

Wisam Kh. Abdul-Jabbar

“The foreigner is a dreamer making love with absence.”
Julia Kristeva

Abstract: This paper examines foreignness in Mohja Kahf’s poetry volume, E-mails from Scheherazad (2003), as a celebratory commodity rather than a literary trope to resist Arab women representations or to accentuate exilic voices. Drawing on Julie Kristeva’s conceptualization of foreignness as internal personae and not a projection of an external locus of identity, this paper explores how the speakers in some of Kahf’s poems view foreignness as festive rather than negative. In sharp contrast to the traditional conception of difference as publicly alienating, foreignness to the Arab-American speakers becomes a distinctive mark that they uphold and celebrate. Examining foreignness in Kahf’s poems through Kristeva’s lens provides a sense of uniqueness to the immigrant’s experience. The notion of recognizing the foreigner in ourselves, that Kristeva provides, subverts the general perception of foreignness as external and intruding. Kahf’s poetry can be perceived as a negotiation of foreignness, which is not an estranging element that incurs resistance but rather as a celebratory part of the human consciousness that should be jubilantly defined rather than politically defended.

Keywords: Kahf, Anglophone, Arab, poetry, Kristeva, foreignness

Mohja Kahf’s (2003) poetry volume, E-mails from Scheherazad, explores themes of cultural diversity and identity. The general perception is to view these poems as a feminist vehicle resisting the representation of Arab American women as oppressed stereotypes. There is also the tendency to look at them as an accentuation of the agonies of exile or as a diasporic plight nostalgically directed toward the tenacious need to be at home in a foreign land (Abdelrazek, 2007; Abdurraqib, 2009). In sharp contrast to critics who argue that speakers in this volume could be negotiated as literary representations of resistance to mainstream generalizations of marked identities or as projections of unresolved anxiety, this article argues that hyphenated identities in most of these poems are celebrated for their self-assertion, imparting a sense of immediacy and kinship that dispels the feelings of anxiety and alienation that are also expressed.

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Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s conceptualization of foreignness, I argue that Kahf’s poems present foreignness as celebratory rather than estranging. In Strangers to Ourselves, Julia Kristeva (1991) proposes a modern definition of the foreigner by dismissing the traditional understanding of foreignness:

a foreigner is neither the romantic victim of our clannish indolence nor the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. Neither the apocalypse on the move nor the instant adversary to be eliminated for the sake of appeasing the groups. (1)

In this sense, Kristeva explores foreignness as a vehicle for self-identification through which the foreigner transcends issues of belonging. For Kristeva, foreignness, once embraced, takes the foreigner across the threshold of irremediable anxieties (4). Kristeva speaks of foreignness as a rare commodity that endows its bearers with an animated life that is more purposeful and favorable:

The foreigner tends to think he is the only one to have a biography, that is, a life made up of ordeals—neither catastrophes nor adventures ... but simply a life in which acts constitute events because they imply choice, surprises, breaks, adaptations, or cunning, but neither routine nor rest. In the eyes of the foreigner those who are not foreign have no life at all: barely do they exist, haughty or mediocre, but out of the running and thus almost already cadaverized. (7)

It is the vivacious and rather triumphant aspect that Kristeva contributes to the modern understanding of foreignness that is quite vibrant and different, which is distinctively voiced in some of Kahf’s poems.

Addressing issues of belonging in some of Kahf’s poems, Samaa Abdurraqib (2009) argues that Kahf’s volume of poetry problematizes the vision of being a Muslim immigrant in America:

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

Similarly, Abdelrazek (2007) observes that the collection addresses the challenges that Arab immigrants confront:

Among the most important issues with which the speakers of the poems wrestle is their split vision as immigrants living between two worlds, the clash of Arab and American cultures, the definition of who they are, their sense of identity as Arabs, Muslims ... these speakers also announce their strategies of resistance, which include their introduction
of a new and more encompassing concept of difference, their notion of hybridity, and more crucially, their own poetry. (68)

While some of the poems in the collection can be seen as tailored toward resistance as Abdelrazek suggests, it is also inviting to read most of the poems as a declaration of foreignness that is not necessarily framed within the discourse of resistance or difference; this foreignness is self-congratulatory and takes delight in its own sheer uniqueness. In other words, to read these poems with either political or autobiographical lenses is to assume that most of them are written to reconcile the feeling of being, as Abdelrazek has put it, caught between two worlds. In contrast, most of the speakers in these poems do not see foreignness through the eyes of the beholder, which could be quite dismissive and alienating and, therefore, invoke resistance. The speakers tend to joyfully acknowledge their foreign status and contently accept it. Thus, the interpretive implication here is that there is no need to return the gaze because the tone in so many poems is subtly triumphant and not apologetic nor self-protective. It does not seek hybridity nor call upon resistance; rather, this volume of poetry is set to discover and define foreignness rather than defend difference.

