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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

By Christian David Zeitz, University of Cologne, Germany

1 Given the new normal of fascist-oid populisms and all too familiar neoliberalism, ‘the Muslim woman’ is produced as a performative battleground of ideological and normative contradictions; as a commodity product with a rearranged voice, not an *arrangeur* of voicings. The AfD (Alternative for Germany) – with its gendered Islamophobic rhetoric materialized in election posters that mobilize the image of burqa-clad women to warn against the supposed *Islamization* of German – rose to 13% in the 2017 German parliamentary elections. Austria recently banned face-veils to make a stand against the oppression of Muslim women, relying on an all too common, ethnosexist¹ ‘saving-brown-women-from-brown-men’ discourse (Spivak 49; Abu-Lughod 784), whilst neglecting the symbolic violence undergirding standardized body politics. In a more alarming and far reaching manner, a recent ruling by the European Court of Justice which grants employers the right to ban *all religious symbols* in professional settings is not only to be read as an attack on religious embodied practices and identity formations under the sign of religious neutrality, but also as a juridical precarization of Muslim headdress-wearing women, refusing to meet the coercions of mandatory assimilation (El Aabedy). Sadly enough, *we* have not yet moved beyond the over-significance of the veil in debates about Islam, women and gender, which makes the veil police and the no-veil police strange bedfellows. And sadly enough, such a move seems far from possible, so long as commentators like the self-declared Muslim feminist Seyran Ateş insist that veils gender and sexualize, whilst excluding embodied performances of hair-dos, make-up and the latest fashions from this line of reasoning (see Yeğenoğlu 63). What the aforementioned legislations and attitudes foreclose is what Sara Ahmed terms “a future response to an other *whom I may yet approach*”, an approach that does not intend to *outlaw* identities that *I* personally and affectively cannot (imagine) to live (*Strange* 146, Ahmed’s emphasis). The *may-yet* temporality of this approach helps to imagine encounters beyond the mediated histories of prejudiced sentiment – ranging from pity to disgust – and the fantasy of knowing *what is best* for the other.

2 At the same time, Shephard Fairey’s *We the People* star-spangled banner hijabs were strongly present at the Women’s Marches and *IamMuslimToo* demonstrations and

¹ *Ethnosexism* is a term used by Gabriele Dietze to describe forms of sexism where gendered and ethnic/ethnicized discrimination converge. Ethnosexist figurations like the *sexually oppressed veiled Muslim woman*, the *sexually aggressive (young) Muslim male* and the construction of Muslim cultures as marked by inherently regressive sexual and gender politics are at the heart of anti-migration and anti-refugee rhetoric (3-7).

multinationals like NIKE and H&M suddenly published ads for hijabs or at least featuring hijab-wearing women. In Germany, the Bundesverwaltungsamt (federal administrative office) started a large-scale advertising campaign in the streets and on social media, which appears to encourage young women wearing headscarves *to apply for a job as their true selves (Bewirb dich wie du bist)*. As positive and inclusivity-fostering as these initiatives are, Banu Gökariksel is right to point out that

The current political moment of a global political turn to the right calls for going beyond easy tokenisms and for questioning the simple folding in of Muslims into existing nationalist narratives about the U.S. (Gökariksel and Smith, forthcoming). Instead, more radical intersectional feminisms that grapple with inequalities across multiple axes of difference are needed. (par. 6)

In this sense, the need to identify (gendered) anti-Muslim and other racialized discriminations cannot stop at critiques of Trump, the AfD and other openly Islamophobic and racist right-wing figures and movements. What need to be targeted are the everyday effects of structural and institutional racisms in supposedly post-racist Western societies: in universities, in admission processes, in the business world, at airports, in sports, etc. What makes the recent wave of positive and optimistic representations so contradictory is that their very celebratory optimisms harbour the risk of “willed oblivion” to existing, widespread anti-Muslim racism as an ongoing structural problem (Ahmed, *Living* 259). Just as there are more shades to Muslim female subjectivities than the type-identity of the *eternally oppressed veiled Muslim woman*, there are also more shades than the type-identity of the *young, successful and patriotically flag-raising Western-Muslim woman*. The latter is not only a normativization, but also, ironically, held back and prevented by stately and juridical regimes that regulate which bodies and identities are acceptable and which are not. We might want to ask ourselves how a European Muslim hijab-wearing woman is supposed to feel European, if EU law entitles potential employers to render her precarious, Other and ultimately *un-European*? Thus, in the face of deeply entrenched stately sanctioned anti-Muslim ethno-sexism, satisfaction *with how liberal and open we actually are* is not a satisfying option. Rather, Sara Ahmed’s appeal to *kill joy* and be “willing to cause unhappiness” about multifarious gendered-racialized-embodied inequalities and complicities is all too relevant (*Living* 258).

3 Over-negativity, over-positivity/over-optimism and the never-ending over-inscription of Muslim women and their bodies from both sides of the right-wing conservative-nationalist and liberal to left spectrum mark these contradictory times. The contradiction of overly negative and positive (and all too easily neoliberal) representations leave minimal space, in the ‘Western’ public imagination, for complexity, nuance and negotiation and restrict a

plurality of Muslim female voices and subjectivities to the tropes of the oppressed Muslim woman *who does not belong* and the neoliberal Muslim female citizen-subject *who has the potential to belong*, as long as she is willing to be incorporated into narratives of the happy multicultural nation and play her part in the growth of GNPs. Although it cannot be denied that the influx in positive representations of Muslim women in the West is unprecedented and constitutes a resistive potentiality to anti-Muslim racisms, the imperative that critical scholarship in the humanities go beyond and counter binary, simplistic and homogenizing representational regimes of Muslim women cannot be postponed.

4 To extrapolate an observation by Sadia Abbas, in the current political climate, Muslim women are often configured as “the pretexts for working out a series of tensions in contemporary thought” (188): in the examples listed above they either work as pretexts for justifying exclusionary nationalism, normalizing whiteness, condemning multiculturalism, constructing the superior Western Self, etc. or as tokenistic pretexts for constructing, in the vaguest sense, the nation or society as diversity-friendly, anti-racist and inclusive of certain Others, whose difference is ontologized and reconstructed rather than revealed to be constructed against the ideals of Euro-American White normative cultures. The age-old ‘who speaks (for whom)’ question so relevant in feminist, postcolonial and critical ethnic and racial studies remains critical. Especially in a time when visibly Muslim women publicly embody either gendered figurations of anti-Muslim racism or are made into poster girls of supposedly happy multicultural societies. In both narratives, the Muslim woman as a critical subject or an acknowledgement of a heterogeneity of voices and an ontological openness of whatsoever ascribed identity positions is lost in an over-inscription of type-like and classifiable Muslim female identity. In her contribution to the *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*’ special forum on “Trump’s Presidency and Middle East Women’s Studies”, Amaney A. Jamal critically analyses the current mobilization and mainstreaming of visibly Muslim women as a strategy of speaking on behalf and controlling voices of critique and dissent:

Muslim women find themselves once again at the forefronts of conflict and understanding, and tolerance and hate, while baring their vulnerabilities to the world and relying on the goodwill of others to support them. That this in itself is a recurring century-old problem for Muslim women in both the ‘Muslim’ and ‘Western’ world, is somber confirmation that Muslim women are still spoken for, even while their own voices are louder than ever. Let’s switch off the mute button (par. 4).

This special issue of *gender forum* is intended to contribute to Jamal’s call for *switching off the mute button* through investigating cultural productions by Muslim women in which *their own voices are louder than ever*. The issue’s cover, designed by emerging Palestinian-

Canadian artist Shahd Faraj², encapsulates the discussed hegemonic muffling of a sheer heterogeneity of Muslim women, whose daily varied negotiations of identities, politics, knowledges, agencies and resistances defy categorizing and homogenizing identitarianisms and representational regimes. In Faraj's artwork, which draws on a diverse iconography of Muslim women's faces, the silencing of the displayed women through anonymous hands reaching over their mouths works as a critique of strategic denials of non-sanctioned Muslim women's voices in mainstream representations. Mapped on the women's bodies, however, are lips, hinting at the materiality, corpo-reality and tonality of resistive and agential voicings.

5 In "Muslim Feminist Agency and Arab American Literature: A Case Study of Mohja Kahf's *the girl in the tangerine scarf*", Martina Koegeler-Abdi discusses how Kahf's negotiation of religious and feminist empowerment opens spaces for Muslim feminist agencies in the canon of Arab American literature. Koegeler-Abdi calls attention to an artistic conflict specific to (Muslim) Arab American women's writing, namely the conflict of meeting marketing requirements through self-Orientalization and simultaneously feeling obliged to defy Orientalist stereotypes of 'the Muslim woman' as passive victim in need of saving. Kahf extends her critique of this conflict to an intersectional feminist commentary on how Muslim feminist writers in the US are situated at the cutting edge of Western Orientalisms and Muslim conservative dismissals of feminism as a Westernizing contamination and complicity with intra-communal patriarchal formations. To challenge this double siege of Muslim Arab American feminist literary production, Kahf proposes an activist and literary double critique of both these hegemonies. Overall, Koegeler-Abdi does not only reveal how Kahf's double critiques are a recurrent feature of her own creative writing, but also how her novel's linkage of literary activism and Muslim feminist religious scholarship ultimately paves the way for more differentiated understandings of women's agency, inclusive of Muslim feminist religious subjectivities and agencies.

6 Leila Moayeri Pazargadi's article "Re/calling Scheherazad: Voicing Agency in Mohja Kahf's Poetry" examines Kahf's collection of spoken word poetry entitled *Emails from Scheherazad*. According to Pazargadi, the Syrian American poet's reclamation of orality, inherent to Scheherazad's storytelling, becomes a strategy for voicing agency and agitating against the silencing of Muslim women. The trope of the storyteller helps Kahf to wrest attention to assumed taboo topics for Muslim women like violence, desire and passion. Pazargadi approaches Kahf's poetry from an autobiographical studies perspective and suggests reading the poems in light of their personal and anecdotal contexts, whilst also being

² We would like to thank Shahd Faraj (www.shahdfaraj.com) for granting us permission to display her artwork as this issue's cover.

attentive to the ways in which the autobiographical ‘I’, in the poems and life writing in general, can potentially encompass a broad range of voices, focal points and hybridized identity and genre negotiations. Kahf’s creative, autobiographical performances of hybridity are to be read as political-ethical statements for the humanization of American Muslims. Finally, the autobiographical poetics of storytelling in *Emails from Scheherazad* become crystallized in the reclamation of subjective stories as counter-discourses to Islamophobic criticism. Pazargadi’s article contributes both to putting into dialogue Middle Eastern literary studies and autobiographical studies and to establishing American Muslim literary studies within the ever-expanding field of ethnic American literary studies.

7 In “‘Can I [...] claim to revive these stifled voices?’: Writing, Researching and Performing Postcolonial Womanhood in Assia Djébar’s *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* and *So Vast the Prison*”, Hannah Kershaw offers a Muslim feminist reading of Algerian author Djébar’s novels *Fantasia* and *So Vast the Prison* in translation. Assia Djébar’s novels chart the patriarchal double colonization of Muslim women in Algeria through French colonial authorities and certain native everyday practices. *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* recounts the personal histories of violent colonial encounters and anti-colonial rebellion during the occupation. At the same time, it counters masculinist historiography through the inclusion of stories of women’s participation in nationalist resistance efforts. Moving on to *So Vast the Prison*, Kershaw shifts her focus to the novel’s gaze relations: it is argued that Djébar’s female characters’ appropriation of the male gaze and their critical engagement with gender relations is achieved through embodied and visually mediated rather than linguistic modes of critical inquiry. In her novels, Kershaw concludes, Djébar highlights and restores women’s active and creative roles in the building of a/the nation and its histories and thereby de-essentializes the static figuration of the ‘postcolonial Muslim woman’ as nothing more than an effect of national interests and male-centred historiography.

8 The issue’s final essay, Julia Watson’s “Parsua Bashi’s *Nylon Road*: Visual Witnessing and the Critique of Neoliberalism in Iranian Women’s Graphic Memoir”, is not only the first critical reading in English of Parsua Bashi’s graphic memoir *Nylon Road*, but also re-shifts the issue’s focus to questions of diaspora, memory and subjectivity. Woven into a dialogical autobiographical process, the narrating ‘I’, Parsua, is in constant conversation with her eleven former selves, confronting each other over competing and reversed attitudes to Iranian fundamentalism, Western secularism and neoliberal late capitalism in Bashi’s country of migration, Switzerland, and sympathies for Soviet-style socialism among 1970s Iranian intellectuals. *Nylon Road*’s visually and politically conflicting vantage points and

subject positions remain in dialogical relation, resulting in varied historically and socially contextualized representations and examinations of multiple life-worlds in Iran and ‘the West’/Switzerland. Watson points to the multi-leveled exercise of critique at play in Bashi’s work, which does not stop at the level of post-revolutionary Iranian fundamentalism and its normative control of women’s bodies. On the contrary, Bashi critique also targets the normative and exclusionary body and gender politics of Western neoliberalism and consumer capitalism as well as Socialist states. Eventually, this multiplicity of visually and socio-politically clashing and reversed positionalities and their dialogical encounters is key to Bashi’s feminist, global, and postcolonial critical reflection on the Islamic Revolution, its aftermath and Western neoliberalism and neo-colonialism.

8 In line with the issue’s overall interest in and contribution to transnational Muslim literary studies, it closes with Anja Wieden’s critical review of Güner Yasemin Balci’s novel *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger* (*The Girl and the Jihadist*, Wieden’s translation), published by S. Fischer.

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Muslim Feminist Agency and Arab American Literature: A Case Study of Mohja Kahf's *the girl in the tangerine scarf*

By Martina Koegeler-Abdi, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract:

Mohja Kahf's novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* highlights a broad spectrum of Muslim feminist agencies. In this essay I look at how her literary representations negotiate religious and feminist discourses in doing so. I further argue that her focus on empowerment through self-defined spirituality and religion sets her novel apart within the canon of contemporary Arab American literature, as most other Arab American feminist narratives focus rather on re-appropriations of orientalist Scheherazade figures to reclaim the transnational histories of Muslim women's agency. The genre of the Arab American novel has experienced a veritable boom in the post 9/11 era. However, this rise is located within contemporary neo-Orientalisms and remains in an uneasy relationship to stereotypical audience expectations and to the marketing demands on 'Muslim women' to represent not themselves, but the supposed blanket oppression of women in Islam. Steven Salaita points to the inherent tensions between orientalist audience expectations and artistic self-representation in Arab American cultural production. Mohja Kahf picks up on this tension in her own theoretical work, but shifts our attention to the intersectional specificity encountered by Muslim feminist writers who have to work within both Western Orientalisms and the disapproval of Muslim conservatives who denounce feminism as a Western import and refuse any critique of their own patriarchy. Kahf suggests a constant double critique and careful contextualization to counter this double bind, and in this essay I not only analyze how she translates this approach into her own creative writing, but I also explore how her novel connects literary activism to Muslim feminist religious scholarship by developing a more expansive, non-binary way of conceiving Muslim women's agencies.

1 Mohja Kahf, a Muslim feminist, Arab American writer, dedicates her scholarly and creative work to fighting orientalist stereotypes and systemic intersections of sexism and racism. Muslim feminist authors in the US often find themselves in a double bind: common Western perceptions of Muslim women's victimhood ignore Muslim women's agency, while patriarchal Islamic scholars consider feminism a Western import and thus foreign to Islam. As a result of this double bind many people, in the so-called East and West, consider feminism and Islam mutually exclusive positions (Badran). Kahf's literary fight thus cuts both ways: against a Western reception environment where Orientalism construes any critique of patriarchal and oppressive instances in Muslim communities as 'proof' of Islamic backwardness, and against conservative Muslim circles who condemn feminist critiques from within as airing dirty laundry (Kahf "The Pity"). Both reactions dismiss or obscure the concrete and varied concerns of Muslim women and Kahf's poetry and fiction set out to challenge this double bind that also threatens to limit her means of literary expression.

2 In this essay, I trace how Kahf translates her own Muslim feminist agency into literature and I argue that her aesthetic choices help us to better understand ambivalences in Muslim feminist political agency at large. Her novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006) relates the coming-of-age story of Khadra, a girl born into a religiously conservative family, who grows up to be an independent, self-defined Muslim American woman. Her experiences growing up reflect the interlocking discriminations Arab and Muslim American women experience in the US and the narrative develops an explicitly Muslim feminist outlook. I propose to read Kahf's novel thus not only as a manifestation of Arab American literature, but also as a re-evaluation of religious agency and as an act of feminist self-writing. I argue that Kahf draws from both the tradition of women of color literary activism in the US and transnational Muslim feminist perspectives in her writing, but that it is also important to specifically highlight her representation of women's religious agency – a neglected perspective within secular Western feminisms that may hold the potential to undermine the power of the double bind over Muslim feminists' artistic and personal possibilities.

Toward a Muslim feminist agency in Arab American literature

3 Contemporary Arab American women's literature is transnational in its genesis and development. It is born out of a dialogue and exchange of various multi-ethnic US literatures and feminisms and defined via a simultaneous/hybrid authorial east- and westward gaze (see Ludescher; Williams; Salaita; Majaj; Hassan and Knopf-Newman). In the contemporary US context, the growing presence of literary-politically active Arab American woman writers, like Mohja Kahf, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Etel Adnan, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Diana Abu Jaber has significantly strengthened and defined an Arab American feminist movement within literature. In the US, Arab American feminist writers struggle not only with patriarchal frameworks in Muslim communities that consider feminism a Western intervention, but their work is often caught in between mainstream US Orientalisms and global feminisms' stereotypes – the above mentioned double bind. US imaginations about ethnic literatures at large are fraught with such hegemonic pitfalls, but the development of a simplistic Western global feminist attitude toward the oppression of Muslim women has become a particularly prominent part of this trend, reflected in the post-9/11 boom of Muslim women's memoirs in the US. Such memoirs sell 'Muslim women as victim' narratives and position their authors as native informants who can reveal the hidden lives of Muslim women to Western readers. In these texts, the veil is frequently cited as a symbol of oppression, which confirms existing stereotypes, but also facilitates access of Muslim authors as native informants into the literary

market and public discourses (e.g. *Reading Lolita in Teheran* by Azar Nafisi (2003) or the purely fictional *Honor Lost* (2006) by Norma Khouri sold as non-fictional memoir). Such memoirs have helped to promote the contemporary peak in negative and orientalist stereotypes¹ about Muslim women and oppression (see Abu-Lughod; Lazreg; Adulahdi et.al), which forms an inevitable backdrop for the production and reception of Arab American literature.