The question of foreignness is central to the corpus of Anglophone Arab literature in general. The first wave of Arab immigrants (1880-1924), consisting of Christian immigrants who were largely from Lebanon and Syria, tried to erase any foreign traces and sought a complete assimilation: “Generally hardworking and law-abiding, the immigrants enthusiastically embraced American values” (Ludescher, 2006: 93). The kind of writing that this early twentieth-century group followed is largely about blending in:

The writing of Gibran and his contemporaries of Arab descent was a blend of messianic discourse and Sufi thought. In their quest for fame and a place in mainstream American literary circles, the question asked is whether they “orientalized” themselves to increase sales and acceptance by casting themselves in the image of charismatic genius. (Al Maleh, 2009: 3)

The second group of Arab immigrants came just after the Second World War: “This second wave of immigrants consisted of educated, skilled professionals, who were more likely to be familiar with the nationalist ideologies that permeated the Arab world. Unlike the Syrian Christians, they staunchly identified themselves as Arabs” (Ludescher, 2006: 94). Arab immigrants, who arrived during the second part of the twentieth century, were largely influenced by the notion that “they were the subjects of cultural colonialism; imbued with love of the language of their education, fascinated by the English lifestyle reflected in their textbooks” (Al Maleh, 2009: 6). On the thematic level, their literary output is mostly concerned
“with the issue of psychological and social alienation (at home and abroad) and the ‘return of the exile’ theme, the experience of hybridity and double consciousness” (Al Maleh, 2009: 8). It was charged with the spirit of defending Arab identity against malicious representations, upheld the Palestinian cause, and fought for recognition as an integral part of American society (Ludescher, 2006: 94-95). In the context of Anglophone Arab literature, some poems in Kahf’s collection steer away from addressing the diasporic experience in terms of the conflicting themes of assimilation vs resistance, which has pigeonholed Anglophone Arab literature into a more reconciliatory approach by Rediscovering foreignness.

Kahf’s poems do not characteristically accentuate defiance. Most of the speakers are not skeptical about their essential Arab identity. They address foreignness as an occasion for exultation rather than destitution, mainly because they see it through their own eyes and not through those of the beholder. In effect, it is to recognize the foreigner in ourselves that defines the modern implications of foreignness to Kristeva: “Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity flounder” (1). The “foreigner” then is something ghastly that lays dormant in ourselves, something with the potential to estrange us from who we are. Similarly, foreignness to Mohja Kahf is a mental or psychological condition, which is not necessarily crippled by dislocation but rather marked by uniqueness. Our consciousness of foreignness is innate and invigorated by difference: “The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities” (Kristeva, 1991: 1). Likewise, Kahf addresses difference as a distinctive quality to be appreciated. That kind of subtle understanding of foreignness as celebrated difference is also implicated in the way Edward Said (2000) perceives exile:

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music is—contrapuntal. (55)

Accordingly, exile, a breeder of foreignness, generates a similar distinctive attribute that is peculiar only to the foreigner’s experience.

The foreigner is not an outcast who is torn between two homes but figuratively a traveler, a lost sailor who is happy to find land and pleased to embrace his or her own foreignness. Kristeva (1991) argues that the foreigner is a happy person whose happiness is very peculiar: “Are there any happy foreigners? The foreigner’s face burns with happiness” (3). This happiness is quite disturbing from the observer’s perspective; to the observer, Kristeva (1991) remarks,
the feeling that there is a special, somewhat insolent happiness in the foreigner. Happiness seems to prevail, in spite of everything, because something has definitely been exceeded: it is the happiness of tearing away, of racing, the space of a promised infinite. (4)