4 The associations of Islam with oppression of women have become so prevalent after 9/11 that gender and religion have been collapsed and completely merged into one category, which is often visually represented by the image of the veiled, oppressed Muslim woman. Miriam Cooke has coined the term “muslimwoman” to denote this conflation in language as well (Cooke “Rejoinder” 117). The overwhelming power of this image usually precludes any deeper discussions about the real-life needs of Muslim women, but Kahf’s novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* uses literature to tap into the popular appeal of the trope of the oppressed veiled Muslim woman to then subvert her audiences’ expectations. She dissects the detrimental impact of orientalist stereotypes on Muslim women’s lives and highlights women’s agency within religious contexts, while simultaneously taking aim at Muslim patriarchal practices. Leading Arab American scholars Steven Salaita and Gregory Orfalea praise *the girl in the tangerine scarf*’s for its political relevance, but at the same time they consider its representational politics too “didactic” (Orfalea 187). Salaita states that “*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* often reads like a social document embedded in the genre of fiction” (*Modern* 40). This view implies a lesser literary value and importance of the novel for the development of Arab American fiction. In this essay I propose a different reading of Kahf’s supposed didacticism. I theorize her aesthetic choices as a form of literary activism that foregrounds Muslim feminist agency within contemporary developments of Arab American literature.

5 Feminism has always had a special affinity to literature, offering a creative platform to envision political changes in both Eastern and Western contexts (Goodman 2). Prominent examples in Middle Eastern literary feminisms include, for example, Assia Djerba’s work in Algeria or Nawal El Sadaawi in Egypt². Djerba and El Saadawi both use literature and

¹ Lazreg sharply criticizes that contemporary global feminism, heir to Second Wave feminist universalism, studies the world, but excludes itself from the subjects of study. Especially Western readers of Arab women’s memoirs practice a “triumphant feminist discourse” (29) that does not address actual diversity but merely “difference from itself” (30) to assert the superiority of a Western feminism and its conception of freedom (29-39).

² Assia Djerba develops an alternative to Western cultural forms of feminist resistance, fighting women’s double oppression by both colonialism and political Islam in Algeria. She bridges not only Arab and French feminist ideas but also creatively re-works feminist figures of Islamic history and Scheherazade’s fictional agency in

storytelling as tools of feminist resistance fighting the intersecting oppression of strict Islamic gender codes and colonial state legacies. Kahf continues this tradition of a double critique in the US, but her specific post 9/11 double bind emerges out of the intersections of American and Muslim patriarchies with Islamophobia and sexism. A re-evaluation of women's religious agency is essential to redressing the notion of Muslim women's supposed inferiority in both these contexts and literature may take a key role in this endeavor. In their 2011 anthology on Arab American feminism, Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber explicitly call on fiction, rather than memoirs, to fight orientalist stereotyping via "strategic narration instead of confessional or positivist testimonies" (xxx). In this light, Kahf's intellectual battles have direct significance for the development of the contemporary Arab American novel and, as I will argue below, for the development of a more multifaceted understanding of Muslim feminist agency.

6 Kahf herself is acutely aware of the limitations Orientalisms and global feminisms produce in literary publishing for Arab American women writers (Amireh and Majaj). She addresses the unavoidable discursive confrontation with Orientalisms writing in English in the US and the importance of reception environments in her scholarly work, but she also deals with the expectations of being a native informant for an US ethnic literary market creatively in the frame tale of *the girl in the tangerine scarf*. The meta-story to the coming-of-age narrative is Khadra's return to Indiana as an adult. Adult Khadra works for a liberal East Coast magazine as a photographer and is sent back to write a report about her old Muslim communities. Her editor is thrilled that she is a former member of the local religious community and he represents liberal American orientalist ignorance in that he wants a story on "Behind the veil! Wow! A keyhole view of the hidden, inside world of Muslims" (Kahf, *the girl* 48). Khadra only reluctantly accepts the job when he guarantees her full artistic liberty to show and represent whatever she chooses. Once she arrives at the conference she then finds herself pressured by her former local community leaders to not write about issues of gender discrimination; for example, Khadra comes to cover a local concert at a religious conference and the scheduled performance of a girl group caused such an uproar that their performance was subsequently cancelled (413). Despite being "tired of everyone putting that on us. Every single thing we do has to 'represent' for the community. (...) For the Prophet's sake, just let us *be*" (399), Khadra resists the pressure from both sides of the double bind and

saving other women from cruel violence (Hiddelston 231). The life and writings of El Sadaawi in Egypt further reflect how inseparable her creative work is from her activism (Cooke "Nawal" 215). El Sadaawi used her public voice to criticize both oppressive Egyptian state rule and Islamists increasing influence on restricting women's public lives (218).

she decides to report anything and everything, as complete a picture as possible. This fictional frame negotiates central concerns Kahf also develops in her own scholarly writings. She asks her readers not to reduce Muslim women to being either victims, escapees or pawns of their culture³ (Kahf “The Pity”). To reach beyond this limited frame of reception, Arab American writers often adapt orientalist tropes to gain public visibility and then subvert audience expectations from within. The most popular approach in this regard is the re-appropriation of the Scheherazade narrative as a precedent of Muslim women’s historical agency in contemporary Arab American literature (Sabry; Darraj). Kahf herself draws on the Scheherazade trope, especially in her poetry, but her novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* points to a yet another avenue for reclaiming Muslim women’s agency that has so far been not as widely considered: The role of religion and the specific possibilities of a Muslim feminist authorial agency in the emergence of Arab American feminist literature.

7 Feminist religious scholars and authors share many of the pressures and double binds outlined above. Religious scholars who look to the Qu’ran to re-claim women’s rights have also struggled to formulate their own project in between the hegemonic Othering of colonialists and the androcentric and patriarchal scholarly traditions perpetuated by Islamic religious authorities (Lamprey 27-8). Fatima Mernissi, a leading Muslim feminist scholar of the 20th century, seeks to unequivocally situate feminism as an integral part of Islam stating that “[w]e Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of Muslim tradition” (viii). Mernissi has helped to publicize a form of Muslim feminism that bases itself on egalitarian reinterpretations of the Holy Scriptures and the celebration of early female leaders in Islam; a strategy embedded in a longer history of emerging Muslim feminist thought, and carried on today by feminist theological scholars like Amina Wadud in the US. However, the relationship between Islam and feminism remains complex. Lamprey points out that prioritizing precedent has been an important stepping stone for Muslim feminisms, but it is not sufficient to break through all the red tape of androcentric, patriarchal religious authority (32-3). The assertion of interpretative agency over Islamic scripture remains the only viable option for religious feminist resistance at the time, but recent scholarship has had

³ Leti Volpp argues that “to posit feminism and multiculturalism as oppositional is to assume that minority women are victims of their cultures” (“Feminism” 1185). This old argument opposes race to gender and provides a theoretical basis for imperial feminism, because it renders certain cultures or religions as inherently violent against women, while turning a blind eye to Western culture’s oppression of women. It thus posits women will be better off without their respective cultures, which not only obscures the agency of women within patriarchal societies, but also condones and even encourages US violent interventions.

to grapple with the limitations of this approach as not all passages of the Qu’ran can be re-interpreted in an egalitarian way and the question of feminist agency within Islamic theology remains unresolved as Western terms of feminist agency may end up being rather oppressive than expressive for Muslim women. However, the ambivalence of different approaches to how a Muslim feminist approach could look like constitutes a useful tension that can foreground “diversity among women and traditions” and is further “not only an assertion of agency but also a position adopted in reaction to hegemonic, androcentric, and patriarchal discourses” (Lamptey 27).

8 Lamptey thus suggests that new, multifaceted and complex approaches are necessary to develop truly egalitarian Islamic discourses and she envisions a broader, more comparative Muslima theology in religious studies to this end. From a literary and cultural studies perspective, she is essentially calling for a re-evaluation of religious agency within a framework of transnational feminist ambivalence. Transnational feminism highlights local differences within feminist practices and is as a theoretical intervention into the facile global feminisms outlined above. I then propose to turn to Kahf’s writing as a literary platform that can productively hold the ambivalences and tensions embedded in Muslim and transnational feminist scholarship and thus develop new, multifaceted visions of Muslim feminist agency embedded in daily life and religious practices. A less biased understanding of women’s religious agency, which is nevertheless committed to feminist political goals, is the key to this vision and to more realistic public representations of Muslim women’s lives outside the East/West double bind. To begin such a re-evaluation of Muslim women’s agency in literary terms, it is instructive to turn to Saba Mahmood’s ethnographic analysis of the socially conservative Egyptian Mosque Movement, as she explores the stakes and possibilities of Egyptian women’s varied, also explicitly conservative, agencies within religious authority.

9 Mahmood is invested in rethinking the concept of agency as more than just a mode of resistance and subversion of representations (10). Despite being unconformable with religious aspects in public life herself, she nevertheless challenges Western feminist blind spots that reduce women’s agency to normative perceptions of progressiveness. Monolithic secular views of a ‘backward’ Islamic revival cannot account for the complexities Mahmood observed within this movement, such as pro-democracy Islamic parties, Islamic welfare organizations and its popularity among people. Mahmood follows local women dawha⁴ leaders who claim power via their public performances of piety. These performances allow them in turn to raise women’s issues and utilize the space for negotiation awarded to them as

⁴ Dawha is the umbrella term for missionary movements in the Islamic revival of the last decades that urge fellow Sunni Muslims to greater piety (Mahmood 57).

pious women within the patriarchal system of the four accepted schools of Islamic law. Mahmood's and Kahf's work share these dawha women as a point of departure. Kahf's protagonists, Khadra's family, are also part of a dawha movement and settle in the US to preach to local Muslim communities in Indiana. Further, both Mahmood and Kahf aim to broaden our understanding of the modalities of agency within conservative women's lives to find ways of doing and thinking feminism that do not violate other ways of life or cooperate with neoimperial politics that simply cast Muslim women as victims of Islam to justify Western military interventions in the Middle East.

10 While they share a broader understanding of agency, Kahf nevertheless engages much more directly in developing an alternative Muslim feminist vision that may emerge out of women's religious convictions. Mahmood calls for more humility and for the acknowledgement of "feminist uncertainty" (196) in terms of understanding non-progressive movements in feminist analysis, but she stops short of asking how then more diverse Islamic/Muslim practices, or even the performance of piety in the Mosque movement, could promote change of the prevailing norms. To better understand the potential political implications of conservative practices by Muslim women, it is helpful to expand Mahmood's view of agency with Serene Khader's analysis of adaptive preference. Khader's conception of adaptive preferences acknowledges "agency in people who perpetuate their oppression" (304). This may be easily misconstrued as another perpetuation of colonial stereotypes about Muslim women's victimhood, but Khader's work offers a nuanced understanding of how oppressed women develop preferences that actually support their subordinate positions to better survive in unjust circumstances. This is in itself a form of agency within patriarchy, but it does not preclude feminist political goals for change – if the situation were to improve, then their preferences would change too. Such adaptive preferences, which perpetuate oppressive norms, are by no means restricted to 'Third world' women. Khader further points out that also Western women adapt their own preferences to meet, for example, sexist beauty standards or the demands of a gendered labor market. Rather than ignoring such pressures on women, the acknowledgment of adaptive preferences makes material constraints placed on women visible and at the same time it reveals that they are by no means 'true' preferences, but rather mechanisms of functioning within patriarchies that display agency in "active reflection about norms and options" (313).

11 In her writing Kahf then brings together a multifaceted understanding of Muslim women's agency within various, intersecting US American and Muslim patriarchies and a feminist political vision that builds on the tenants of Muslim feminist re-interpretation of

Quranic sources as well as on Kahf's own experiences as an Arab American feminist and scholar trained in the US. I argue that it is the combination of these approaches that allows Kahf to work within and beyond her specific double bind as a US based Muslim American feminist writer. She adapts her writing to some degree to orientalist and religious audience demands; an adaptive preference of sorts that allows her writing to function on the US literary market and to maintain an unapologetic affiliation to a Muslim identity, but her positive emphasis on women's religious agency utilizes this public visibility to change the terms of discussion that frame Muslim feminist agency altogether. Kahf's choice to highlight a broad spectrum of Muslim feminist agency, progressive and non-progressive ones, thus also goes beyond the more common Arab American feminist re-appropriations of orientalist figures like Scheherazade, which sets her novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* apart within the canon of contemporary Arab American literature. Finally, her creative exploration of how to improve women's lives and rights within multiple, intersecting oppressive forces develops a Muslim feminist literary agency that strives to upset the exclusionary terms and material consequences of both ethno-nationalist Orientalisms and religious patriarchy – a deeply political, transnationally feminist goal.

Beyond the Double Bind with *the girl with the tangerine scarf*

12 In *the girl with the tangerine scarf*, Islam is represented as being part of America. The mere fact of placing Islam as a heterogeneous religious practice within American culture directly challenges East/West binaries (Salaita 32). In the novel, Kahf tells the coming-of-age story of Khadra, a girl born into a conservative missionary Muslim family that settles in Indiana. Khadra grows up as a devout believer who draws strength from her faith while encountering hypocrisies in various Muslim as well as broader American communities. In her adult life, she marries but then decides, despite family pressure, to abort and divorce, to be able to continue her studies. She recovers from this blow, living for a while with her wise grandmother Téta in Syria, and when Khadra returns to the US she has become a self-conscious American Muslim woman who defines her own life and faith, drawing on her ancestry and her own interpretation of Islam.

13 The basic plot lines and settings already go beyond the nationalist-orientalist East/West binary that usually frames the Muslim feminist double bind. Set in the American heartland, the novel likens the missionary parents of Kahf's protagonist Khadra to early Anglo-European missionary settlers: the parents have moved to the US to create a dawha community and preach to Muslim migrants. Kahf thus writes her Muslim Arab American

characters into the national US American Ur-archetype of religiously motivated settlers, which puns on contemporary anxieties over Muslim immigration. The trope of the pilgrims and settlers helps to legitimize the idea of Americanness as white, Christian and with European roots – also the quintessential ‘Western’ part in implicit orientalist binaries. Kahf’s appropriation of these national myths does not just invert, but actually destabilizes this binary altogether. The citational analogy of Khadra’s parents as dawha preachers to archetypal Christian missionaries highlights the arbitrariness of inclusion mechanisms of national mythologies, while the religious analogy undermines orientalist Othering of Islam versus Christianity. Her literary agency allows Kahf to poke fun at the national origin myths, but she also lays a serious claim to Americanness entailing both Arabness and Islam within its boundaries, metaphorically and literally.

14 The refusal of East/West binaries and destabilization of monolithic views of religion, within both Christianity and Islam, characterize also Kahf’s literary vision of Muslim feminist agency. Khadra’s experiences reflect the multiplicity of Islams in America as well as the ethnic diversity and multiple approaches to gender within Muslim communities. In this mix Khadra represents a Muslim American feminist outlook. She draws part of her agency from her religious knowledge and her conservative upbringing. Her Uncle Taher teaches her about the crucial role of women and female leaders in early Islam already as a young girl (Kahf *the girl* 36). This religious proficiency enables her to work toward a Muslim feminist independence later in life. Khadra claims her rights through knowledge of scripture, which speaks directly to Muslim feminist scholarship that reinterprets historical Quranic precedents to frame women’s rights as a religious right. However, literature allows Kahf to push the question of feminism and Islam further than scholarly discourses usually do. She also includes a wide array of female characters, ranging from her converted, fervently religious aunt Khadija (24) to her rebelling, secular high school friend Hanifa, who becomes a race car driver (438), to represent agency on a wide spectrum from conservative to avantgarde Muslim women. This avoids replicating an orientalist subtext that religious gender identities are of ‘lesser’ value, a key tenant of a transnational Muslim feminism.

15 On the other side of the double bind, Kahf’s representations of Muslim American womanhoods also challenges convenient Muslim imaginations of ideal womanhood in form of a ‘modern’, yet devout and selfless Muslim woman and wife – views defended in the novel by Khadra’s husband Juma (224). Juma is a kind man and Kahf makes a point to portray their marriage as happy and sexually fulfilling, but his narrow views on the proper behavior of a wife soon prove too limiting for Khadra. Kahf’s narrative consistently criticizes such intra-

Muslim experiences of gender oppression, but without catering to Orientalisms. She rather places a tongue-and-cheek challenge to ‘ignorant’ Muslims, resorting to a Muslim feminist outlook, claiming that they perpetuate gender stereotypes due to a lack of religious knowledge: “The prophet never asked his wives to do anything in the house for him,’ Khadra snapped. What was the use? It took a Dawha Center man to appreciate that sort of thing. A reg’lar Muslim from the Old Country like Juma wouldn’t get it” (241). This quote carries a very clear political message, but it is more than just didactics. Kahf’s narrative playfulness works against an orientalist appropriation of her critique of gender oppression as representing Muslim women’s victimhood, and while she locates resistance to such oppression within Islamic revivalism, the quote’s sassy tone also defies any religious expectations of performances of piety as a proper form to voice concerns. In short, her humor, irony, and skill as a narrator weave these multiple social dimensions into an artful Muslim literary-feminist aesthetic.

16 Kahf’s Muslim feminist authorial agency challenges orientalist stereotypes in her general audience, with little knowledge about Islam, but it also pushes conservative Muslim readers to recognize heterogeneous and self-defined expressions of Muslim womanhood beyond narrow, patriarchal idealizations of devout, selfless motherhood. Kahf’s narrative is intricately linked to intersectional realities of myriads of different patterns of injustice stemming from patriarchal Muslim *and* patriarchal US views on ‘proper’ gender roles. The plot lines about the destiny of Khadra’s friend Zuhura (94-5) are case in point of this literary multiplicity. Zuhura is a young, bright Muslim American woman activist, and despite pressure from the conservative establishment in her local Muslim community she continues to study after her marriage until she is found murdered and raped by the local KKK clansmen one day. This episode criticizes both the hypocrisy of patriarchs in Muslim communities, who believe Zuhura’s independent behavior ‘invited’ such an attack, as well as the ignorant and brutal reaction of local press and law enforcement who dismissed her murder as an honor killing without ever investigating local right wing communities. Instead, they simply suspect and deport her innocent husband and belittle Zuhura’s activist achievements and religious convictions. This particular narrative further connects the Muslim American feminist struggles to the fight of US women of color against the interlocking oppressions of race-gender hierarchies. The bottom line is that for Zuhura, as a Muslim woman/women of color, the greatest physical danger in the US comes from a racist-sexist society and being visibly Muslim.

17 To go beyond the double bind, Kahf practices a double feminist literary agency that draws from Eastern and Western genres. She combines references to the feminist precedents within Islamic scripture with an appropriation of the Western literary genre of the Bildungsroman. This genre centers on a growth narrative of a central character toward self-awareness, often the coming-of-age process and integration of a young person into adulthood and society. The ethnic Bildungsroman, however, typically conceptualizes this growth narrative as a character's assimilation into the cultural norms of a given hegemonic society (Fielding 201-2), which is also a staple of orientalist narrative patterns. Kahf maintains the main formal criteria of a Bildungsroman, but she plays with her audiences' orientalist expectations of the life trajectory of a Muslim woman from supposed Eastern oppression to Western freedom. Kahf takes apart the conventions of such 'Muslim women's stories as victim narratives.' She cites the orientalist trope of Western emancipation, a familiar narrative for her American audiences, but in her narrative Khadra's transformation to adulthood takes place in Syria, facilitated by a woman (her grandmother Téta), and rooted in a Muslim feminist/female power tradition (Kahf, *the girl* 270). Téta also resembles a modern-day Scheherazade figure whose storytelling recapitulates the history of Arab feminist traditions. Like many other Arab American authors Kahf reclaims the Scheherazade trope to build on a different discursive legacy of Muslim women's agency outside Western orientalist binaries and feminisms. However, these Scheherazade references remain relatively marginal in the novel and Khadra's direct grappling with religion is the most important element of her coming-of-age.