Most of Kahf’s poems accentuate this sense of happiness that Kristeva locates in foreignness. Kristeva (1991) argues too that there is a sense of ambivalence in the foreigner’s joy: “Such happiness is, however, constrained, apprehensively discreet, in spite of its piercing intrusion, since the foreigner keeps feeling threatened by his former territory, caught up in the memory of happiness or of a disaster—both always excessive” (4). The fact that this happiness is linked to diasporic memory is quite central here. The joyful remembrance of home and homeland becomes accessible only through memory, i.e., “through communication with loved ones still living there, the sharing of memories and cultural items within one’s diasporic community, and/or personal acts of conscious and unconscious remembering” (Hout, 2012: 160). Kristeva (1991) points out that since the foreigner’s happiness is largely dependent on memory, it becomes very elusive: “The strange happiness of the foreigner consists in maintaining that fleeing eternity or that perpetual transience” (4). Kahf’s poetry is a celebration of that happy foreignness not only because of its transient nature but also in spite of it.

The very first poem “Voyager Dust” employs dust as a literary trope which signifies foreignness. The poem speaks of the arrival of newcomers: “When they arrive in the new country, voyagers carry it on their shoulders, the dusting of the sky they left behind” (3), which refers to the new image characteristic of newcomers. The metonymic association becomes clearer as the dust is described with a direct reference to the soil of their home country:

I could smell it in her clothes.
   It was voyager’s dust from China.
   It lay in the foreign stitching of her pocket.
   It said: We will meet again in Beijing. (5-7)

The foreignness accentuated here is one that longs for its otherness, for reunion. However, it is visibly described to be a commonality among immigrants: “My mother had voyager’s dust in her scarves” (10). This notion of foreignness is reasserted when described as the remains of city ruins: “its soft spray on our faces like the ash/of debris after the destruction of a city/its citizens driven out across the earth” (18-20). Foreignness here acquires a historical mark in association with a city that no longer exists. Immigrants, in this sense, are citizens of the world. The dust becomes a metonymy for otherness as it is associated with a city that the speaker and her brother have not seen before. However, they inherit this mark,
which projects a feeling, a longing for reunion: “It was Syria in her scarves ... Now it is on our shoulders too” (25-26). The legacy that has been passed is not a burden to shoulder but a bonding link to a culture that will always be cherished and remembered.

Kahf is intent on introducing foreignness as a quality to be sought after or a remedy in times of dire need. In “The Skaff Mother tells the Story,” the speaker is a mother who is forced to send her two sons away because “The Safar Barlik had begun—the Balkan War—the Turks were conscripting all our boys/Wasting their lives” (5-7). When the boys are set to leave, the mother whispers in their ears: “Survive and come back to us ... Come home to share the bundle/Of mother, father, kin, house, bread, and wool” (13-14, 15-16). Notably, the mother does not define home in terms of land or location but solely in terms of people. Foreignness in this piece serves as a biography of survival. However, the fact that the mother rarely hears from her two sons is perplexing: “My boys, I hear, got to Brazil. There they united the bundle/Of their journey. [The] Faint echo of them finds a way” (21-23). Uniting the bundle here stands for the concept of substitution. The two sons have their own families now, and therefore, their initial homeland becomes subordinate. The mother understands that her sons have found a home of their own. Her response materializes the Kristevan understanding of the “strangely happy” as the glad tidings are immediately interrupted by the mother’s interrogative tone:

We survived
On scraps, rumors passed across the ocean about my boys,
Grown into men and married. I don’t know if I will
See them again in life. Have they found wool
to keep them warm in their new land? (28-31)

Although exile is alien to the mother, she feels intensely alienated in her homeland as she lives with no family ties:

But what is to survive/Like grafts cut off a tree, a child without a bundle?/The wool of my heart is threadbare after years and wars/And I keep in a bundle the names of my lost boys/Survive, we told them, and we sent them unthinkably away. (34-38)

The mother becomes a stranger to herself without her kids around although she lives at home, which further complicates the notion of foreignness as Kristeva proposed in her understanding of foreignness as a state of the strangely happy. Similarly, Homi Bhabha (1995) explicates the notion of being a stranger while living in one’s own hometown:

A Place of difference—such that the atlas of the difficult world articulates a defiant and transformative “dissatisfaction,” a dissonance at the heart of that complacent circle that constitutes “our fellow city dwellers” ... For it is precisely there, in the ordinariness
of the day-to-day, in the intimacy of the indigenous, that, unexpectedly, we become murderous, unrecognizable strangers to ourselves. (7)

The idea of not feeling at home while at home creeps into the mother’s desolate life as the concept of home is defined by the presence of the people we love and know rather than by the geographic location itself. In other words, the sense of foreignness for the mother becomes an occasion to celebrate as it is the only feeling that she shares with her long gone kids. The speaker in the following poem is one of her sons, who not only does fail to show nostalgia toward his childhood country but feels happy to present his mother with a Brazilian version of her, in the form of his daughter.

The speaker in “Word from the Younger Skaff” addresses his feelings after years of living away from his mother. The son acknowledges throughout the poem a sense of hunger which stands for his longing to be in the company of his mother:

I was still hungry
when I left home, mother,
to disappear from the one piece
of earth I knew

.........................
Yumma, that hunger’s never left me,
even though I’m big as an ox,
fifty-five now, married, and master of a house
with a good larder.
Hunger still lurches
inside me, like the sea voyage
from Beirut to Brazil. (1-4, 12-19)

Again, the poem is often perceived as a desperate call from an exiled son longing for his mother who figuratively represents the motherland or homeland:

He addresses his mother using the endearing Arabic word “yumma” to show his deep love for her and for his motherland, emphasizing that he has not cut his ties to them despite the distance that separates him from them ... deep inside he still feels like a child who needs his mother’s warmth to alleviate the pain of exile that eats him up. (Abdelrazek, 2007: 76)

Kristeva (1991), however, describes the foreigner as someone who is away from his mother: “As far back as his memory can reach, it is delightfully bruised: misunderstood by a loved and yet absent-minded, discreet, or worried mother” (5). The memory of the foreigner, in this case the speaker, is “delightfully bruised,” because the very act of recalling his mother from his bruised memory is delightful.
The foreigner, therefore, “holds on to what he lacks, to absence, to some symbol or other ... thus, has lost his mother. Camus understood it well: his Stranger reveals himself at the time of his mother’s death” (Kristeva, 1991: 5). In this sense, the son becomes a stranger to himself due to the mother’s absence, and not necessarily because of some sentiment toward his motherland. The feeling of being intoxicated, or in his case the constant hunger, is the result of the loss of a parent, divorced of any homeland longings as he has already established a home abroad: “one might not be exaggerating to say that for poets of Arab heritage, family is self. This is in marked contrast to Emersonian self-reliance because for the Arabs, reliance on the network of family was a key to survival” (Orfalea and Elmusa, 2000: xix).

The speaker is more estranged by his mother’s absence than by any other exilic concerns because the loss of the mother is associated with the loss of self, which renders him foreign and yet at home. Furthermore, both poems, by mother and son, can be seen through the intervening factor of the notion of travel, which defines their lives—instead of being defined by a sense of anxiety caused by nostalgia for a fixed location or figure. James Clifford (1997) questions the ambivalent nature of travel which has troubled common assumptions about localism:

Dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes. But what would happen, I begin to ask, if travel were untethered? Practices of displacement might emerge as constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension. (3)

Consequently, the son feels the ambivalence of the experience of travel. The bitter–sweet experience has not been a mere “transfer or extension,” but the cause of the thirst; yet, it has also brought a unique joy to the son, which he celebrates through his daughter. The son finds comfort in his daughter’s foreign quality, which is the Syrian part in his Brazilian daughter:

My little girl knows how
to make your mincemeat pies,
folded in neat, small triangles.

Wherever you are, O mae,
I bet it fills your belly to know
there’s a twelve-year-old Brazilian girl
with your hair and eyes, who,
though she’s never seen
you or your kitchen fire, makes
Syrian meat pies proper,
baked golden and sealed
with your same thumbpress. (33-41)
To the son, the foreign side that his daughter inherits is actually his gift to her, and she does not hesitate to embrace it. The speaker is more estranged by his mother’s absence than by any other exilic concerns because the loss of the mother is associated with the loss of self, as Orfalea and Elmusa explained, which renders the speaker uncannily foreign and yet at home, oxymoronically bruised and yet delighted.

The speaker in “Fayetteville as in Fate” finds no trouble romanticizing his foreignness. He associates his recent move to Fayetteville with fate and renders it inevitable and relaxing: “I came into town the American way,/the immigrant way, the upwardly mobile/bedouin trekking across the highway ... and I like it just fine” (3-6). He positively utilizes his foreignness to assimilate with people whenever an occasion arises: “I hear that people pick ‘poke’ here/and my family memory stirs with people who picked the wild herbs, the *khibbeze*” (23-25). The speaker is surprised how people live in this city together despite their differences, and he finds no problem in joining them and wishing their children a perfect multicultural life: “Their names and languages are wildly different/and they believe improbable, vile things about each other” (35-36). In fact, he urges them to recognize each others’ otherness:

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 conscionable profit
May they learn each other’s tongue and put words into each other’s mouth. (53-56)

The speaker wishes the people to recognize their multicultural community by celebrating their differences, which should always be conceived as a privilege because these differences constitute additions to the diverse community. Kristeva (1991) speaks of this sense of “addition” in terms of border or the foreigner’s status: “Whether perturbed or joyful, the foreigner’s appearance signals that he is ‘in addition’” (4). Kristeva (1991) observes that “in addition” as the presence of... a border, internal to all that is displayed, [which] awakens our most archaic senses ... like a standing invitation to some inaccessible, irritating journey, whose code the foreigner does not have but whose mute, physical, visible memory he keeps. (4)

To Kahf, this “in addition” factor is personalized to become a distinctive mark that needs to be recognized and shared. Kahf wishes to capitalize on the “visible memory” that the foreigner keeps to transform his or her journey into something pleasant and rewarding. In fact, even Kristeva (1991) acknowledges that the presence of this “in addition” is not deprecating: “This does not mean the foreigner necessarily appears absent, absent-minded, or distraught. But the insistent presence of a lining ... pleasing or death-bearing—disrupts the never

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regular image of his face” (4). This Kristevan understanding of border and culture-crossing synchronizes with her conception of the state of the foreigner as “delightfully bruised.” It is in this sense that the celebration of difference, as a presence in the foreigner’s private space and life, interacts with public issues of nationalism and borderlands. In the context of the poems discussed, the personal is always politicized.

The celebratory tone continues to resonate in the poem “The Cherries” where the speaker, in an autobiographical outburst about being torn away from her country of origin, speaks of how that country will always remember her: “I left Syria many years ago, as a child,/and I don’t remember Syria,/but Syria remembers me: I am sure of it” (1-4). It is the memory of the country now—the perpetual historical stream of reserved archives and names of citizens—that is the cause of joy. The autobiographical bent, as the speaker addresses herself and mentions her name, positions the speaker in a space between two worlds which is characteristic of diaspora. In effect, the poem is a dramatization of the plight of foreignness as the speaker seeks a confirmation of her identity in relation to her country of origin. There is a sense of delight in the seemingly new recognition when she proclaims herself to be a native of Syria:

Last April, a friend just back from Syria
phoned to say he’d tried to buy a book of poetry
in a small bookshop in Srujeh,
a book wedged high on a dusty shelf.
The shopkeeper said,
“You can’t have any from that stack;
they’re for Mohja, daughter
of Monzer and Maysoon.”
See? Syria still remembers
its children who live in late capitalism,
an information age away. (9-19)

The speaker writes from the “peripheral” to “the center” as she “retain[s] a collective memory, vision, or myth about ... [her] original homeland” (Safran, 1991: 83). She considers herself a child of the center, in her case, Syria, who lives in a different place of “capitalism” and a different time of “an information age,” and yet she holds on to the refrain “but Syria remembers me: I am sure of it” which runs throughout the poem. The speaker renounces any doubts about the welcoming nature of her homeland. Her depiction of Syria is, therefore, quite utopian and verges on an imaginary state of mind that envisions perfection and induces exultation:
Some people say that Syria
would stare at me with provincial hostility
if I went back.
Some people say all Syria would do
is empty my wallet with demands for bribes,
complain about the price of melons,
calculate the value of my watch and ring,
and turn me in to the state police. (20-27)