18 Throughout the novel, Kahf posits a particularized, fluid Islam as an integral part of Khadra's Arab *and* American subjectivities. Her spiritual journey spirals back and forth between Eastern and Western interpretations of Islam, input from her local family, university, Muslim feminist sources as well as zealous, revolutionary forms of Islam and finally secularism. In the end, Khadra neither assimilates into rigid rituals or orthodox Islamic interpretations nor into a mainstream US culture. She realizes that any interpretation of Islam "was just one point on a whole spectrum of Islamic faith. It wasn't identical to Islam itself, just one little corner of it. What was difficult to accept was that these other paths had always existed beyond the confines of her world, and yet were still Muslim" (233). Kahf's embraces Islam, America and Arabness as open categories, which only make sense in a particularized form that cannot be co-opted by either side of the double bind. The various characterizations multiply and particularize so many different possibilities of Muslim religious and ethnic subjectivities that the binary orientalist reception frame of the novel collapses: The spectrum

of Muslim characters includes Khadra's black American Muslims friends, "the fake Muslims" (23), shia Muslims (34), the deeply committed dawha-style versus popular versions of Islam (108), Sufism (183), assimilated second and third generation immigrants from earlier Arab immigration (184), Gulf capitalist Islam (220), academic Islamic studies, and finally also secular/agnostic Muslim friends (318).

19 While this individualization of religious identities and practices clearly challenges hegemonic interpretations of what one 'true Islam' should look like, there remains a certain danger of co-optation into a neoliberal multiculturalism. Mahmood Mamdani warns that the terms of neoliberal US expectations of assimilated multiculturalness, or in other words being a "good," not overtly religious Muslim, actually rather reinforces orientalist binaries in that they devalue explicitly religious identities as then being "bad Muslims" (766). To counter such potential co-optation, Kahf uses subplots and character developments to practice structurally in her creative writing what Leti Volpp has laid out in legal terms as a strategy to talk about existing oppressions in Muslim communities without feeding into orientalist discourses. Volpp suggests doing a Geertzian thick description with a microanalytic focus of the particular situation or person at hand ("Framing" 97). Kahf's writing translates this practice into a literary practice in her formal choices. To "normalize and particularize complex norms of 'cultural identity'" (Volpp 102) helps Kahf to criticize gender oppression within Muslim communities in literature as well. Khadra encounters gendered discrimination on many occasions; for example, when she is banned from a Qur'an recital competition simply for being a girl (199) or when Khadra has to rebel against her own family's traditional expectations of her role as wife and mother to insist on her right to abortion and divorce (225). These negative experiences come out of specific encounters and situations that adult Khadra can counter with religious literacy *and* self-defined agency. Strategically, this is important because Kahf's critique effectively re-frames discussions on gender oppression in Muslim communities away from global prejudice to actual practices and concrete interventions.

20 These microanalytic literary representations help Kahf to transcend the double bind, but what do they imply for Muslim feminist agency? As I suggested above, Kahf also writes from a transnational feminist vantage point. Her location in the US expands her immediate feminist reference frames beyond Muslim feminisms and her novel functions as a transnational platform that connects radical US women of color feminisms with Muslim

feminist traditions⁵. I have shown above how Khadra represents Muslim feminist agency, but the microanalytical context of her character development, finding her own inner access to spirituality and faith, also relates her self-writing to the legacy of Gloria Anzaldúa's path to *conocimiento*⁶. *Conocimiento* links an understanding of spirituality as self-defined, lived practice with the constant process of self-writing as de- and reconstructing your own self outside hegemonic cultural imprints. Kahf's Muslim feminist vision and Anzaldúa's legacies are not by any means identical, but they share the imperative to write oneself or be written with other ethnic minorities in the US. In terms of feminist agency, the two approaches seem to be diametrically opposed at first glance. Anzaldúa's radical self-writing claims spirituality and subjecthood outside *any* hegemonic reference frame, while Kahf seeks to reclaim the possibility of a self-defined subjectivity for Muslim women outside *harmful* hegemonic terms. However, Anzaldúa's radical vision of claiming a subject position outside, but still in-between, commonly practiced identities is nevertheless a vision of engagement and activism. As a *nepantlera*⁷ she adopts the position of a mediator who engages with and supports women that remain caught within patriarchal contexts and Kahf's Muslim feminist vision strives to do the same. In my view Khadra, as a Muslim feminist role model of sorts, ends up in a kind of *nepantla* – a neither/nor positionality – in that she refuses to locate herself in both traditional Muslim and hegemonic Global feminist identity categories.

21 Muslim feminist agency in *the girl in the tangerine scarf* thus functions as a mediating umbrella that accommodates the agency of religious women who seek a gradual improvement of their personal situation within a patriarchal system and of women who seek to change norms and options altogether. Khadra's re-claiming of an individual approach to faith becomes not just a fulfillment of a general Muslim spiritual duty, but she turns this quest for spirituality into an expression of Muslim feminist agency. This quest is not prescriptive in its progressiveness, which accommodates adaptive preferences and forms of agency that are not

⁵ Arab American and US women of color feminists have intervened and fought for the recognition of actually diverse feminisms that need to cooperate on equal terms in a transnational framework since the 1980s. However, the relationship between US women of color and Arab American feminists has been complicated. Despite structural parallels and different, specific concerns as women of color, Arab American feminists had been considered 'white' and gone unnoticed for a long time (Elia 223ff). After 9/11 Arab Americans were unambiguously racialized as Others, but it is important to keep the specificity of racisms and anti-Arab racism in mind.

⁶ In her final essay "now let us shift" Anzaldúa summarizes her life experience and theories of how to go beyond resistance and achieve transformations in the path to *conocimiento*. This „guide“ to self-determination directly addresses her audience and encourages the reader to determine themselves what their lives mean, to de-program the oppressive cultural constructions, and to find a self-defined subjectivity (568).

⁷ While Anzaldúa's earlier work departed from her vision for a *mestiza* consciousness, referring to a hybrid, new form of consciousness, her later work on the *nepantla*, the Nahuatl word for 'in-between,' goes beyond a *mestiza* consciousness in that the *nepantlera* cuts all ties to Euro-American and patriarchal reference frames – both as a means of self-protection and as an effective base for transformative world building (Koegeler-Abdi).

forms of outright resistance, but it redresses the invisibility of Muslim women's causes within both religious and Western feminist scholarship. The novel offers portraits of religiously conservative women alongside her protagonist, but the sum of her individualized stories never leave any doubt that the novel is challenging the patriarchal status quo. Taken together with her strategic re-articulation of the Bildungsroman, Kahf successfully destabilizes the orientalist tropes of 'inferiority/oppression of women and Islam' versus 'Western superiority and gender equality,' and claims a space for Muslim Arab American womanhood outside the East/West double bind but within a self-defined religious framework.

Literary Inspirations: Feminist Agency and Multiplicity

22 What literary inspirations may a religious scholar like Lamprey then draw from *the girl in the tangerine scarf*? And what are the limitations of Kahf's literary Muslim feminist agency in claiming a multifaceted approach to gender equality within Islamic scholarship? A central advantage of theorizing via literature is that the "literary frames feminist critique as the opening to a difference, a creative resistance. For this – for the possibility of envisioning alternative social relations, outside of the dominant Common sense – feminist theory needs literature, and feminist literature gives rise to feminist theory" (Goodman 3). Goodman's view offers a literary equivalent to Lamprey's approach to ambivalence as a position vis-à-vis patriarchal dominance; combined their outlook opens a creative avenue to work with Muslim feminist ambivalence in literature to achieve wider political impact without resorting to hegemonic feminist certainty. In my reading, Kahf harnesses this creative potential of ambivalence in her writing when her plot lines address multiple audiences, that otherwise would not share political concerns, at the same time – for example, in her literary representation of veiling for her various Muslim audiences.⁸ Kahf is careful to avoid orientalist appropriation of her flexible attitude toward veiling in that she presents Khadra's personal conclusion as only one possible and not *the* only approach to veiling. Her overall narration of a Muslim girl's own experience and flexible attitudes toward wearing a hijab, however, also disputes the increasingly wide-spread view in political Islam of veiling as a required expression of faith and modesty for Muslim women. Khadra's reassertion that the Islamic requirement of modesty can also manifest itself in behavior without wearing a hijab (312) is thus a crucial complement to her own Muslim feminist embrace of veiling. The sum

⁸ This exceeds the scope of this article, but it would be interesting to further explore how Kahf's multiple address links her writing to the specific histories of Muslim Arab writing in the US at large. For example, one of the earliest texts by a Muslim Arabized African American writer, the slave narrative *The Life of Omar Said*, written in 1831 practices what Ala Alreyyes calls "double utterances" (22) to address potential Muslim readers as a separate reader community within a specific text that is otherwise geared to American audiences at large.

of Kahf's representational choices invites Muslim women with very different views on veiling, from traditional, religious to secular anti-veiling, into a dialogue without claiming one form of veiling as the right one.

23 On the flipside of the double bind, however, Kahf's prominent references to veiling throughout the novel, and especially her occasional framing of veiling as a "sexy" (183) practice, walk a tight line between challenging and catering to the potential orientalist imaginations of her audiences. The trope of sexy veiling harks back to the British and French colonial history where the fascination with the veil included both a desire to unveil Maghrebi women as well as maintaining the veil as part of Western erotic fantasies (Alloula). Kahf's decision to cite and employ the heavily orientalized discourses around veiling so prominently, could be read as counter-intuitive for a Muslim feminist cause⁹. 'The veil' appears in her title, on the book cover, and as a running metaphor and device of characterization throughout her plot lines. The publishers' choice to have a veiled woman on the cover places the marketing and promotion of the novel in the context of visual omni-presence of veiled, oppressed women on memoir covers, 'Muslim fiction' and in the news media (Ahmad). Even if *the girl's* cover image of a woman with a loosely clad orange scarf, dressed in Jeans and looking assertively into the camera deconstructs typical orientalist assumptions about passive, backwards and oppressed veiled women, literary ambivalence can cut both ways. Kahf's play with orientalist views of veiling and their colonial legacies may also end up confirming the tropes she seeks to subvert for some readers. Steven Salaita has identified this tension between Arab American literary self-representation and orientalist audience expectations as foundational to the whole genre (*Arab* 109), but to better understand the stakes of Kahf's Muslim feminist agency in this tension it can be useful to return to Khader's conceptions of adaptive preferences in a literary mode. As Christina Civantos has pointed out in her work auto-Orientalism, that is, Arab essentialisation of the self based on orientalist stereotypes (22), the use of orientalist terms may provide access to publication and audiences for Arab American authors. To some degree, Kahf's ambivalent references to hegemonic orientalist tropes could thus be read as a form of 'adaptive preference' to attract a wider readership, even

⁹ Arab American and Muslim feminists have grown weary of constantly having to discuss the long history and multiple uses of veiling, which actually contributes to silencing them and making other concerns invisible. English translations of veil or headscarf do not represent the variety of functions and approaches to this mode of dress within the Muslim communities and all its varying political, sexual, religious and social meanings that overlap and have multiple signifying functions (Jamarkani 153-4). For the histories of veiling see, for example, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender and Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* or Christina Von Braun, "The headscarf—An 'empty signifier'," in *The return of religion and other myths: a critical reader in contemporary art*. For the political implications of the excessive Western attention to veiling, see Leila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" or Nawar Al Hassan Golley, "Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?"

if the novel as a whole thoroughly deconstructs orientalist binaries.

24 With regard to her Muslim readers, Kahf's own literary agency also reflects some adaptive preferences that allow her novel to function within the accepted standards of a religiously inflected Muslim dating culture. For example, when it comes to issues of sexuality and marriage, the novel offers a notably less diverse panorama as opposed to its multiple representations of faiths and ethnicities. Kahf's makes a point to highlight sexual pleasure and to promote a positive view of Muslim women's sexuality, challenging stereotypes of Muslim women's victimhood, but the life choices of Khadra place sex within heterosexual marriage only. The novel includes extra-martial sex or homosexual desire on the very margins of her narrative, but the protagonist Khadra is careful not to endorse a 'Western'/liberal approach to flirtation, dating, and casual sex. Kahf highlights that it is Khadra herself that takes this decision as an adult and as part of finding her own position in between her heritage and her personal needs. At the same time, her explicit valuation of sexuality within marriage in the novel helps Kahf to maintain her own connection to more traditional Muslim identity conceptions while she challenges many other conservative expectations of proper Muslim womanhood in her writing. Just as Wail Hassan points out that Arab American authors often use orientalist terms as a means of "contesting the identity assigned by the dominant majority discourse while at the same time utilizing its sanctioned narrative procedures to enter into its regime of truth" (80), so does Kahf's adaptive preference for heteronormativity use this majority discourse to facilitate that Kahf's voice is, or can be, heard in her respective conservative audiences.

25 In conclusion, I would like to return to Kahf's representational choices around veiling, which in their entirety serve as a metaphorical guide to how a Muslim feminist agency can operate within multiple normative views of religion, while fighting the double bind and without obliterating multifaceted religious agency among women. In Khadra's character development veiling comes to be a mode of dress *and* of being that defies orientalist binaries via its holistic, circular, and process oriented approach when she concludes that: "veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary" (309). She reclaims the hijab as a positive symbol and a facilitator to cross the threshold between the marked division of domestic and public spaces in Muslim traditions, but never as an impediment to freedom of movement (112). Strategically and narratively, Kahf locates gender injustice in human interaction, but not in a piece of cloth or choice of dress. This unequivocally feminist stance challenges Western stereotypes and conservative Muslim views alike, but it maintains her self-defined approach to veiling as an important, religious practice

for Khadra – a connector to her culture and an armor against losing her Muslim identity, an “outer sign of inner quality she wants be reminded of” (425). Kahf’s view of Muslim feminist agency suggests a concrete vision for empowerment in self-defined spirituality, but it also maintains an expansive view of agency and openness to dialogue with non-progressive forms of agency that may improve women’s lives. Her literary feminist agency empowers her to claim a mediating position between various religious schools of thought, which always centers Muslim women’s voices and their varied claims to agency.

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Re/calling Scheherazad:

Voicing Agency in Mohja Kahf's Poetry

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Abstract:

In her collection of spoken word poetry entitled *Emails from Scheherazad*, Syrian American poet, Mohja Kahf, invokes the orality of Scheherazad's storytelling to voice her agency and dispel perceived silences about Muslim women. Kahf uses the role of storyteller to strengthen discussion of misunderstood subjects like violence, desire, passion, and sex, perceived as "off limits" to Muslim women. Conducting an autobiographical reading of Kahf's poetry, I assert that her writing comes from a personal place, infused with anecdotes from her own life experiences. In surveying Mohja Kahf's inclusion of the autobiographical voice in her poetry, it becomes clear the author pushes the boundary of the autobiographical 'I' to include additional voices and vantage points, such as the third person perspective, in the sphere of life writing. Whether cast in a classroom, a PTA meeting, or in the bathroom of Sears, Kahf's poetic subjects illuminate their simultaneous maneuvering of Muslim and Syrian traditions against an American backdrop. To read her poetry in a political light, Mohja Kahf's *Emails from Scheherazad* becomes a creative, autobiographical work that uses hybridity – both in genre and identity- to humanize American Muslims. This article, therefore, traces the motif of storytelling in *Emails from Scheherazad* to determine how in autobiographical poetics, the author rejects Islamophobic critics through reclaiming one's own story. Drawing on Arab American studies scholars like Steven Salaita, Leila Ahmed, Waïl Hassan, and Nouri Gana and fusing their criticisms with research conducted by autobiographical studies scholars like Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, and Nawar al-Hassan Golley, this article bridges gaps between Middle Eastern literary studies and autobiographical studies. In doing so, it illustrates the way in which Kahf challenges discriminatory attitudes against Muslims as she stitches American Muslims into the fabric of ethnic American literature.

1 In a video performance of her poem, entitled, "Fayetteville as in Fate", Syrian American writer, Mohja Kahf declares to her viewers that the way in which American Muslims and American Christians can understand one another is through the power of speech and the art of poetry. Seeking to resolve the problem of prejudice lodged at Muslims in America, the poet poses cross-cultural dialogue as a potential solution for fighting racism. In her video, an animated Mohja Kahf exclaims, "Darling, it is poetry/ Darling, I am a poet/ It is my fate/ like this, like this, to kiss/ the creases around the eyes and the eyes/ that they may recognize each other" (Kahf, *Emails* 7/ "Fayetteville"). Performing in her headscarf, Kahf shatters the 'Western' notion that all Muslim women (particularly those who are veiled) are silent victims by writing herself into an American literary landscape with her own style of poetics. In the autobiographical poem, she speaks about how she has recently moved to Arkansas as an associate professor of English and

Comparative Literature at the University of Arkansas: Fayetteville, using the poetic 'I' to signal her autobiographical voice. Fluctuating in tones, shouting enthusiastically, and sing-songing her way through the poem, the poet creates a more positive space for Muslim and Arab Americans in the presumably xenophobic Fayetteville. Though "Fayetteville as in Fate" was first published in 1995, it is certainly more prevalent today after 9/11, perhaps explaining why it was made into a video and uploaded to YouTube for global viewership in 2009. The poetic video offers an alternative medium to print, presenting the gestures and tonal variations to the reader, in this case, the author delivers and demonstrates the politics of her poem. Kahf showcases her poem by using her persona as the poem's author to aid the delivery of her work's message. With the advancements of technology and the expansion of new media, the autobiographical 'I' humanizes Muslims while being digitally transmitted at a rapid rate.

2 To bridge the gap between white Americans, Arab Americans, non-Muslims, and Muslims, Kahf urges her readers to speak about their similarities and differences repeatedly commanding her audience: "say it, say it." By emphasizing speech as a means for cultural conflict resolution, Kahf shatters the illusion that Muslim women are unable to speak for themselves. This is further reinforced by the title of her poetic collection in which "Fayetteville as in Fate" is housed: *E-Mails From Scheherazad*, which heralded the author's arrival as an Arab American poet in 2003. Unlike monolithic stereotypes depicting the silencing of Muslim women, Kahf depicts fiery and assertive female subjects throughout her spoken-word poetry. Introducing her poetry through the reclaimed identity of Scheherazad, Kahf aptly invokes the power and force behind a literary feminist figure, who saves her court from the misguided jealousy of the tyrannical King Shahriyar in the infamous *One Thousand and One Nights* (restyled as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment* in initial English interpretations).¹ Through the storytelling power of Scheherazad (a savior figure who weaves tale after tale over a thousand and one nights to wizen her king and spouse), Kahf replaces the orientalist depictions of Muslim women as co-dependent objects with more nuanced images of Muslim women who are subjects, capable of asserting their agency. Through the language of poetry, Kahf does not just encourage Muslims, Christians, and Arabs to understand one another, but she also suggests that all Americans should

¹ Antoine Galland, Edward Lane, and Richard Burton were the first orientalists to translate *The Thousand and One Nights*. Their translations, however, are more like interpretations as they loosely adhere to linguistic constructions and plotlines. For a greater discussion about how orientalist scholars repackaged the stories for Western European consumption, see Fatema Mernissi and Eva Sallis' assessments in their respective works discussed in this study.

engage in cross-cultural understanding. Through the power of speech, Kahf advocates the written and spoken word as resistance literature – a vehicle capable of transporting all Americans (of diverse backgrounds) to a place of mutual understanding.