The notion that she could possibly be seen as foreign in her homeland is instantly
retracted; instead, an image of a warm welcome is captured and the “true, ideal
home” (Safran, 1991: 83) is retrieved: “I am sure that if I went back to Syria,/there
would be music,/and all the melodrama of a Hindi movie:/The ground would love
me” (28-31). She even romanticizes the notion of Syria as a restored, remapped
homeland, as would be expected of any diasporic individual (Safran, 1991: 84):
“Hatreds based on class and sect would disappear,/along with political prisons
and electric torture-prods,/and no one would be afraid to be seen talking to me,/or
listening to poetry about Syria” (69-72). The ending of the poem, however, is very
enigmatic and disturbing. In sharp contrast to most of the other poems discussed,
this poem ends in a very grim tone in which foreignness seems to be emblematic
of a reluctantly endured deprivation:

And where did I go?
And what did I become?
And in my new home did I eat cherries?
And in my adopted family was I warm like Aleppan wool?
What happens to a child who can no longer speak
the language of her mother?
What happens to a bird when it can no longer fly
in its natural habitat?

Tell me who ate the cherries.
They were in a small bowl in the back of the refrigerator.
They were for me, because Syria remembers.
I was
sure of it

The sense of loss is unequivocal. The Kristevan understanding of the foreigner
as “delightfully bruised” surfaces again. It is the feeling of uncertainty that rises at
the end that juxtaposes the mindset of celebrating foreignness. The disposition of

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the foreigner as “delightfully bruised” does not disparage the celebratory nature of foreignness as much as acknowledge rather than deny conflict.

In another poem named “Lateefa,” the speaker points out how foreignness has become the norm in the twenty-first century. It is the myriad quality of foreignness that is being celebrated here:

A zoom lens into the twenty-first century:
An Afro-Caribbean Muslim woman
eating paprika-tossed Hungarian potato
salad at the wedding of a Pakistani-American to a West Indian man
be happy Columbus: At last
the two Indies meet. In Jersey, in Jersey City. (22-27)

This sense of jubilation associated with being foreign negates the sense of resistance, often linked to stereotypical representations of Arab women as oppressed victims, i.e., often symptomatic of immigrant literature. The lyrical quality, embedded in the repetition of the phrase “In Jersey,” transforms the poem into an invocation of a universal citizenship, the acknowledgement of foreignness, that is now characteristic of Jersey City; as “the two indies meet,” concretizes integration and equality.

Similarly, the speaker in the poem “From the Patios of the Alhambra” celebrates her fictitious genealogy, which pleasantly generates her foreign traits: “From the patios of the Alhambra I come/and out of the fountains of the Taj Mahal/Hispanic-Arab women sang me in Andalusia.” (1-3). The speaker, as a representative of Arabness, proudly makes her semi-mythical visit to the New World like a conqueror:

I am in the work of the Lebanese grocers of Argentina
and the Indian tailors of Trinidad
Also in the designs of the rhinestone on denim in Detroit
and ... even now being spliced together in video
studios and public-access cable stations in Chicago and California and Toronto

I am rice of every hue
cooked with nuts, pine and pistachio
I am a seal of musk, opening, joyous
flinging myself, mingling
with the oils of your body,
merging with you. (37-39, 41-44, 48-53)

Kahf introduces foreignness as fragmented and uprooted. The genealogical construct belongs to nowhere and everywhere. The sense of identity as fixed is
gladly lost to a feeling of intersubjectivity, in which imbalance becomes the shared
experience of a new consciousness:

So, when one is oneself uprooted, what is the point of talking to those who think they
have their own soil? The ear is receptive to conflicts only if the body loses its footing.
A certain imbalance is necessary, a swaying over some abyss, for a conflict to be heard.
(Kristeva, 1991: 17)

What is being challenged here is the idea of a mainstream, monolithic culture in
society “who think they have their own soil.” To Kahf, this conception of society
and identity has become just another dismissed fallacy. She introduces the notion
of imbalance as a positive, intersubjective force again in “Mahmud’s First Letter
Home from Minneapolis.” In a letter to his mom, the speaker stresses how landing
in America is like landing on the moon:

Dear Mom, I landed in America
might as well say the moon

I said I made it to the moon!
I’m bouncy—no gravity here,
America’s got different rules. (1-2, 8-10)