3 Using “Fayetteville as in Fate” as an introductory example, it is not surprising that in her poetry, there is much at stake for Kahf, who, as an Arab and Muslim American writer and professor, actively destabilizes the Western notion of Muslim women’s victimhood. While her writing can be read as simultaneous personal and political, it is also feminist as she invokes Scheherazad to voice agency. In doing so, she confronts stereotypes having to do with the wearing of hijab or the invisibility of women, turning them on their head to reveal the inherent racism of those perceiving Muslims as Other. Keeping in mind autobiographical knowledge about Mohja Kahf’s life, her birth in Syria, and subsequent immigration to the US, the fifty-two poems that comprise *Emails from Scheherazad* become even more impactful. Mohja Kahf, who was born in Damascus, Syria, in 1967, moved with her family to the United States in 1971 to escape the Syrian government’s backlash toward those opposed to its politics. She moved to Utah when she was four, then to Indiana, until she was in the tenth grade. After that, she moved to New Jersey and completed her Ph.D. at Rutgers University. Not able to travel back to Syria because of her family’s political opposition, and her husband Najib Ghadbian’s active participation in opposition to the Syrian regime, she has spent time in other parts of the Middle East, with a few brief stints in Iraq as a teenager in 1984, Saudi Arabia as an exchange student in college, and, after moving to Fayetteville, Arkansas, as a professor, she has regularly visited the United Arab Emirates with her husband during the summers (Drake). All of these cultural contexts and locations appear in her collection of poetry, *E-mails from Scheherazad* and her greater body of fiction. By crafting poems that discuss identity politics as they move between the Middle East and the Mid-West, Kahf creates a unique set of poems that presents hybridity for the American Muslims who discuss their religious practice against an American backdrop. Though she includes many poetic speakers, she is able to successfully create texts that move between her life experiences and identity politics, ones that resist victimizing Muslim women.

4 Many research points of interest intersect in her poetry, namely questions having to do with reading her poetry autobiographically, while also investigating the figure of Scheherazad as a feminist motif to voice one’s agency and break down ethno-religious and gender barriers. Firstly, in reading her poetry as an autobiographical act, it can transcend aesthetics to become a mode of expression bearing witness. Through poetic form, Kahf creates resistance literature that

sheds light on identity politics that Middle Eastern women face while moving in-between homeland and elsewhere. A central question for this study ponders: how is poetry used as a hybrid mode of self-expression and tool for offering testimony, particularly from an intersectional identity fusing gender, culture, and religion? When surveying Kahf's inclusion of the autobiographical voice in her poetry, the author pushes the boundary of the autobiographical 'I' to also include varying voices and vantage points, such as the third person perspective, in the sphere of life writing. Ultimately, the poems of *Emails from Scheherazad* creatively fuse life writing and poetic form to birth hybridity – not just in terms of genre, but also with respect to identity as Muslims are humanized as Americans, too. Whether cast in a classroom, a PTA meeting, or the bathroom at Sears, Kahf's poetic subjects illuminate their simultaneous maneuvering of Muslim and Syrian traditions against an American backdrop. Secondly, by tracing her invocation of Scheherazad throughout her poetry, I argue that Kahf both reclaims the literary figure and recalls the power of the storyteller in each poem. By introducing her work as a series of emails from Scheherazad, which is a creative byproduct of emails exchanged in an email salon between Kahf and other 'marvelous women' beginning in 1995, Kahf foregrounds both herself and the poetic 'I' as the ultimate storyteller, who weaves tales of politics, homeland, exile, return, love, violence, religion, and the self in beautifully crafted poetic works (Kahf, *E-mails* acknowledgements). It is at this juncture between the genre of autobiography and the poetic form that I am most interested – a crossroads wherein the author recasts herself as the ultimate female, Middle Eastern storyteller, providing the reader (a stand-in for King Shahriyar) with the opportunity to confront ignorance through the morality-tales included in her poetry. Ultimately, in doing so, Kahf weaves compelling and humanizing stories about American Muslims into the fabric of ethnic American literature, adding to the rich, literary tapestry depicting diverse lives in the U.S.

Autobiographical Poetics: Intersections of life writing and poetry

5 Within the larger context of Muslim women's autobiographical narratives, it is important to differentiate the productivity of Kahf's work from the sensationalist attitudes of other Middle Eastern women writers producing material at the time of publication in 2003. Perhaps because of the increasing anti-Muslim sentiments since 9/11, some Muslim and Middle Eastern memoirists, such as Azar Nafisi, Latifah, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and hoaxers like Norma Khouri and Souad have published life narratives more congruent with Euro-American perspectives and policies

concerning Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) nations. They demonize Islam and the customs of their home countries by gazing at themselves through a ‘Western’ lens and worldview. With titles like *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), *Forbidden Love/Honor Lost* (2003), *Marriage by Force* (2004), *In the Name of Honor* (2006), and *Infidel* (2006), to name a few, anxiety about Islam manifests since the writers stereotypically cast Muslim men as violent and oppressive, and Muslim women as silent and oppressed. In these narratives, the female Muslim subject is almost always portrayed as a victim, incapable of asserting her agency without the assistance of a European or American figure featured prominently in the narrative. Unquestioningly supportive of European or U.S. foreign policy, these works gaze at their respective MENA cultures from a historically western standpoint; they are neo-orientalists reviving the orientalist gaze. While, initially, the publication of Middle Eastern and Muslim women’s life narratives allow many women to voice their experiences in pursuit of self-discovery, when sensationalized, some of these “escapee or victim narratives”, as Mohja Kahf calls them, can serve as imperialist propaganda justifying militaristic conquest and expansion (Gana 1578). Gillian Whitlock points out that since 9/11, the demand for nonfiction, “particularly books which perpetuate negative stereotypes about Islamic men” resulted in bestsellers, since American readers were anxious to learn about the dangerous ethnic other (Whitlock 111). Similarly, Steven Salaita asserts that the growing desire for Arab American works became “too much in demand for its own good” (*Modern Arab* 4). The success of Middle Eastern women’s autobiographical narratives have signaled the so-called center’s need for access to ‘exotic cultures’ in the margins, in this case, reflecting America and Europe’s needs to reaffirm the ‘Third World’ Muslim woman’s native authenticity as part of an imperial project.

6 Standing apart from these sensationalist writers, however, is Mohja Kahf, who is a culturally conscious writer who critically engages national and transnational politics, especially pertaining to feminism and Islam. In her work, Kahf effectively creates a new vocabulary and discourse to express her position as a Muslim-Syrian-American-feminist-academic in a changing post-9/11 America. Perhaps, this is why Mohja Kahf’s writing is so important, not only at the time of publication during the anti-Muslim sentiments surging after 9/11, but again today in 2017, during a Trumpian era full of executive orders and Muslim bans.² The global resurgence of

² Following the inauguration of President Donald Trump, the American president issued Executive Order 13769 on January 27, 2017, which temporarily suspended entry of refugees, travelers, and green card holders from initially seven MENA nations: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen for 90 days (120 days for most refugees appealing to the United States Refugee Admissions Program, US EO 13769). This order was immediately challenged

fascism and anti-Semitic rhetoric and politics adds urgency to Kahf's poetry, which grants her the opportunity to bear witness and speak her truth. Life writing scholars, such as Nawar Al-Hassan Golley and Gillian Whitlock, agree that in producing autobiographical material, Middle Eastern women writers are able to merge the private and domestic space with the public sector, in which they use writing and publishing as a means of coping with the events of their lives, such as childbirth, immigration, abandonment, displacement, and cultural trauma. Golley more specifically asserts in *Arab Women's Lives Retold* that in the study of Middle Eastern women's autobiographies, issues of postcolonialism, nationalism, feminism, transnationalism, political activism, and subjectivity converge in the discussion of Arab women's writing (xxvii).

7 Middle Eastern women life writers fashion their own images of the self through the retelling of their lives, thus using their voice as a creative agent of expression. This is especially critical, since as miriam cooke points out, "Arab women were thought not to write" (Golley, *Arab Women's* xv). With respect to the autobiographical articulations of decolonized and othered subjects, Chandra Mohanty, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson similarly agree that the marginalized are not merely objects of the colonizers or imperial oppressors, but are "agents of a conflicted history, inhabiting and transforming a complex social and cultural world" (Mohanty 77, Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography* xx). By writing revisionist histories and alternative testimonies, autobiographical subjects can assert agency through the writing of the self (xx). Through the act of writing, Middle Eastern women are able to question established customs and resist patriarchal limitations, while also creating anti-imperialist solidarities (Golley, *Arab Women's* xxvii). In so doing, Steven Salaita notes that ethnic American writers have the ability to challenge American hegemony through the power of the text (*Anti-Arab Racism* 147).

8 It is precisely this intersection between autobiography and poetry that has fascinated autobiographical studies scholars and literary critics alike, since many of the discussions and arguments concerning women writers reach the same conclusion: ultimately, this crossroads allows for feminist subversion of patriarchy and the assertion of agency. In Carol Muske's seminal work about *Women and Poetry*, the author invokes a question posed by Muriel Rukeyser:

and an amended version, Executive Order 13780, was introduced on March 6, 2017, which removed Iraq from the restricted list, however deeming it necessary for "additional scrutiny" in case there is a connection with terrorist organizations (US EO 13780). Though denied as a 'Muslim ban,' because the executive orders target predominately Muslim nations and give advantage to non-Muslim religious minorities applying to USRAP, one could argue, as the State of Hawaii has in its civil suit against Trump that it violates the First and Fifth Amendments of the Constitution in its religious discrimination against Muslims and its violation of the Equal Protection and Procedural Due Process clauses (*US Hawaii vs. Trump*)

“What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open” (Muske 2). Jo Gill and Melanie Waters similarly ask in *Poetry and Autobiography*, “Does widening the term ‘autobiography’ to create a larger, more inclusive field of ‘life writing’ as has been common and useful of late, bring poetry within the same fold as conventional (prose) forms or does it leave poetry still marginalized, still pushed to the edge of an otherwise-expanding practice?” (Gill and Waters 1). These questions all seek to determine the relationship between poetry and autobiography, ultimately exploring various modes of expression rooted in the *self* – as opposed to the role of *other*, in which women, especially Muslim women, are often cast.

9 It is an interesting discussion considering that Philippe Lejeune asserts that poetry cannot express life writing since the definition of autobiography is “a retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of his personality” (Gill and Waters 2). James Olney provides a contrasting perspective, stating, “Poetry, like psychology and philosophy, is about life, not about part of it but potentially about all of it. The truth that poetry embodies ...is a whole truth” (Schenck 287). In *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Olney further adds, “When the autobiographer thinks of himself or herself as a writer and would put down “writer” (or “poet,” “novelist,” or “playwright”) when asked for a profession, the tendency is to produce autobiography in various guises and disguises in every work...” (Olney 236). In his seminal article, “Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Bios: The Ontology of Autobiography,” Olney defines poetic autobiography as that which struggles with memory. For Olney, the autobiographical markers of lyric poetry struggle with this work of memory, which differentiates it from lyric poetry in general (240). This adds an interesting layer to the discussion as the act of remembering, particularly by the narrating ‘I’ who crafts the narrated ‘I’ coming through in the autobiographical poem (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 72).³ The potential autobiographical elements of a poem become more critical as the reader considers the potentially marginalized identity of the author penning her poem.

10 Unconscious and conscious come together to create works that could simultaneously be personal, yet devoid of any biographical markers. This is particularly interesting considering expectations of ‘truth-telling’ in autobiographical writing. Muske asserts that for women who are often considered as other, the poetic form can allow women to bear witness and assert the self

³ I am using Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s terms: the narrating ‘I’ is the one producing the narrative, while the narrated ‘I’ is that which comes through after narration has concluded (72). What is interesting to note here is the way in which the writer of autobiographical material is engaging in the act of remembering to recreate and narrate life story.

through poetry, yet at the same time, they can fictionalize and use creativity to write around socially-constructed confines. For example, she states “[t]he desire for a historical self and the desire for a ‘true telling self,’ or ‘real self,’ merge into a single drama, it a dramatic voice” (Muske 4). Poetry often looks to share smaller truths as opposed to grand Truths supporting master narratives. In reference to this truth, Alex Goody adds, “[t]he conjunction of autobiography and poetry becomes important: the action of a poem has its own truth, its own shape, distance and duration, which, through the structures of sound and language, return the poem to itself.” (Goody 61). Breaking from traditional autobiography, the poetic form offers an alternative truth as it communicates new meaning via the poem’s overall message, rather than emphasizing life events through prose. Perhaps, it is helpful to think of a poem as more than just a mode of reading and writing, but also as an ‘act’ or action, granting the author license and creativity to showcase life truths, rather than represent them exactly (Muske 17). In *Reading Arab Women’s Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story*, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley notes the formal hybridity of autobiography as it “exists somewhere on the line between fictitious narrative and historical truth” (Golley 59).⁴ Recent scholarship in life writing studies seeks to push the boundaries of the genre, as well as to expand the way in which form can express the autobiographical. As a result, women, particularly those who are marginalized with intersectional identities, are able to use the vehicle of poetry to create new meaning from life experience.

Reviving Scheherazad: Storytelling as an Act of Agency

11 As a Muslim, Syrian American woman writer, Kahf diversifies the Arab Christian voices that have primarily made up Arab American literature in previous decades.⁵ At the same time, she invokes the infamous Scheherazad to frame her collected poetic works, so that Muslim and Christian Arab readers alike will identify with the timeless figure. She has reawakened

⁴ As Golley also notes, long before her assertions, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Paul de Man have all separated the textual ‘I’ from the authorial ‘I’ as part of a deconstructionist approach to discussing autobiographical writing (*Reading Arab* 59). In other words, the text does not need to reflect autobiographical facts, but rather, there is room for fiction that can separate the autobiographical “I” from the “I” of the writer, as Sidonie Smith also notes in *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography*.

⁵ The absence of Arab Muslim voices in early Arab American literature is attributed to the fact that the first wave of Maronite Arabs immigrating to the U.S. began long before the Muslims, in the late 19th century. This first wave of Arab immigrants to the U.S. triggered the beginning of a more than century-long immigration for Christian Arabs, an immigration which had not been matched by Muslim Arab immigrants and refugees until after the 1948 creation of Israel, the Lebanese Civil War raging between the 1960s and 70s, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, and the 2004 Iraqi invasion (Gana 1574). Their immigration in comparison is much more recent, and the representation of Muslim Arab American writers in ethnic-American literature has exponentially increased during the last decade.

Scheherazad, but she updates her image, offering up a bolder speaker in the eponymous poem, “E-mail from Scheherazad” (2000), stating: “Hi, babe. It's Scheherazad. I'm back/ For the millennium and living in Hackensack,/ New Jersey. I tell stories for a living.” (Kahf 43, lines 1-3). The poem offers a more contemporary rendering of Scheherazad, a woman who returns to the new millennium after divorcing King Shahriyar in order to tell stories and teach writing workshops in New Jersey and the U.S. Through her poetic speaker, Scheherazad, Kahf notes the power of storytelling, “That story led to story. Powers unleashed, I wound/ The thread around the purn of night. A thousand days/ Later, we got divorced. He'd settled down” (lines 10-12). Employing imagery denoted by ‘wound’, ‘thread’, and ‘purn’, Kahf analogizes storytelling to weaving, noting its “unleashed” power that embeds story within story. That power is invoked in the creativity and authority used in the act of storytelling, since the poetic ‘I’ identifies herself as the agent and doer of various actions: teaching, storytelling, publishing, touring, healing, and saving virgins from beheadings. Kahf’s image of Scheherazad is simultaneously legendary and contemporary as she is actively engaged in an intellectual life with independence.

12 The legacy of Scheherazad, heroine and storyteller, is not just important to Kahf, but to scholars like Fatema Mernissi, Eva Sallis, Suzanne Gauch, and Nawar Al-Hassan Golley who desire to see the figure celebrated for her intellect and wit, not her aesthetics. For instance, in *Scheherazade Goes West*, Mernissi discusses Scheherazad as an intelligent force, whose independent nature European translations have obscured to match the era’s stylistic preferences (Mernissi 68). Mernissi reports, “Strangely enough, the intellectual Scheherazad was lost in all these translations, apparently because the Westerners were interested in only two things: adventure and sex. And the latter was expressed only in a bizarrely restricted form confined to the language of the female body” (62). Sallis agrees with Mernissi in *Sheherazade Through the Looking Glass*, noting that in European depictions of Scheherazad, she is often penalized for her power and described in Victorian terms of “courage, wit, and penetration infinitely above her sex” (Sallis 100). Adding to this notion, Gauch points out that European rivalry with Ottoman power, in particular, prompted an objectification of Scheherazad that reduced her to nothing more than an odalisque-type seductress (Gauch xi). In her version of Scheherazad, Kahf draws from the autobiographical persona of the academic scholar and restores intelligence to the storyteller who is often stripped down to her aesthetics and sexuality. Scheherazad is therefore capable of transforming and empowering through the art of storytelling. She’s a paradigm for women writers, since as Golley notes, “when a woman writes her own story down on paper or tells it to

others, she is asserting her autonomy by ordering her life into a composition and to that extent moving toward feminist consciousness, though” (*Reading Arab* 81). By embodying the role of Scheherazad throughout her collection of poetry, Kahf reminds the reader that she is simultaneously the narrating ‘I’ and “narrated ‘I’, even if the poem is not a literal retelling of Kahf’s life.

13 The extraordinary power of Scheherazad transitions from belonging to an independent academic to a truth-bearing enchantress in the poem immediately following “E-mail from Scheherazad” entitled, “So You think you know Scheherazad” (2000). In the poem, Kahf discusses the awesome power of the storyteller and truth-bringer, who allows the reader to catch a mirrored glance into their own souls and discover something deeper about themselves. Kahf opens her poem, addressing the reader with an accusatory tone in the second person, “So you think she tells you bedtime stories/ that will please and soothe,/ invents fairy creatures/ who will grant you wishes/ Scheherazad invents nothing/ Scheherazad awakens/ the demons under your bed” (44, lines 1-7). This poem offers a very different Scheherazad, one who ‘awakens’, ‘locks’, and ‘unleashes’ the truths within (lines 6, 9, 18). Although, the poem uses the second person perspective, I find this poem to be one of her most autobiographical since it establishes Kahf’s role throughout the series: the ultimate storyteller who helps the reader confront their inner values, hypocrisies, and perhaps ignorance, particularly concerning Muslim women. This is the invocation of Scheherazad the healer and teacher who exposes ‘demons’ and ‘terrors hidden within’ (lines 18-19). After running from Scheherazad, the reader identified through the second person ‘you’ runs through a series of corridors and rooms to escape the demons she unleashes. The imagery of corridors leading to corridors and “the room within a room within a room within a room” compounds the tension of searching for one’s identity. What is significant about the sequence of rooms is that they immediately recall the frame narrative structure of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which weaves story within story to overcome King Shahriyar’s ignorance with Scheherazad’s morality tales (Sallis 94). Likewise, Kahf, recast as the storytelling Scheherazad, uses her spoken-word poetry to help readers uncover truths and confront their own ignorance. As a motif, the role of storyteller is important for the poetess to establish herself as an agent of her own life writing.

Refusing Invisibility: Recuperating the Hijab and Dislocating Muslim Women's Victimhood

14 As part of this literary transformation into Scheherazad, Kahf uses her pen to slay the stereotypes constantly lodged at her fellow Muslims. Her motivation for writing, in fact, stems from her conviction and belief in Islamic values. In an interview with *Islamica Magazine*, Kahf states:

In my upbringing, the foremost factor in bringing me to my voice was religion, and the religion of Islam as manifested in my family had a modern, political Islamist orientation. Whether I agree or disagree with that worldview today, I am dismayed that it is being painted as terroristic, not only in Western media, but by secular Arabs, Arab feminists, and others who consider themselves as 'progressive.' These progressives are often extremists themselves, favoring undemocratic secular rule over democracy that gives room to Islamists, whom they see as the apocalypse. (Kahf, *Islamica Magazine* 1)

In her poetry, Kahf often creates a feminist Muslim figure who is strong and assertive; it is an image that is antithetical to the scores of Muslim women's autobiographies published in the Global North, which usually demonize Muslim men and victimize Muslim women. Kahf resists monolithic assumptions about Arab women and attitudes that reject Islam in order to reflect a feminist and progressive sensibility. In particular, she offers her work as an alternative to the works of celebrated MENA feminists such as Fatema Mernissi and Nawal El Saadawi, who are more critical of Islam (*Islamica Magazine* 1). Instead, Kahf creates a space in her text that allows for a contemporary and empowering, but still strict practice of Islam. In order to humanize Muslims in America, Kahf writes against antiquated and recycled images about Muslims, countering widely accepted racist views. This seems to be the vehicle and motivation for her poetic critiques, wherein she attempts to create a space for contemporary American Muslims who must contend with the hostilities of a post-9/11 America. Not only does she diminish impoverished views about Muslims in America, but she also shines a spotlight on her own culture and religion, aiming to, as she says, "manifest traditions, but critique them too" (*Islamic Magazine* 1).

15 In addition to her poems about Scheherazad, her hijab scene series recast Muslim women in positions of power. In her poem "Hijab Scene #3", Kahf discusses the perception of veiling in the United States, stating: "Would you like to join the PTA?" she asked/ tapping her clipboard with her pen./ "I would," I said, but it was no good,/ she wasn't seeing me.../ A regular American

mother next to me/ Shrugged and shook her head.../ “Dammit, Jim, I’m a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!”/—but the positronic force field of hijab/ jammed all her cosmic coordinates” (*E-mails* 25). In her poem, Kahf elucidates the negative view of Islamic veiling in America, signaling its perceived opposition to a mainstream, pop-cultural American identity with markers like ‘PTA’ and ‘regular American’, which also includes a sci-fi reference to *Star Trek* via Captain James ‘Jim’ Kirk and the enemy race of the Klingons. Kahf underscores a hijab-wearing Muslim woman’s assumed difference from non-Muslim Americans, oscillating between her invisibility as a participatory member of the PTA and her visibility as a threatening, ethnic ‘other,’ not unlike a Klingon. In this instance, hijab becomes more than just a symbol of religious devotion, but a paradoxically visible/invisible barrier surrounding the wearer. The poet’s use of science fiction imagery aptly troubles the ‘alien’ status often lodged at immigrants. Additionally, the poet explores misperceptions about the veil, comparing the veil to a ‘force field’ capable of ‘jamming’ and disabling her ability to interact and communicate with others. In witty, free-flowing poetry, Kahf discusses the perceived limitations of the veil in American society, problematizing its stigmatization, before offering solutions for interfaith dialogue in her other poems. This is not the first time that Mohja Kahf personifies the veil and attributes to it transformative powers in her body of work. Perhaps, this is also why she includes a sketch of herself while wearing the veil on the author’s note in the paratext. Her attention to hijab is personal, thereby signaling her inclusion in multiple groups fusing together as American Muslim.

16 Rather than dismiss the body or present Islamic veiling as a form of hiding the body, Kahf presents the body as a central space for feminine existence, instead drawing attention to how veiling enhances presence of self and liberation from objectification as part of asserting women’s agency. The normative narrative in Western European and American discourses tend to dictate that dress, especially religious dress hailing from orthodox Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities, seek to control the female subject and her body. According to Meyda Yegenoglu in “Inscribing the Other Body”, European feminist scholars and philosophers alike draw on Enlightenment philosophies to regulate the body and argue that when it is unveiled, it is in its natural state, and to do otherwise is to subjugate the free individual with irrationalism (62). Many second wave feminists and non-Muslim, Euro-American feminists have used theory to argue that dress is an apparatus for social control, usually equating veiling with suffocation, and unveiling with emancipation. Rightfully so, feminist scholar Christina Ho has dubbed such scholars as “Orientalist feminists”, since many Western feminists have called for the liberation of Muslim

women (without consulting them) from the perceived barbarism of their cultures, homes, and nations (Ho 433). Women's bodies – and the veil by proxy – have been the battlegrounds on which many Euro-American powers have waged imperial campaigns. They use the question of women and the 'liberation' of veiled, Muslim women to intervene in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. This discourse perfectly falls in line with Western criticisms of the veil, which often cite scholars such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu to justify critiques about clothing originating from supposedly oppressive cultures.⁶ It is interesting to note that alternatively, Yegenoglu notes that Foucault's assessments about marking and stamping the body through social construction can also suggest that to unveil the body is to also mark it by a social practice that distinguishes it from the veiled body. This suggests a "materiality, for questions regarding the differences between bodies can only be meaningfully asked if the corporeality of bodies is no longer seen as a biological, natural and neutral, but always as a product" (63). Ultimately, Yegenoglu asserts that while many arguments claim that the veil is a cultural practice, so too is the act of unveiling a marker of a specific cultural practice informed by European liberalism (64).

17 Kahf on the other hand, argues in her work the opposite; examining what veiling can achieve for women – not as religious mandate or social pressure – but as a lifestyle choice to express one's faith. In a post-9/11 world, the veil is often vilified and identified as the most striking symbolic marker for Muslims, and it is not surprising that it appears as a reoccurring motif in Kahf's poetry. Through her writing, the author establishes a new Muslim identity, wherein the veil, amongst other Islamic dress, is just an outward expression of faith, and not a pejorative mascot for otherness or foreignness. About the veil, Kahf notes, "There is something deep down beautiful and dignified about it. It has brought some beautiful and joyous dimensions to my life that always amaze me" (Abdelrazek 97). In her hijab scene poems, for instance, she celebrates the veil as liberating, while rejecting the racism and objectification lodged against Muslim women in America, whose oppression is always represented by the *menacing* veil. Though her "*Hijab Scenes*" were written in 1992, they touch on the timeless critiques against the

⁶ For example, following Michel Foucault's writings on the body in the 1970s, many studies asserted that the body was governed by political systems, which insisted on managing the body in social interaction as an apparatus of its control (Arthur 2). To quote Pierre Bourdieu, "the social determinations attached to a determinate position in the social space tend, through relationship to one's own body, to shape the dispositions constituting social identity" (Bourdieu 71). For Bourdieu, the body can be influenced by the social forces around it. With respect to dress, the body is especially vulnerable to the choice in dress as the meanings given to alternative styles of clothing are determinant of social, cultural and religious significations linking fashion to other social fields (Arthur 2). But many non-Muslim scholars are using this theory to claim injustices against veiling Muslim women. It is not their choice that they are veiling, but a consequence of their socially constructed sphere. This ideology is not only ignorant, but inaccurate; denying gender-neutral spaces that some veiling societies have created in the workplace and education.

veil that date back to colonialism and resurge today, particularly after heightened Islamophobia. Through her first two hijab-scene poems, Kahf undermines the notion that the veil must exclusively constitute otherness or restrictiveness, as the appearance or clothing of other Americans may also be considered just as confining. In her short “*Hijab Scene #1*” (1992), she depicts the moment in which two aesthetically-different Americans come into contact and evaluate each other, stating, “You dress strange,” said a tenth-grade boy with bright blue hair/ to the new Muslim girl with the headscarf in homeroom,/ his tongue-ring clicking on the ‘tr’ in “strange” (*E-mails* 41, lines 1-3). There is dramatic irony in the poem wherein the boy with the blue hair and tongue rings is oblivious to his own unconventional appearance, which does not represent a mainstream American identity. Kahf ironizes the teenager’s treatment of the Muslim girl who wears the hijab in homeroom. The alliteration between ‘headscarf’ and ‘homeroom’ not only link Muslim with American identities together, but they also recall ‘home’ for the girl who lives in America. Similarly, in “*Hijab Scene #2*” (1992), Kahf targets women’s clothing in her dialogue between a non-Muslim American woman and a Muslim American woman, writing, “You people have such restrictive dress for women,”/ she said, hobbling away in three-inch heels and panty hose/ to finish out another pink-collar temp pool day” (*Emails* 42, lines 1-3). In both poems, Kahf demonstrates that American identity is not singular or monolithic in any way, which begs the question: why continue to exclude Muslims from it? As Samaa Abdurraqib notes, both poems “place expressions of Muslim identity in juxtaposition with expressions of American identity” (Abdurraqib 68). These poems both show the ways in which the representatives of non-Muslim American identity are limited in some way. While the American figures in both perceive the Muslim woman’s hijab as ‘strange’ or ‘restrictive’, as Abdurraqib points out, the boy’s speech is impaired by his tongue ring, while the heels and panty hose hinder the woman’s ability to walk. In the second poem, the veil is seen as liberating, not restricting the movements of the wearer in the way that the temp-pooling hobbling woman experiences. Moreover, the limited social mobility of the accuser exclaiming “you people” is evident in the fact that she is working yet another “pink-collar temp pool day”, which not only suggests the temporary status of her employment, but also recalls sexist issues like the the wage gap, glass ceiling, and glass escalator reserved for women in the workplace. Kahf calls attention to how non-American Muslims are oblivious about the notion that their appearance, habits, and life styles can seem just as constricting to others as the hijab seems to them. She illustrates that veiling is no different than other modes of dress and they need only serve as personal expression, rather than cultural

markers of confinement. In this way, she attempts to carve out a space for American Muslim women, pushing for an environment that does not stigmatize the veil.

18 Contrary to Western feminist and colonialist beliefs, the veil does not oppress women; rather, the confines of a patriarchal society that seeks to reduce the condition of women to either the eradication or implementation of the veil limits the mobility of women. In her essay entitled “Under Western Eyes”, Chandra Mohanty critiques representations of the veil as a “unilateral” institution of oppression, questioning the generalizations of the Western feminist perspective that condemns the act of veiling as a “control” over women or a “universal” symbol of “backwardness” (Mohanty 56). She condemns Western feminism and subsequent writings about Third World women for portraying the average ‘Third World’ woman as leading an “essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)” (56). That is, just as colonialist men use(d) a binary equating unveiled women with being educated and modern, and veiled women with being uneducated and backward, Western feminism has also universally reduced veiling discourse to a binary of oppression and liberation within Muslim communities. In response to stereotypes about the veil, Kahf offers an alternative assessment recognizing that the social context of veiling matters: “the surrounding context can make it oppressive...where observing *hijab* includes the practice of separating women from the resources of society including education, mosques, sources of religious and spiritual guidance...[*hijab*] develops oppressive qualities” (Abdelrazek 97).

19 Within her poetry, Kahf often appropriates negative images or misperceptions about Islam and rejects them, before refashioning them to recuperate Islamic values that are not dissimilar to Christian ones. Additionally, it is also evident when she uses violent imagery to express the power of her intellect and ability to break through metaphorical barriers and silences (including what she calls Syrian silences within a literary context. Kahf, *Silences* 230). In the special edition *Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)* about Arab American literature, Catherine Wagner asserts that Kahf’s poetry “riskily uses violence as a figure for a powerful force in American society” (Wagner 236). In using the word ‘riskily’, Wagner points to the hostilities aimed at Muslims after 9/11, which unequivocally associate Islam with terrorism. Yet, I would not consider Kahf’s use of violent imagery as necessarily risky, but assertive and powerful, as it undermines the negative stereotypes so often equated with Middle Easterners and Muslims. Instead, Kahf’s use of violent imagery in her

poetry is an inversion of prejudicial views, the first of a series, which thread her poems together. For example, considering her poem, “*Hijab Scene #7*” (1995), Kahf creates poetry that counters American oppression with linguistic aggression. In her poem, she challenges ignorance about Muslims in America, rejecting stereotypes, while affirming her simultaneous Americanness. She uses a defensive and emphatic tone to denounce negative stereotypes that non-Muslims possess about Muslims. She begins the poem with a series of rejections repeated through ‘No’, which is in answer to unspoken questions that presumably lump all Muslims together as un-American: “No, I’m not bald under the scarf/ No, I’m not from that country where women can’t drive cars/ No, I would not like to defect” (*E-mails* 39, lines 1-3). The repetition of ‘No’ consistently rejects established beliefs that demonize Muslims. In terms of identity politics, the poetic narrator proclaims, “I’m already American”, indicating that she is simultaneously Muslim and American, thereby paving the way for a new hybrid identity that does not need to pit Muslims and Americans against one another. Rather, Kahf poses a way forward via identity fusion that brings Muslim and American together in a way that can bridge gaps and heal rifts. As Amal Talaat Abdelrazek notes in *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings*, hybridity in Kahf’s offers “another way to resist essentialized identity politics...breaking down the center/margin dichotomy, and opening up spaces between the center and margins” (69). She continues to challenge the unnamed interlocutor (who is unworthy of corporeal representation in the poem) with her question: “What else do you need to know”, thereby, reflecting independence stereotypically not attributed to Muslim women. What is more, through additional acts of opening up a bank account, buying insurance, and reserving a seat on a flight, Kahf paints the portrait of everyday activities performed everywhere in the world, also depicting Muslims as ordinary as other Americans. In this way, Kahf’s writing is tied to the diaspora, rather than rooted in homeland. From this new space, wherein both Kahf and the poetic speaker exist in liminality, neither here nor there, she can forge new works from a fluid, tertiary space that refuses closure. Cultural production from the in-between space of the diaspora can act as a mode of resistance that creates new meaning about identity that in this case, fuses Muslim and American identities together.

20 In contrast to her earlier rejections of stereotypes about Islam, Kahf marks the tonal shift in her poem with a series of affirmations repeated in ‘Yes’, which speaks to the potential power that Muslim women can assert. For her, language is powerful and able to explode through racial barriers, when the poetic speaker states, “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" (*E-mails* 39, lines 11-16). She recuperates violent imagery as a metaphor to embody the power of her words and to assign agency to those breaking through the silences. She mocks and subverts the association with violence that many link with Muslims. In so doing, she captures in poetic form, a complex image for many Muslim Arab American women, who are strong, assertive and simultaneously Muslim and American. Ultimately, by grafting violent imagery onto a discussion about language, Kahf complicates the homogenous view of the victimized Muslim woman by demonstrating her ability to assert herself and speak. The power of speech is therefore capable of combating racism against Muslims. Just like in her poetic video "Fayetteville as in Fate", Kahf relies on speech to create a bridge for cross-cultural understanding, particularly during times when Islamophobia resurges with the repugnance of racism.

21 Ultimately, through *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Kahf complicates accepted misperceptions about Muslim women in the U.S. By reclaiming the power of the storyteller, Scheherazad, she explodes through the homogenous and monolithic images of silent, oppressed Muslim women. The spectrum of poetic depictions, ranging from PTA mother to infamous storyteller, depicts each Muslim subject uniquely, already challenging the notion of a monolithic representation of Muslim women from a more flexible and fluid position in the diaspora. Following 9/11, the message is even more important, as Muslims are increasingly targeted for their difference from the American Christian majority. Yet, what Kahf points out is that these identities are not at odds and that the power to speak, share, and listen can help bring about mutual understanding and transformation between the self and the other. In fact, Muneer Ahmad has pointed out the possibilities for unification after 9/11, noting "The opportunity is there for these communities to forge necessary coalitions now, that they might endure beyond the period of immediate self-interest, and begin to imagine a shared citizenship outside the bounds of subordination" (Golley, *Arab Women's* 69). These sentiments, though written not long after the tragic events of 9/11 in 2002, echo truth in 2017's geo-political climate that has witnessed the resurgence of fascism and extreme acts of racism, particularly in response to Muslim immigrants and Syrian refugees. As the Syrian refugee crisis intensifies and the discrimination against Muslim minorities throughout the world persists, poetry like Mohja Kahf's becomes critical in humanizing Muslims, while calling for their acceptance outside the homeland. Like the legendary Scheherazad at the center of her poetry, Kahf wields the power of words and storytelling to deliver her message of cross-cultural understanding. She is truly an innovative writer drawing on

her Syrian, American, Muslim and female identities to create poetic speakers capable of breaking through stereotypes and molds. By presenting defiant and vibrant images of American Muslim women throughout her poetry, Kahf bears witness and crafts an inspiring narrative that uses hybridity to push the boundaries of American identity and the genre of autobiographical writing.

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“Can I [...] claim to revive these stifled voices?”: Writing, Researching and Performing Postcolonial Womanhood in Assia Djebar’s *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* and *So Vast the Prison*

Algerian Cavalcade and *So Vast the Prison*

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Abstract:

This article approaches Algerian author Assia Djebar’s novels *Fantasia* and *So Vast the Prison* in translation and from a Muslim feminist perspective. More specifically, this article examines how Assia Djebar narrativizes the processes of empowerment and disempowerment amongst Muslim women in Algeria under the oppression of two authorities: the French empire and everyday patriarchal structures. *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* is a multi-layered novel that charts the colonial violence between France and Algeria simultaneously with the struggles of the Algerian Muslim women. It explores not only the personal histories of those who fought against France during the occupation, but also the private lives of the women who contributed to the nationalist effort. I ask how Djebar approaches the challenge of trying to provide silenced women with a voice after experiencing war-time sexual violence, whilst being aware of the linguistic restrictions which are upon her. In the second half of this article, I discuss *So Vast the Prison*, exploring how Assia Djebar represents the complex politics of ‘the Gaze’ between men and women in Algeria. I focus on how her female characters are able to appropriate the male gaze and critique sexual politics not only through language but through the movements of the body and visual media. In these two texts Djebar frames women as crucial to the development of the nation but resistant to homogenizing assumptions about the ‘postcolonial Muslim woman’ as voiceless, representative of national interests, and excluded from historical discourse. Ultimately, I argue that Djebar’s work encourages the recognition of women’s agency in national and historical discourse, and challenges limited understandings of the role of Muslim women in Algeria. By doing this, I argue, Djebar becomes an important voice in the broader project of dehomogenizing Muslim women in the Western imagination.