The very idea of comparing landing in America to landing on the moon renders
America foreign. His experience on this new planet, however, is not expressed
in terms of racial difference but in relation to what Bhabha (1994) calls: “the
intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or
cultural value” (2). What dazzles Mahmud is the distinctive marks of a new nation
and what Mahmud conceives to be its idiosyncratic elements such as air, cars, sun,
sky, girls, food, and music:

The air is a different element
cars are new and shine like jewels
The sun is made of another fire
The sky is an alien blue

You should see the girls
And what they wear here

and I’m eating, don’t worry—
not like our food

There is snow. And ice. The music is fine. (3-6, 11-12, 14-15, 23)
The lad does not look at himself as foreign because he fancies himself to be a normal person on an unusual planet with an alien sun and sky. He projects foreignness into others and rejoices in his discovery.

In some poems, Kahf explores how foreignness manifests when our own selfhood becomes intrusive only because it is not welcomed by others. Kahf argues that foreignness can be estranging not as the outcome of the individual’s unwillingness to let go of the home country and accept the new home, but rather because the new home is inhospitable. Certain poems explore this notion of the inhospitality of the hosting country:

Kahf’s inclusion of this sort of inhospitality is a common move in much of the American literature that focuses on immigration, although different authors, of course, explore such inhospitality in different ways ... the violent process of assimilation that immigrant groups have often experienced in the United States, a process that once affected the Irish, Italians, and Jews and now affects South Asians, Middle Eastern, Hispanic, and other immigrants from the Southern Hemisphere. (Salaita, 2011: 34)

In this sense, Kahf draws attention to the reality of the foreigner as being trapped in an already framed discourse. In his book, *A Forgetful Nation*, Ali Behdad (2005) dismisses the notion of America as the land of asylum: “The myth of America as an asylum obscures the ideological underpinnings of the state and the political economy of immigration, as well as the importance of xenophobia in the founding of the United States” (10). Glimpses of such inhospitality can be seen in certain poems. In “Fayetteville as in Fate,” the speaker wishes the community to be more accepting of each other. In “Lateefa,” a more subtle implication of prejudice is accentuated by the speaker’s conversation with an Officer:

“Officer, if you could just wait for the wedding to ...”  
“What wedding, lady? I don’t see no priest. Where’s the priest?”  
“We don’t have—see, we aren’t—we’re—”  
“Lady, you people gotta move your cars or they get tickets, see?”  
“But Connie’s getting—this is a wedding! Just wait one sec ‘til the ceremony—”  
“Lady, move these cars or I give them tickets.”  
“But, Officer—”  
“Lady—!” (100-111)

However, in poems where speakers complain about their targeted foreignness, Kahf tends to equate ethnicity with religious identity. In a lecture at Stanford University, Kahf told a literature class, “Islam makes you this other race.” She explained her position as a member of a minority group in the States by saying: “I can’t not write ethnically, because my characters don’t eat pork and they do use incense” (Macarquhar, 2007). This disposition becomes clearer in the poem...
“My Grandmother Washes her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears.” Kahf speaks of how her grandmother, washing her feet at Sears, expects “the matrons of the Middle West” to understand that her feet are cleaner than the sink because she washes them five times a day for prayer:

Respectable Sears matrons shake their heads and frown as they notice what my grandmother is doing, an affront to American porcelain, a contamination of American standards by something foreign and unhygienic. (15-19)