1 In “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Hélène Cixous challenges the normalisation of writing as a masculine activity. She argues that “woman must write herself; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (875), thereby aligning the act of writing with specifically female agency. Female guilt caused by masturbation, Cixous argues, is comparable to the guilt felt during the act of writing (876–7), and yet this guilt must be overcome for the sake of resisting traditions of patriarchal control. Through the act of writing, women can push back against a silent, symbolic presence and instead become active and in control of their own existence. Cixous, being a Jewish child living in Algeria during the French occupation, spent her childhood between and amongst different languages and cultures (Penrod 137). The complexity of her

cultural, linguistic, and national identity, whilst challenging, allowed Cixous to embrace her status as exile and embark on acts of creative production, such as writing (Penrod 138).

2 Renowned Algerian-born francophone author Assia Djébar, although moving from the colonial periphery of Cherchell in Algeria to global metropolises such as Paris and later New York, similarly interrogates the relationship between women, patriarchal structures, and the act of writing. However, her experience of exile, whilst allowing her a productive career as an author, does not fully translate into her writing. Rather, she spent her literary career focusing on the lives of ordinary women in Algeria, albeit in the language of Algeria's colonial occupiers. Djébar, who passed away in February 2015, was a Professor of Francophone Literature at New York University and had an impressive collection of literary prizes. In 2005, she was the first Algerian woman to be elected to the Académie Française, a prestigious cultural institution (De Medeiros 25). Throughout her career, her primary literary concern has been the "treatment of women in Islamic culture", and she explores this through interrogating colonialism, women's agency, and women's place (or absence) in recorded history (De Medeiros 25).

3 Feminism and women's rights are both passionately supported and fiercely contested in the Arab world, and this situation is worth contextualising when discussing Djébar's work. The rise of Arab feminism occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century after the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Golley 529). The arrival of European colonialism from this point onwards was significant in changing not only the "political map" of the Middle East but also the "socioeconomic structure" of the region (Golley 521). Specifically, women's movements began to take off alongside anti-colonial and national liberation movements. Women in Algeria found, however, that their contribution to national liberation efforts did not afford them the augmented rights they were expecting in a post-colonial setting (Golley 533).

4 Algeria has had a contentious relationship with women's rights, particularly in the period after its hard-fought and notoriously violent fight for independence from France. In Nadia Hijab's discussion of Arab women's rights, she highlights the irony that although Algerian independence was gained in 1962, women were pushed backward into the home even though they had played a prominent role in the revolution. At the time of independence, "women immediately received full civil rights like the right to vote and to be elected, but personal rights remained a grey, uncharted area" (Hijab 26). To the horror of many women, the Family Laws of 1981 stipulated that women would become legal minors who needed their

husband's permission to work and travel, and who had no equal rights to proclaim a divorce (Hijab 27).

5 Arab feminism has been criticised for supposedly being a Western import that negated anti-colonial work. It has been argued, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley explains, that feminism is simply a Western concept, and “an alien import to the Arab world” rather than a home-grown movement (521). Feminisms, I would argue, are not limited to the Western world, and are created and produced in a multitude of contexts. Indeed, Margot Badran argues that “feminisms are produced in particular places and are articulated in local terms” (243). In other words, Arab feminism is a particular type of feminism that pushes back against both orientalisating discourses stemming from European colonialism and patriarchal attitudes developed through conservative interpretations of Islam.

6 The Islamic Revival that has swept the Muslim world since the 1970s has also had a significant impact on the role of women. “Islamic Revival” refers “not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies” (Mahmood 3). The adoption of veiling, in the form of *hijab* or *burka* for example, became more commonplace during this rise of political Islam, and many older Muslim women felt uncomfortable about what they saw as a reversal of “the golden age of Arab feminism” (Hatem 98). Prominent Arab feminists, such as author Nawal El Saadawi and writer and sociologist Fatema Mernissi, are just two examples of middle-class, educated Arab women who have been condemned for their criticism of veil-wearing “Muslim feminists” (Hatem 98). Islamic or Muslim feminism, in contrast with Arab feminism, is a women's movement that focuses on reforming a religion. Whilst it is often associated with the Middle East, it can also be found in Europe and North America (Zimmerman 149). Islamic feminism argues that patriarchal attitudes are not inherent to Islam, but are due to male interpretation. Their goal is, therefore, both emancipation from conservative, male-focused Islam, and from Western feminists that call for liberation from the veil, and other symbolic moves that suggest abandonment of Islam for the sake of feminism (Zimmerman 149).

7 Women such as Saadawi and Mernissi have been criticised for mimicking Western attitudes towards Muslim women (Hatem 99), and pushing a “crude belief that religiosity and rationality are antithetical to each other” (Hatem 99). Similarly, Haideh Moghissi (a professor of sociology and women's studies), argue that, firstly, Islamic feminism is simply not critical

enough of oppressive Sharia practices (11), and secondly, that the term itself homogenizes Muslim women and relegates critical thinking to “the domain of Western scholars” (11). For Moghissi, women in the Middle East should be understood as having multiple, including secular, identities, rather than being consigned to a religious one (84). However, this criticism, particularly the focus on Sharia practices, has been seen as a misinterpretation of Islam. Indeed, Miriam Cooke argues that those who believe Islamic feminism as a concept is an oxymoron are conflating Islamism and Islamic practices, resulting in a juxtaposition of feminism and Islam as “two mutually exclusive rigid ideologies” (59).

8 Djebar cannot neatly be categorised as either an Arab feminist or a Muslim feminist, and the categories themselves, whilst respectively secular and religious, do have a degree of overlap. Djebar identifies as a Muslim, but her feminist criticism is less toward the intricacies of the Qur’an and more concerned with women’s everyday social, economic, political and personal experiences. As I go on to discuss in depth, Djebar is highly critical of conservative – and sometimes even violent – attitudes and actions towards women. Yet she does not simply condemn Islamic teachings, or laud European notions of liberation, for example. Her approach is nuanced, and she instead exposes a trio of complex oppressions: male-interpretations of the Qur’an that relegate women to being second-class citizens; Algerian and Arab conservatism and traditionalism that restricts women’s freedom; and orientalisating attitudes from colonial powers that strip women of their agency and individualism.

9 In the first half of this paper I discuss Djebar’s *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (translated from the 1985 French original *L’amour, la fantasia*). *Fantasia* is a multi-layered novel that charts the colonial violence between France and Algeria alongside the changing role of women in Algerian society. Not only an exploration into the personal histories of those who fought against France during the occupation, it delves into the private lives of the women who contributed to the nationalist effort. Djebar specifically focuses on women’s experiences, drawing connections between female guilt caused by self-expression and the physical reality of the restricted female body. Similar to the exposure of one’s body, expressing the ‘self’ through writing is shown to induce feelings of shame and indecency. Indeed, *Fantasia* tackles the difficulties in trying to provide silenced women with a voice after experiencing sexual violence or suffering under quotidian patriarchal oppressions, whilst being aware of the moral, cultural and linguistic challenges that she faces as a French-speaking Algerian woman. I therefore consider how Djebar employs a distinct style and structure throughout *Fantasia* in

order to explore the relationship between colonial history, the female body, and the subversive act of writing.

10 *So Vast the Prison* (1995), which I discuss in the second half of this paper, is structurally unusual as it changes form throughout. The first section resembles an interior monologue of the married narrator about her forbidden love for a young man; the second takes on the form of tales or fables from the narrator's historical research that she undergoes in an attempt to distract herself from her romantic obsession; and the final section is a chronology of the life of the narrator. In this section I explore how Assia Djébar represents the complex politics of "the gaze", specifically how her female characters are able to reappropriate the male gaze in several ways. I examine who enforces everyday sexual politics, how they are shown to be enforced, and how these restrictions are overcome not necessarily linguistically, or by gaining a 'voice', but through other mediums such as the body (dance, song, stories) or through visual media (filming).

Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade

11 While *Fantasia* is Assia Djébar's first attempt at autobiography, as Isis Butôt explains, the structure and form complicate this assertion: "[f]rom the first page onwards the narrative's perspective changes from third to first person and back again, historical chapters cut the autobiographical narrative in fragments and toward the end evermore 'voices' are introduced, telling their own stories and frustrating the whole notion of autobiography" (76). I will refer, therefore, to the primary 'voice' as 'the narrator'. In an early scene, the narrator describes her summer holidays in a small village in the Sahel region of North Africa. Her daily life is described as contained and controlled as she moves from one monitored family space to another: "[m]y stay there, shut up with these three sisters, is my 'visit to the country'" (*Fantasia* 9). British geographer Gillian Rose claims that "the everyday is the arena through which patriarchy is (re)created – and contested" (17). In terms of women's role in the home, it is clear that "everyday routines ... are never unimportant, because the seemingly banal and trivial events of the everyday are bound into the power structures which limit and confine women" (Rose 17). For the narrator, women's everyday experiences at home are associated with confinement and sedentariness, represented in the figure of a senile old woman who spends her time lamenting "some past persecution" (*Fantasia* 9). As a child, the narrator and her cousins are unable to understand "the magical formulas, the passages from the Quran, that

the grown-ups recite aloud to exorcize these outbursts” (*Fantasia* 9). And yet later, when the narrator is an adult, this frightful world of superstition becomes a comforting world of Muslim femininity. The narrator, however, feels excluded from this intimate world of other women, finding that her Western education and middle-class pursuit of writing distinguishes her from the women and girls of her rural childhood. Indeed, Mildred Mortimer explains that on the one hand, the ability to learn and write can be a “liberating force” for women, but on the other and it “serves to alienate” the individual from collective, feminine environments (304). By stepping outside of the domestic role that the narrator sees many of her fellow Algerian women occupy, she gains a critical understanding of women’s oppressions, and a voice to speak out against them, but loses a sense of communal, intimate womanhood. When the narrator discovers that her seemingly cloistered female cousins are writing letters to their Arab lovers, she describes the knowledge as “heavy and weighty” (*Fantasia* 11). Indeed, the act of writing a letter goes beyond an act of flirtation, and instead signals a transgression of their cloistered environments not physically but through writing. Within the gendered framework of the Algerian home, female authorship is therefore portrayed as an act of cultural and social subversion.

12 Although Djébar, to an extent, concedes Cixous’ argument that empowerment can be gained through writing, Djébar’s self-proclaimed position within Arab and Muslim feminisms (Cooke 64) complicates this relationship, as I show throughout my discussion of *Fantasia* and *So Vast The Prison*. Cixous argues that women have been kept in the “dark” (875) and must resist this cloistering in order to “return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display” (880). Cixous’ nod to Sigmund Freud’s concept of the uncanny highlights the distanced position of the female body to the woman who owns it, and the understanding of the body as strange, different, and shameful. This exposure of the female body and mind is, for Djébar, problematic due to the perpetuation of the male gaze. When the narrator receives a love-letter, she feels pity for “those women who never received a letter: no word taut with desire ... [t]heir only path to freedom was by intoning their obsessional chants” (*Fantasia* 60), lamenting the lack of literacy education for the Muslim women of Algeria. However, when a man steals the letter and reads it, the narrator explains that she feels physically exposed. The permanency of the written word discloses not just thoughts but the female body itself: “the peeping-tom’s eyes have upset me. This man’s fascination with the other man’s unguarded words, which speak so

frankly of my body, make him a thief in my eyes” (*Fantasia* 60). Evidently, Djébar struggles with, on the one hand, championing the cause of female literacy, and on the other hand, observing Islamic notions of female purity and respectability.

13 In discussing autobiography and the search for identity, Leigh Gilmore and Jane Moody argue that authors often write autobiographies because they feel that their identity is unjustly excluded from “dominant forms of truth-telling” (19) which are traditionally appropriated by the “overrepresented Western white male” (17). Djébar is evidently attempting to insert female narratives into a primarily male discourse. However, Gilmore and Moody further argue that the purpose of autobiography is also for the reader to identify with the author and therefore to “naturalize ideology”, or to “stabilize ‘truth’ as if all these simply pointed to the ‘real condition of existence’” (23). Whilst Djébar does attempt to stabilise the “truth” of the Algerian war, she in turn destabilises her own identity. From a Lacanian perspective, it is evident that in an attempt to create an identification with her fellow Algerian women, she instead creates a misrecognition, or *le méconnaissance* (Lacan 441). For example, in “III” (Part Two), the narrator demands bodily authority by consummating her marriage in a flat in Paris away from the traditional domestic and religious environment of “peeping women” (*Fantasia* 108). However, instead of feeling that she has asserted her identity as an independent, modern woman, she has a crisis of recognition in which she feels as if her body is no longer her own. As she walks through the flat after having slept with her new husband, she is “avoiding the mirrors, a wounded gazelle” (*Fantasia* 107). By appropriating her body on her own terms, and rejecting the traditions and rituals expected of her fellow women on their wedding night, she finds that her own understanding of her identity is thrown into confusion, and she suffers from cultural and gendered guilt.

14 Karina Eileraas claims that Djébar “reflects on the impossibility of claiming an authentic or stable identity within the context of colonization” (17). Indeed, while the narrator feels guilty for moving from the traditional Algerian domestic sphere to a colonial-inspired flat in Paris, she similarly appears to struggle with expressing herself through autobiography. The structure of *Fantasia* reflects this crisis of representation. Whilst the autobiographical chapters in Part I begin with titles such as “A Little Arab Girl’s First Day at School”, “Three Cloistered Girls”, “The French Policeman’s Daughter”, and “My Father Writes to My Mother”, she becomes unable to introduce these passages with the “engendering matrix of textual selfhood: the autobiographical *I*” (Gilmore and Moody 63). The historical chapters, in

contrast, are simply introduced with roman numerals. However, in Part Two, the chapter titling is switched so that the historical chapters have titles and the autobiographical ones are introduced with roman numerals. I would argue that this reversal of representation shows Djébar's increased confidence in representing the women of the Algerian war, but in turn suggests a sense of failure in her ability to write about the narrator's more personal experiences of Algeria.

15 Writing is shown as a means of transgressing the confines of womanhood, of enabling women to enter the masculine domain of *écriture* and depart from the traditionally female domain of *kalaam*, or orality (Ghaussy 458). However, writing is also shown to be a risky endeavour that allows the exposure not just of a woman's mind but also of her body. Indeed, Anne Donadey argues that the French language is too "direct" and "coarse" to express the emotions of a woman of Muslim origin, and notes Djébar's understanding of words as "vessels of an entire cultural baggage" (32). In "My Father Write to My Mother" (*Fantasia* 35–38), for example, a postcard sent from the narrator's father to her mother in French and her utterance of his first name are described as a "harem conversations" (*Fantasia* 36). Family and friends understand this direct correspondence between a man and a woman, regardless of their married status, as a significant subversion of Islamic tradition. Traditionally, the narrator explains, written discourse must travel through male lines, such as through a son, to protect the name of the woman from the "masculine eyes" (*Fantasia* 37) of the postman. In the Muslim Algerian community that Djébar presents, it is evident that there is a close and significant connection between the act of writing and the female body. Opportunities for men imbue a sense of permanency that accompanies the act of writing and recording, and yet the women must live in a state of temporality, remaining in the ever-changing sphere of orality and domesticity. This has wider implications than everyday interactions, for accurate historical record relies on permanency, and therefore women are dismissed from recorded history. Djébar's frustration here is directed both against French hegemony and Islamic cultural tradition, two systems that she approaches as having damaging effects on women's lives.

16 These restrictions on women's lives are demonstrated not only through writing but also through physical space. In "The French Policeman's Daughter", the ways in which the young French women conduct themselves in public spaces in comparison to the Algerian girls is telling. A young French woman named Marie-Louise is heard calling her fiancé "Darling

Pilou” (*Fantasia* 27), much to the embarrassment of the Algerian girls. In order to introduce him, he must walk up and down the street in a rather farcical scene in which the Algerian girls “catch a glimpse of him through the cracks of the shutters” (26). By using this literal divide between the public sphere and the private, Djébar creates a microcosm that is representative of the cultural divide present in French-occupied Algeria. However, an Algerian way of life and a French way of life are not entirely separable. Because the narrator and the other French girls mature under French colonialism, they find themselves moving between an identification with a ‘modern’ French way of living, and a loyalty to the matriarchal structures of the home. Frenchness, specifically the language, proves unable to really translate the Algerian experience. The narrator states that: “this ‘Darling Pilou’ left me with one deep-rooted complex: the French language could offer me all its inexhaustible treasures, but not a single one of its terms of endearment would be destined for my use” (*Fantasia* 27). Whilst the French language is portrayed as supposedly liberating, allowing women to express a metropolitan, sexualised identity, it is unable to translate the emotions of the narrator. Instead, she finds it strange and almost crude, and the colonial hegemony in which the language functions ultimately produces another level of silence. The freedom that French colonialism promised, ironically, proves restricting for Djébar.

17 Djébar draws connections between everyday, gendered domesticity and movements of resistance by placing the respective chapters side by side, yet she also creates a telling distance by not allowing these separate narratives to intersect. Her historical chapters relay her research into the documentation and narrativisation of the French occupation of Algeria and the revolution of 1954–62. Although Algerian women played a significant role in the Algerian War, this facet of their lives was overshadowed by their traditionally accepted role in the home, and so the part they played was largely disregarded in official records and diminished in written history about the revolution (Green 959). This public participation resulted in minimal change in regards to women’s advancement more generally (Cox 74–5), partly because of their refusal to comprehend the French as liberators of their veiled state, and partly because of the gradual rise of conservative Islamism in Algerian society (Cox 75; 71). Rather than being viewed as autonomous and committed figures in the revolution, Algerian women came to represent the comforts of domestic life and a nationalistic “haven of values” that resisted French influence (Cherifati-Merabtime 42). Evidently, writing takes on a double significance in *Fantasia*. Whilst it is a liberating exercise that can offer agency to women

confined to domestic spaces, it can also function as another mechanism of confinement and sequestering when used by colonial or patriarchal powers to render absent in the imagination the role of women in historical movements.

18 This concept of silence and disempowerment is what connects Djébar's seemingly disparate chapters of the autobiographical and the historical. The very masculine Algerian nationalism that succeeded the war of independence, whilst different from French hegemony, contributed to a popular discourse that restricted the independence of Algerian women by portraying them as symbolic of an authentic and unchanging national identity (Cox 71). Indeed, when Djébar imaginatively recreates the fall of Algiers in the early 1800s, she describes a girl named Badra whose beauty "attested to their city's past splendour" (*Fantasia* 84). For the French soldiers who capture her and murder her father, she is a symbol of a possessed and subdued Algeria, showing the lack of female agency within both Algerian and French colonial discourse. In the present-day narrative, women's silence is perpetuated and reinforced through historiography. Djébar narrates her research into women's role in the revolution, but finds that she cannot revive the voices of the women who fought, such as Cherifa: "The words that I thought to put in your mouth are shrouded in the same mourning garb as those of Bosquet or Saint-Arnaud" (*Fantasia* 142). General Pierre François Joseph Bosquet and Marshal Armand-Jacques Leroy de Saint-Arnaud are two examples of a number of French men who chronicled the revolution. Throughout the texts, the historical chapters, which were aided by the historical texts authored by French men, adopt a different tone to the autobiographical chapters. The tone is noticeably distant, and this is reflected in the way in which Djébar uses the terminology of the theatre, the stage, and of performance. In the chapter entitled "I", Djébar opens her historical narrative by describing how the city of Algiers "made her first appearance", how the French fleet continued their "stately ballet" until noon, and asks "who are to be the performers? On which side shall we find the audience?" (*Fantasia* 6). Indeed, throughout the text Djébar describes the men who fight in battle as actors, and the battles themselves as types of dances or theatrical scenes. It is evident, however, that Djébar is doing this to reflect the style in which the Algerian revolution was narrated by French historians and military men. Her chapters are littered with snippets from French colonialists, such as Lucien-François de Montagnac: "This little fray offered a charming spectacle. Clouds of horsemen, light as birds, criss-crossing, flitting in every direction, and from time to time the majestic voice of the cannon rising above the shouts of

triumph and the rifle-shots – all this combined to present a delightful panorama and an exhilarating scene” (*Fantasia* 54). This poetic, idyllic scene, which resembles a performance or a painting, in fact describes the battle that led to the brutal murder of Cherifa’s brother. By describing the battle in such a way, the brutality of French colonial violence is shrouded in the imagery and discourse of a heroic and rather enjoyable conquest. The everyday brutalities of war, including the sexual violence against women, are omitted in favour of a distancing technique that depicts a broader scene of French authority and masculine gallantry, thereby reinforcing the supposed benefits and superiority of colonial rule. In contrast, Djébar sets these scenes alongside intense and intimately personal portrayals of Algerian men and women, focusing on the individual and therefore refusing to allow colonial discourse to predominate.

19 During the Algerian occupation, Colonel Pélissier famously caused the asphyxiation of hundreds of people of the Ouled Riah tribe by igniting a fire at the entrance of a cave where they were hiding in June 1845 (Welch 237). In *Fantasia*, Pélissier is introduced as if waiting to go on stage, and indeed his actions are being watched and recorded by many:

For Colonel Pélissier the approaching dawn makes a solemn backdrop, befitting the overture to a drama. The curtain is about to go up on the tragic action; Fate has decreed that he, as the leader, must make the first entrance on the stage set out before them in this austere chalk landscape. (67)

Similarly to the cloistered girls at the beginning of the novel, Pélissier comes to realise how significant the act of writing is. After smoking out hundreds of Algerians from their hideout in the caves, killing almost all of them, Pélissier writes a report so realistic that it causes chaos in Paris. Lieutenant-Colonel Canrobert writes: “Pélissier made only one mistake: as he had a talent for writing, and was aware of this, he gave in his report an eloquent and realistic – much too realistic – description of the Arabs’ suffering” (*Fantasia* 75). Ironically, Canrobert concludes that the “only” mistake Pélissier made was not hiding the gruesome details in poetic language. Djébar, however, expresses her gratitude to Pélissier, for his honesty allowed her to “weave a pattern of French words” (*Fantasia* 78) around the events and to attempt to appropriate Algerian history for herself, for the women who fought, and for the Algerians. However, Djébar suggests that she has failed at her task: “[w]hile I intended every step forward to make me more clearly identifiable, I find myself progressively sucked down into the anonymity of those women of old – my ancestors!” (*Fantasia* 217). The French language that her father “lovingly bestowed” (*Fantasia* 217) on her has drawn her closer to creating a

female narrative whilst simultaneously pushing her further away from a feminine history of orality. It is indeed the French language that speaks for modern Algerian history, both men's and women's.

20 The silencing of women is a concern that Djébar consistently critiques and reflects upon throughout *Fantasia*. Whilst I have discussed in depth how the text explores women's writing, it is also evident that how women speak amongst themselves and articulate their own experiences is influenced by patriarchal traditions and French colonialism. Djébar's research into the role of women in the Algerian revolution is not simply material for the text, but is text in itself. The processes of researching, writing, and speaking about women's experiences is therefore brought to the forefront of the narrative through a littering of self-reflexive passages. For example, Djébar narrates a time when she was talking to a group of Algerian women about their experiences during the revolution (*Fantasia* 201–2) and explains that she felt unable to articulate certain traumatic instances, resulting in a secondary silence perpetuated by the author/researcher. Even when in an entirely female environment, she realises that rape “will not be mentioned, will be respected” (*Fantasia* 202). The concept of rape has been connected to the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised by Frantz Fanon: “every veil that fell, every body that became liberated from the traditional embrace of the *haïk* ... was a negative expression of the fact that Algeria was beginning to deny herself and was accepting the rape of the colonizer” (42). This violent connection between the nation and the female body, and the masculine coloniser, betrays the heavy weight placed upon Algerian women as both physically vulnerable and as symbolic. The women in *Fantasia*, instead of using the word rape and talking outwardly about their experience of sexual violence, use the term ‘damage’, suggesting a reluctance to discuss a specifically female experience and implying that women's bodies were accepted as collateral and unavoidable loss during the revolution. Djébar therefore finds that language cannot adequately represent the female body, and in a self-reflexive style she asks:

Can I, twenty years later, claim to revive these stifled voices? And speak for them? Shall I not at best find dried-up streams? What ghosts will be conjured up when in this absence of expressions of love (love received, ‘love’ imposed), I see the reflection of my own barrenness, my own aphasia. (*Fantasia* 202)

Evidently, silence becomes both a coping mechanism and something that is imposed upon women. It also transcends time, leaving history books without a record of women's military

and political contributions in Algeria and leaving Djébar, who is actively attempting to revive the female experience twenty years later, unable to speak.

21 Elleke Boehmer's model for postcolonial women's texts claims that many female postcolonial writers "retrieve suppressed oral traditions, half-forgotten histories, unrecorded private languages, moments of understated or unrecognised women's resistance" (228). Indeed, throughout *Fantasia* there is a sense of archaeological excavation in which Djébar attempts to revive voices that have been suppressed by both French colonialism and Algerian patriarchy. *Fantasia's* commitment to a self-reflexive narrative means that the text not only exposes the struggles of Algerian women, or the nation more generally, but of the author/researcher/archaeologist. Indeed, through her research and attempt at representation, Djébar experiences a crisis of her own identity. Ultimately, she finds that the post-colonial landscape of Algeria is home to a complex amalgamation of national tradition, Islamic teachings, and French influence. Within this is the even more tenuous position of women, buoyed by their effort in the revolution but perpetually silenced in both the domestic and private sphere, and within historiography. Discerning and representing a genuine female experience through these layers of silence, therefore, proves an almost impossible task.

So Vast the Prison

22 In the second half of this article, I move on to discuss Djébar's *So Vast the Prison* while keeping in mind Djébar's core concern of womanhood and agency. Whilst *Fantasia* focuses on the significance and limitations of writing for the Algerian woman, *So Vast the Prison* reconsiders the possibilities of women's creative production by focusing on mediums such as dance and filmmaking. Similarly to in *Fantasia*, *So Vast the Prison* offers a narrative that struggles with the concept of representation. As Stacey Weber-Feve notes: "in all of [Djébar's] work, she is 'speaking nearby' the indigenous women of her Algerian communities ... she may not speak 'for' the subjects in her literary or cinematic discourses since 'speaking for' reinstates colonizing cultural practices" (3). Indeed, Djébar attempts to capture the multitude of forms of female expression, yet maintains her own political stance that proves critical toward structures, institutions and traditions that oppress women. In this way, Djébar's discussion of womanhood in *So Vast* complements that of *Fantasia*. However, a more critical eye is turned towards women in *So Vast*, particularly regarding how oppressive traditions can be perpetuated by women just as much as men. Indeed, many critics argue that Djébar's aim

in this text is to reclaim control of the male gaze, to reappropriate or to reverse it (Hiddleston 99; Drissi 3; Faulkner 86), and whilst this is true, Djébar does not suggest that reversing the male gaze will equal an end to women's oppression. Djébar's concern in *So Vast* is less with the act of writing than with the movements and meanings of the female body. By striving to make the body "visible", Djébar sheds light on a kind of "gendered cultural trauma" (Faulkner 79) inherited from Algerian and Islamic cultural practices and manifested through the female body.

23 Ketu Katrak claims that acts of female resistance stem from an "internalized exile" (2) where the individual feels disconnected from the body and is therefore unable to claim control over it. By reacting to patriarchal domination, these women are therefore attempting to "transcend exile" (Katrak 2). She uses an example from Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1988 novel *Nervous Conditions* to emphasise this point: whilst Lucia, one of two female protagonists, confronts and resists patriarchal authority, Nyasha focuses this lack of agency inwards, eventually developing bulimia (Katrak 3). *So Vast* is similarly concerned with the process of transcending internalised exile, shown through destructive practices such as the narrator admitting to her husband her love for another man. Yet more significantly it exemplifies the narrator's powerful acts of self-expression such as dancing, historical research, and filmmaking. Much of the critical attention to *So Vast* has understandably focused on concepts of freedom and agency, but I add to this discussion by offering an analysis of how the novel draws on the act and concept of dancing. As in *Fantasia*, the female body is of continual concern, negotiation, and appropriation, and I suggest that in *So Vast* Djébar continues this line of enquiry by showing how dance offers women a chance to govern their own politicised bodies.

24 Throughout *So Vast*, dance is shown to be significant for Algerian women as well as for the narrator personally. The narrator explains that dance formed a substantial part of her childhood: "[s]o often during my childhood I saw the terrifying grandmother abandoned to her rages and her magical dances. Then, afterward, when she would reemerge from them, she was as much in cool control of herself as she was of her entire household" (*So Vast* 311). These dances, described as both passionate and strange, are a way for the grandmother to gain a degree of psychological release from her own kind of domestic prison to which she must return. These dances could be examples of *zar* ceremonies, women's dances that "derive from folk religion with its characteristic blend which combines popular Islam and traditional

African religion” (Hurreiz 151). These dances allow women to become “possessed”, to be “completely absorbed by the collective animation of the women” and of “the power of their community” (Kramer 114). This spiritual power is needed because of the reality of their “isolation and impotence in a world dominated by men” (Kramer 114). The politics of the bare female body is explored through the narrator’s childhood memory of a cousin’s wedding. During a dress fitting she asks for her arms, shoulders and back to be left “completely bare” (*So Vast* 284), a risky request that is, however, accepted by her liberal-minded mother. The dress fitter is astonished, but her mother retorts: “for a wedding, just among women [...] why should she not have a low-cut dress?” (*So Vast* 284), signifying a de-politicised and liberated female space. However, the dressmaker regards it as inappropriate for the exact reason that the mother finds it appropriate: “because among women!” (284), showing that notions of shame and modesty about the female body are perpetuated and maintained by both men and women.

25 In *Fantasia*, the narrator finds herself continuously feeling guilty for not being veiled and cloistered as a child. As she matures, she once again feels guilty, but this time for not being able to communicate in Berber with her fellow Algerian women. In *So Vast*, the narrator similarly experiences a sense of disconnect from Algerian tradition. She expresses how she is “riding astride the rhythm and discovering the new pleasure of [her] body” (285) but is aware that this corporeal freedom distinguishes her from other women. She feels uncomfortable with this sense of freedom, claiming that she is forgetting herself, that she cannot help but move “despite the spectators and their eyes” and is “disregarding the kinswomen” (*So Vast* 285). Specifically, she is dancing so vivaciously “in this most ancient of homes where long ago the grandmother made her entrance as a young bride” (*So Vast* 285), creating a binary contrast between lone sensuality and the tradition of marriage, and initiating a sense of guilt. This guilt is not only from direct encounters with the observing women around her, but from a kind of cultural, inherited tradition of modesty and ritual.

26 Djébar’s dance scenes reflect Fritz W. Kramer’s description of the *zar* in that they both suggest a need to gain power through dance: “[a] few others are dancing as well, mature women. Gradually, in spite of themselves, they are dancing their grief and their need to get out, to fling themselves into the distance, into the beating sun” (*So Vast* 285). Although these dances can only be performed around women, Djébar does not suggest that they are simply a connecting factor between women. Indeed, she resists a simplistic feminist discourse that

suggests “a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their [women’s] oppression” (Mohanty 262). Rather, this exposure of the female body results in criticism amongst the women, with one commenting that “[s]he goes out, she reads, she goes to the cities like that, naked, her father, bizarre, lets her” (*So Vast* 285). Dance, rather than mobilising women, brings to the forefront the differences between them and forges divisions between how women understand tradition and modernity. A dance scene within the childhood narrative is imbued with snippets of gossip from the women. For example, one says that the narrator “dances, but too vigorously, her manner is too lively” (*So Vast* 286), and another: “if her father put her back in her place ... really, if he made her wear the veil ... I would not hesitate to ask for her in marriage for my eldest son!” (*So Vast* 286). The narrator’s moment of freedom is impinged upon by the judgmental voices of women, rather than men, contributing to the extended motif of imprisonment that runs throughout the novel whilst also asserting that patriarchal forms of control are perpetuated by both men and women. Indeed, Djébar “unsettles the very category of femininity ... contesting the validity of any specific notion of feminine experience” (Hiddleston 91). Through these dance scenes in particular, Djébar illustrates the varied and multiplicitous voices of Algerian women.

27 Following custom, a woman in the party dances “in the manner traditional to the town she came from” whilst her body was “burdened with jewels, belt, tunics embroidered with gold, stiff and sparkling moiré” (*So Vast* 61). The music becomes “frenzied” in an “ancestral refrain” (*So Vast* 61). Although Hurreiz describes the *zar* ceremony as a “dramatic performance aimed at releasing psychological tensions” (153), the narrator does not feel connected to the women: “[t]he important thing was to distance myself as much as possible from the collective frenzy of those women, my relatives – I felt I could not accept for myself the almost funereal joy of their bodies, verging on a fettered despair” (*So Vast* 61). The sombre atmosphere no longer appeals to the narrator, resulting in her employing “Western dance steps” (*So Vast* 62) whilst her “arms alone became lianas, drawing arabesques, in the half-light only my bare arms moving now like serpents and now like calligraphy” (*So Vast* 63), employing rich natural imagery of plants and animals as well as artistic imagery of design and writing, a stark contrast to the “ceremonious” dancing of the relatives. Her dancing separates her from the other women because it is, for her, an act of individualism that she narrates with heavy use of the first-person pronoun: “I dance on. I dance. I feel I have been dancing ever since” (*So Vast* 60). This independence allows her to consciously and defiantly

exchange looks with a young man whom she nicknames “the Beloved” (*So Vast* 64). She thinks: “I was keenly, consciously, happily aware of myself ... as being truly ‘visible’ for this almost adolescent young man with the wounded gaze. Visible for him alone? My visibility for him made me visible to myself” (*So Vast* 64). Her appropriation, rather than abandonment, of ancestral tradition allows her to remain in a feminine space but with a new independence. Although, in *So Vast*, Djébar “seeks connections between women of different epochs and laments on their common plight” (Hiddleston 94), she also shows how these genealogical connections through time are not immutable, and that while female spaces exist, they are not necessarily ones of freedom.

28 The influence of the narrator’s cultural heritage is evoked in the second major dance scene. The elation that the narrator experiences while dancing is quickly shattered when a fight between her husband and the young man erupts. The young man flees from the cabaret, leaving the narrator thinking: “[w]hat shame! *How could I ever have been attracted that way to someone whose back I am seeing now? Because he is running away, is it possible? Because he is leaving, he is afraid, can this be true?*” (*So Vast* 104, italics in original). Her horror at his cowardice, she explains, is informed by the lessons that her grandmother passed down to her: “[a] man is someone whose back one does not see! ... whose back the enemy never sees!” (*So Vast* 106). She adheres to this inherited and rather traditional approach to masculinity, losing her means through which she transcends “exile”, or asserts her agency as a woman, by having a relationship with a man other than her husband. However, not only is her husband the “enemy” (*So Vast* 14), but so is her grandmother: “I was no longer seeking liberation from the husband with his melodramatic mask, but trying to get away from the virile grandmother, away, at least, from this bitter, virile woman” (*So Vast* 108). It is this ancestral figure of female tradition that enforces a perspective of masculinity that influences the narrator years later, disempowering her. The unorthodox space in which she asserts her independence is thwarted by the ubiquitous presence of ancestral influence. Indeed, Hiddleston argues that “while solidarity is important to Djébar, the sharing she evokes consists in the transfer of resonances across history rather than in the establishment of a unified identity” (96). Indeed, it is evident that Djébar exemplifies the significance of women’s values and teachings throughout generations in order to highlight the clashes in values and beliefs that occur within Algerian Muslim communities. By doing this, she thwarts any concept of a unified female identity and instead shows how female identity is

heterogeneous and mutable. The dance scenes are framed by women's voices, or as the narrator expresses, a culture of "women speaking among women" (*So Vast* 109). In *Fantasia*, Djebbar uses historiography to critically frame the text around male voices, specifically French men chronicling the Algerian revolution from a colonial perspective. *So Vast*, however, takes the concept of *écriture* as portrayed in *Fantasia* and replaces it with *kalaam*, exhibiting the influence and importance of women's oral discourse. Djebbar, therefore, is showing the impact of women's ancestral voices as opposed to men's, yet also suggests that this influence can be a way to enforce patriarchal traditions.

29 In her essay entitled "Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound", Djebbar discusses Eugene Delacroix's painting "The Women of Algiers (In Their Apartment)", describing it as "a stolen glance" (137) into the private, forbidden sphere of women, an "intoxicated gaze: a fugitive moment of evanescent revelation" (134). Delacroix's gaze is risky and inappropriate, but the women remain steeped in domesticity and tradition. They are being looked upon by a man, with the permission of another man, and have no power of their own to control the gaze. Over a century later, Djebbar is overturning this binary and appropriating the gaze for women through her directing of the 1977 film *The Nouba Of The Women Of Mount Chenoua* (translated from the French *La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua*), *nouba* roughly translating as "party". This appropriation through film, suggests Djebbar, is significant for all women. Towards the end of the text she says, reflecting on her role as a director:

I was gripped by an emotion. As if all the women of all the harems had whispered 'action' with me. Their complicity excites me. Only what their eyes see matters to me from now on. Resting on these images that I assemble with the help of their invisible presence over my shoulder. This gaze, I claim it as mine. I see it as 'ours'. (*So Vast* 178–179)

The act of filming allows Djebbar to figuratively and literally take control of the 'gaze', and by doing this she is able to reverse the role of the Algerian woman from the watched to the watcher, and from the powerless to the powerful. It is not an individualist pursuit for Djebbar, but a collective, deeply feminist one.