Kahf points out how the foreign becomes hygienic once it is explained to others. “Go on, tell them,” the grandmother urges her granddaughter to explain her position to the White patrons for whom “my grandmother might as well have been squatting/in the mud over a rusty tin in vaguely tropical squalor” (35-36). The granddaughter’s position, however, is that of a mediator who can “hold the door open for everyone” (62) because she can see foreignness in both parties as they are equally ignorant of each other’s different culture. Ironically, both parties speak to the granddaughter: “You can’t do that,” one of the women protests, turning to me, “tell her she can’t do that,” while the grandmother continues saying ‘Go on, tell them’ (39-40, 46). To the urgency of speaking, the granddaughter responds with silence: “I smile at the Midwestern women/as if my grandmother has just said something lovely about them/and shrug at my grandmother as if they/had just apologized through me” (57-60). But what is it that silences her? Kristeva (1991) explains how “between two languages, your realm is silence. By dint of saying things in various ways, one just as trite as the other, just as approximate, one ends up no longer saying them” (15). In other words, the girl cannot find a language that can be culturally intelligible to both parties. She does not find the words “with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others” (Ashcroft et al., 1995: 157). Speaking this third language is paramount to the notion of endorsing cultural hybridity where foreignness, as a negative energy, dissipates: “And by exploring this ‘Third space’, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the other of ourselves” (Ashcroft et al., 1995: 157). The girl evidently explains how she felt trapped in this in-between space: “Standing between the door and the mirror, I can see/at multiple angles, my grandmother and the other shoppers” (47-48). Homi Bhabha (1994) observes, in his Location of Culture, that these in-between spaces define and stigmatize the self and society as well: “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2). The irony is that it is the foreignness that exists in the third space, the bridging element, that is being
silenced when it is most needed. It is this kind of inhospitable lingual anxiety, the crippling silence, that Kahf wants to break through by introducing speakers who are at home with their foreign side and who can recognize foreignness as inclusive and not intrusive.

The introduction of the character of Scheherazad in the context of breaking the chain of silence is very perceptive. In the poem “E-mail from Scheherazad,” Kahf introduces a modern Scheherazad, who is divorced, shares custody of her little girl and who is an aspiring writer:

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

The historical Scheherazad is known for her narration of one thousand and one Arabian tales to the Persian king Shahrayar who marries and beheads a new virgin every day since his discovery of his first wife’s betrayal:

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. (5-8)

The general perception is that the character of Scheherazad is evoked as a liberating literary agency to free women from patriarchal hegemony. Scheherazad can also be viewed here as a modern Arab feminist subverting the oriental representations of Arab women as either erotic or subjugated:

The voice of the Arab woman had been warped since it first made its way westward. Scheherazade, the heroine of One Thousand and One Nights, had suffered terribly at the hands of translators. Revered in the East as a heroine for distracting the sultan Shahrayar from his murderous rampage with intriguing stories ... Scheherazade became nothing more than a harem sex kitten ... An intelligent woman, schooled in literature, philosophy, and history, reduced to an erotic, shallow, sex-crazed body behind a veil. (Darraj, 2004: 1-2)

However, the introduction of Scheherazad in this volume of poetry is not prevailingly bent toward recalcitrance. She may be viewed to explicitly accentuate resistance but more subtly she is there to introduce the element of foreignness as a healing power to the King’s world of stereotyped women: “I taught him to heal/His violent streak through stories, after all,/And he helped me uncover my true call” (21-24). Scheherazad is a Persian woman speaking to a Persian King. Why would she narrate stories about Arabs when the Persians, having already established an
empire, have a far more enchanting history and legacy? What she introduces to the king is not only the art of storytelling but also the fascination of foreignness.

To a large extent, this volume of poetry does not present itself exclusively as an immigrant’s complaint of exile or doubtful feelings of belongingness; neither is it a fixed, bitter denunciation of Western representations of Arab women or immigrants. What Kahf attempts to do is more intricate and inclusive. She sets some of her poems to rebuild a hyphenated identity by capitalizing on its foreign element:

Arab descendents in America are, to a degree, colonized. Encouraged to forget our beautiful difference, we imbibe so many of the biases and distortions around us. We become ambiguous about our heritage. And a person who is equivocal or confused can never become an artist. (Aziz, 2004: iii)

This is why Scheherazad divorces Shahrayar, so she can become an artist: “A thousand days/later, we got divorced. He’d settled down/& wanted a wife & not so much an artist” (11-13). The salient aesthetic constituent of foreignness, extolled in some of these poems, questions the inhospitable face of exile that does not recognize variety as the spice of life. The celebrated nature of foreignness, as addressed in the selected poems here, does not speak for the state of forced exile and displacement. Kahf is not bent to glorify exile, neither is she set to paint foreignness with one brush as there are so many other poems in this collection that address the different manifestations of xenophobia and alienation that a foreigner would still experience in diaspora. Foreignness, as an estranging aspect of identity, is rediscovered and re-embedded in both self and society. The idea of foreignness, therefore, is neither abstracted nor estranged but represented by real human beings. Kahf’s E-mails from Scheherazad celebrates this “beautiful difference” as an enriching component in any society that endorses multiculturalism.

References


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