30 A reader of *So Vast* is watching the action play out through two cultural mediums; the words on the page are watching the lens of the camera, which is watching the scene. Because of this, every frame that Djebbar captures is imbued with political and social significance and is meaningfully reflected upon from a feminist standpoint. For example, Djebbar films a man in a wheelchair watching his wife sleep in the house, unable to enter because of the steps. She

describes this as “the gaze of the paralyzed man ... the dance of impotent desire” (*So Vast* 178). In this scene, the reader is watching Djebbar watch the man watch the woman, constructing layers and therefore raising more questions about representation and gender. By choosing this scene in particular, she reverses the traditional gender binary that she critiques throughout her work of the trapped, immobile woman and instead focuses the camera on the impotent man. Later, she films a girl named Ferial, a bright and confident child from Chenoua. She is able to capture her youth, femininity and wildness in a way that “resembles a dance” (*So Vast* 282) as Ferial leaps about, guiding the camera rather than being directed by it. The camera, *So Vast* shows, allows women to appropriate the gaze and move away from the paradigm enforced by Delacroix. Specifically, it allows her, and Muslim Algerian women more generally, to reconfigure and reframe the way in which we look at women’s bodies.

31 Djebbar employs the idea of dance in *So Vast* in two different ways. In a literal sense, she narrates scenes of dance in which the politics of the female body are brought to the forefront of the readers’ attention. Women’s ability to move their bodies in public, and the way in which this movement is received, is influenced and regulated by the way in which Muslim Algerian culture understands women’s bodies. Although the text employs dance scenes that resemble *zar* ceremonies, and shows them as a way for women to gain psychological relief from a male-dominated environment, Djebbar shows us that these dances are sources of disparity as well as communal comfort amongst women.

32 The narrator develops throughout the text, from her narrative that is framed by the voices of other women, to the filmic narrative in which she is sole creator and manipulator. Indeed, in a figurative sense, Djebbar embarks on directing films in order to frame other kinds of ‘dances’, of the wild young girl and the impotent man for example. She does this in order to, firstly, encourage readers and viewers to challenge preconceptions about the role of men and women, and secondly, to imbue beauty into everyday encounters and movement. For Djebbar, writing and filming allow her to create and represent women as more than symbols or property.

Conclusion

33 In this paper, I have argued that Assia Djebbar draws connections between the female body, self-expression, and the politics of postcolonial Algeria in order to critique how we understand, research and write the role of women. In *Fantasia*, Djebbar creates a semi-

autobiographical text that, through the voice of a narrator/writer/researcher, charts her experience of womanhood in modern Algeria. On the one hand, the narrator wishes to be liberated from Algerian Islamic traditions of modesty, but on the other, she finds that the public intimacy evident in French culture and the poetic French language is simply unable to represent her experiences as an Algerian Muslim woman. Instead, Djébar takes on a more significant project than simply choosing between two supposedly opposing sides. She uses her mastery of the French language, and her position as a successful, global author, to return to her Algerian roots and bring forth the experiences, often traumatic, of the Muslim women of her childhood. An outright challenge to the narratives put forth through French historiography, *Fantasia* accepts that it cannot speak for women but must instead allow a space to open up where their voices can, finally, be heard.

34 In *So Vast the Prison*, Djébar recommences her project of bringing forth a woman's perspective, but moves from interrogating the act of writing to a more intimate discussion of the female body. Dance, in particular, is shown as a medium through which women can express themselves, yet the cultural and moral significance haunts the entirety of the text. Dance is shown to be a wild and feminine act, bonding women in a shared feeling of liberation and camaraderie. Yet as in *Fantasia*, women's experiences are never shown to be homogenous. Bodily expression, even amongst women, is often received as inappropriate and sexualised, damaging their reputation as well-behaved wives or potential daughters-in-law. Once again, Djébar creates a narrator caught in the liminal space between a sense of community and a desire for self-determination. Regardless, both texts celebrate and embolden the voices on the ancestral and the modern Muslim Algerian woman.

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Parsua Bashi's *Nylon Road*: Visual Witnessing and the Critique of Neoliberalism in Iranian Women's Graphic Memoir

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Abstract:

I offer the first critical reading in English of Parsua Bashi's graphic memoir *Nylon Road*, which traces a narrative of place and belonging by a diasporan Iranian woman after the cataclysmic changes of previous decades. The narrative is a dialogical autobiographical process in which Parsua, the narrating I, conducts a self-interrogation with eleven of her former selves. Together they weigh the competing belief systems of Iranian fundamentalism; Western secular humanism in Switzerland, where Bashi was a migrant (her preferred term) from 2004-09; and Soviet-style socialism, influential for many middle-class intellectuals in 1970s Iran. This visually charged clash of political and cultural positions serves as a lens for thinking about social relations and the role of women in public life. Bashi organizes *Nylon Road* dialogically as a site for airing visual and voiced evidence about conflicting representations of what it meant to live in, leave, and return to, Iran over a quarter century. *Nylon Road*'s story of coming of age in revolution-era Iran presents Bashi as a daughter who, unlike Marjane Satrapi, participated in the new regime's program for decades and critiqued those escaping into exile. When she finally does so, in her thirties, she is an uncomfortable migrant in Zürich, where her multiple past selves, drawn at different ages, confront her with versions of her childhood and adolescent experience that the present-time narrating I recalls quite differently in both visual and verbal terms. The differing political positions traced in these encounters with her multiple I's, distinct in her representations, form a complex set of perspectives for both reflecting on and critiquing the Islamic Revolution within feminist, global, and postcolonial contexts.

[A] political battle ... is taking place in part through the medium of the visual image. – Judith Butler (827)

Graphic narratives that bear witness to authors' own traumas and to those of others materially retrace inscriptional effacement; they reconstruct and repeat in order to counteract. – Hillary L. Chute (*Graphic* 173)

1 Many memoirs by diasporic women in the generations after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the founding of the Islamic Republic attracted international attention for their accounts of navigating the contradictions of Iran's strict fundamentalist regime. These transnational narratives of upheaval and its aftermath, usually narrated by subjects now living in the West, are often situated within a liberal-humanist framework. Such memoirs as Azar Nafisi's *Reading*

¹ A longer version of this essay previously appeared in *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader* © 2017 Edited by Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson by permission of Michigan Publishing Services, 839 Greene Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-3209. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9739969>.

Lolita in Tehran are read as “written for the West”, observes Madhi Tourage, because they are taken up by a global readership seeking validation of Enlightenment values. Notably, they were wielded, after the events of 9/11 in the United States, in a marketing campaign for Western intervention in the Middle East when Nafisi’s “ideas [found] a brand” and she became a kind of “commodity” (Whitlock 21-2).²

2 Responding to the global framing of diasporic memoirs, Nima Naghibi calls for a more nuanced reading practice with “a critical diasporic cultural politics [that] focuses on a creative tension between the home and the host country, interrogating the concept of the nation-state, and celebrating a border space that facilitates fluid cultural identities” (my emphasis). She urges rethinking the narration of the Islamic Revolution as a space of “both rupture and possibility, positioning diasporic Iranian women writers as key witnesses to testimonial narratives of loss and suffering” (154). Naghibi’s call raises interesting questions: What kinds of representational strategies might make life narratives more resistant to exploitation by campaigns announcing a message of ‘freedom’ and ‘liberation’? And, which autobiographical media can effectively link the personal and the political to promote telling stories of crisis and trauma, on the one hand, and innovative possibility, on the other, to map the ‘creative tensions’ that they set up?

3 As Naghibi and O’Malley observe, even Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* has often been read through a Western neoliberal filter focused on engaging personal details, such as teenaged Marji’s touching costume of jean jacket, Michael Jackson button, and hijab in *Persepolis I* (131), while ignoring its sharp critique of British and American oil-driven foreign policy and anti-Muslim propaganda. While its expressions of anguish about the revolution’s undermining of a distinguished Persian history and grief at the loss of family members and friends to the regime’s persecution make *Persepolis* a moving and important intervention, Satrapi has remade herself as a cosmopolitan diasporic subject, migrating to France in 1993, although she affirms her identity as Iranian.³ That is, she is one of the “Iranians of the imagination” whom Naghibi distinguishes from “those who stayed behind and suffered through the war and the policies of the Islamic Republic”, some of whom now assert – invoking the rhetoric of authenticity – that they are “the ‘real’ Iranians” (152).

4 A differently situated graphic memoir tracking how the experience of the Revolution and

² Touragi extends his critique to memoirs by writers remaining in Iran such as *Iran Awakening: One Woman's Journey to Reclaim Her Life and Country* by 2003 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi.

³ Over a decade ago Satrapi insisted that her identity is as an Iranian woman. See the interview by the Asia Society <http://asiasociety.org/marjane-satrapi-i-will-always-be-iranian>.

the Islamic Republic affected both micro- and macro-Iranian histories is Parsua Bashi's *Nylon Road*, published in German in 2006, while she lived as a 'migrant' (her preferred term) in Zürich; it was translated into English a year later, then Spanish. *Nylon Road*'s innovative style of visual and verbal dialogue is a tough yet engaging antidote to narratives of nostalgia and victimage; and its dialogical style resists appropriation to a liberal humanist point of view. Like Satrapi, Bashi as a girl and young woman identified with various socialist-leftist ideological positions and criticized the excesses and abuses of the Revolution and its repressive aftermath. But because Bashi, born three years before Satrapi, did not leave Iran until 2004 (at age 37), her account in *Nylon Road* of life in Tehran for decades suggests how ideological shifts accompanying the upheaval of revolution and the fundamentalist regime texture the processes of memory as the flux of events plunges subjects into near-constant change and ever-shifting self-definition.

5 Bashi's graphic memoir is an open-ended, dialogical one. In *Nylon Road*'s plot the narrator engages serially, and non-chronologically, with eleven sharply contrasted younger 'ghost' selves that she shed with migration. As she discovers that she had "forgotten me" these ghosts gradually reawaken her to the diversity of her former beliefs and positions (Bashi 15).⁴ Bashi's innovative use of these avatars places them on the scene of past events similarly to how eyewitnesses are positioned, although they are not genuine eyewitnesses but visual fictions created from memory. Of course, because migration is the necessary precondition for narrating a story of vulnerability and flight, a diasporic witness is not literally an 'eyewitness', although some diasporic memoirists serve as surrogate eyewitnesses to the experience of national upheaval and oppression. Bashi's ghost selves exert pressures that compel *Nylon Road*'s narrator to constantly negotiate with her memories as embodied subjects in creative tension with her migrant 'I', rather than consolidating them into a coherent post-migration identity. Her strategy of positioning encounters with these past selves in Zürich, rather than having her memories recalled by a child narrator, dramatizes how her past avatars responded quite differently over decades to the flux of experience. Bashi's rhetorical tactics and visual tropes for situating self-presentation thus provide a prismatically multi-sided account of her pre-migration past in Iran, giving *Nylon Road* an experiential authority closer to that of the eyewitness. Through this rhetorical strategy Bashi documents significant abuses that, as a young woman, she experienced during the

⁴ I call this process a dialogical one, drawing on Bakhtin's concept in *The Dialogic Imagination* for an ongoing process of exchange with no final resolution. Parsua's encounters with her former selves conduct a continuing dialogue as a chain of exchanges that remains unresolved at the comic's end (see Bakhtin, 292-4).

repressive early days of the Republic. Although she recounts a catalog of humiliations and losses – a severe whipping by the Islamic Court, loss of most of her family and friends through emigration, and loss of custody of her child in a divorce trial – such times are not presented as *all* that staying in Iran and working for change after the Revolution meant to her.

6 Bashi also extends her dialogical critique to the excesses of neoliberal capitalism, embodied in her experience in Zürich but visible globally in practices toward and media representations of women. Her argument has two effects: it undermines the West’s claim to ethical superiority; and it underscores the tendency to represent Islamic women as abject others without distinguishing among the histories and practices of various nations and periods. *Nylon Road*’s sustained montage of past selves thus foregrounds the limits placed on women globally by conservative politics, be they in ‘democratic’, ‘socialist’, or ‘religious-fundamentalist’ nations. As a result, its exponential multiplication of figures of the drawn and narrated past self is a challenging dialogical ‘read’ that explicitly resists framing in neoliberal-humanist terms. Despite this achievement, *Nylon Road* is not well known in either Anglophone nations or Iran, where copies are prohibited from circulating officially. It merits attention, however, as a feminist diasporic graphic memoir navigating both national politics and global cultural relations with improvised and innovative visual and verbal strategies.⁵

The Search for Forgotten ‘Me’s’ in *Nylon Road*

7 Parsua Bashi is well positioned to narrate her story. Born into a middle-class family with three children in 1966, over a decade before the Revolution, she refused her parents’ urging that she migrate – unlike most of her family and friends – after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Instead, she studied art at the University of Tehran when it reopened in 1983 and became a successful, award-winning graphic designer. Yet, for ‘fraternizing’ with a man in public, she was sentenced to a severe whipping and thereafter, at 23, married to escape the pressures on unmarried women. Although she and her husband had a daughter, she soon found him oppressively dominating and sought a divorce. When the punitive divorce court assigned custody of her daughter to the father, she grieved although her career thrived. Eventually she was “struck by Cupid’s arrow” in 2002 and left Iran in April 2004 for Zürich – in German-speaking

⁵ As Naghibi observes, “some narratives of the regime may languish in obscurity, unsuccessful in their attempts to claim willing witnesses” (155) if they fail to establish an “empathic engagement” (158) with readers.

Switzerland – although she did not know German, to marry Nathanael Su, a well-known jazz musician of Swiss and Cameroonian parents (6, top right). *Nylon Road* originated as a comic about a protagonist who, struggling to resume her artistic career abroad in her thirties, began work on a book of comic drawings.

8 Parsua Bashi wrote me that her idea of making the comic arose when she experienced “a Vacuum space between my past in Iran and my new life in Zürich” that spurred her to begin “a kind of daily sessions to write about my past, and draw some little pictures only to show to some friends” (Personal Correspondence, 28 Nov. 2015, hereafter referred to as PC). *Nylon Road* thus originated as a form of self-therapy in sketches that Bashi developed into a graphic memoir in collaboration with a translator and editor from Kein & Aber Publishing Company. It was awarded the “Cultural Worlds in Switzerland” prize by Pro Helvetica, the Arts Council of Switzerland. Bashi’s journey, however, was not a one-way trajectory as, three years after the memoir’s publication, she returned to Tehran, where she continues to live and work as a successful graphic designer, now reunited with her daughter. She has written other books in Farsi that were translated into German and published.⁶ While her reintegration into Iran may seem surprising, given the sharp criticism by *Nylon Road*’s protagonist of post-Revolution life, her critique extends to the inequitable gender and racial politics of Western and Socialist nations as well.

9 *Nylon Road* conducts its coming-of-age story as a conversation among versions or avatars of Parsua at various ages that, she says, “came from a real emotional/psychological situation” (PC).⁷ Its dialogical set-up enables her to interrogate notions of identity coherence for subjects caught in conflicting concepts of home, history, and memory amid the ideological positions of fundamentalist post-revolutionary Iran, the capitalist global north, and the Socialism of the former Soviet Union. Through this dialogism, *Nylon Road* forestalls resolution other than the creative tension that its narrating I, Parsua, confronts with her eleven narrated I’s. In its constant conversational shifts among ‘I’’s between comic boxes, Bashi develops, in Marianne Hirsch’s term, a “binocular vision” that is ambivalent about her location and position (1213). Thus *Nylon*

⁶ Bashi’s more recent books include: Parsua Bashi with Martin Walker: *Persische Kontraste* (Persian Contrasts), Zürich: Walkwerk, 2008; and Parsua Bashi: *Briefe aus Teheran* (Letters from Tehran), Kein & Aber Verlag, 2010, translated from Farsi by Suzanne Baghestani.

⁷ Although the convention in life narrative is to use the first name of the author for the narrated I and the last name for the narrating ‘I’, in *Nylon Road* the complexity of having eleven former selves engage in dialogue with the narrator makes this impractical. I therefore use ‘Parsua’ to refer to the narrating ‘I’ and add, after the name of each former self, her age to make their differently situated positions and points of view clear. I also distinguish both the narrated I’s and the narrating ‘I’ from the flesh-and-blood author Bashi, who draws, writes, organizes, and edits the comic. She is revealed as the comic’s maker on its last page, with her drawn hand invoking the invisible hand that drew it.

Road serves simultaneously as both a dissident history of the Islamic Republic and a critique of Western consumerism and commodity capitalism as they define Swiss and, more generally, Western values. In treating individual trauma as part of a collective experience occasioned both by the Republic and by migration, *Nylon Road* belongs to the genre of life writing that Sidonie Smith terms ‘crisis comics.’⁸ Unlike many such comics, however, *Nylon Road* does not appeal to readers to bear witness to her suffering or contribute to an agency aiding the artist. Rather, its tough yet funny interrogation of the complicity of the world’s nations – including Iran and the Middle East, Europe and the Americas, and the former Soviet socialist bloc – in perpetuating colonial values critiques how all conform their citizens to repressive ideologies and discourage independent thinking.

The Divergent International Reception of *Nylon Road*

10 Although *Nylon Road* has not gained traction in North America or the UK, in the German-speaking world, as in Spain, it has a substantial, appreciative readership.⁹ Its varied fortunes are a consequence of both the contrasting publishing strategies of its Swiss and American publishers and its differential reception by critics in Europe and North America. The original German edition of the comic was marketed as a kind of double-edged sword – a memoir simultaneously critical of the Islamic Republic and Western neoliberalism that was welcomed in European reviews as a witty and probing intervention into cultural politics. In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Simon Poelchau characterized *Nylon Road* as a thoughtful dialogue among several different embodiments of Parsua about the excesses of both Iran and the West, noting her sharp quip that in Zürich she enjoys gourmet dining while Iranians are starving under Western-imposed sanctions.¹⁰ In the online journal *Migrazine*, Olivera Stajić observed how many Western feminists ignored *Nylon Road*’s substantive interrogation of Islamic fundamentalism and critique

⁸ Smith describes the crisis comic as a mode of “witness to radical injury and harm” that addresses readers variously as “those with the need to know their rights”, “individual agents of rights activism” who can “rescue themselves,” and “privileged readers to be enlightened about conditions elsewhere” (62-4). Bashi’s audience includes both readers in the global north and those of the Iranian diaspora interested in the interplay of rescue and alienation in their own experience of migration.

⁹ As of early 2016 Kein & Aber has sold about 3,000 copies of *Nylon Road*, and the Spanish translation has sold about 1,000. Information from Lisa Mühlemann, Head, Rights and Licenses, Kein & Aber AG, Zürich.

¹⁰ Simon Poelchau, in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, aptly observes: “Despite her criticism of the fundamentalist regime of the mullahs, Bashi resists damning Islam as such. In her opinion those in power use religion as an ideological weapon to legitimate their authoritarian politics.” (My translation of: “Bei aller Kritik an dem fundamentalistischen Regime der Mullahs unterlässt Bashi es aber, den Islam als solches zu verdammen. Ihrer Meinung nach benutzen die Machthaber im Iran die Religion als ideologische Waffe, um ihre autoritäre Politik zu legitimieren.”)

of the limits of Western positions.¹¹ Overall, *Nylon Road* was heralded as a comic sharply aware of discrepancies between the ideology and economic and cultural practices of Western neoliberalism that contributed to debates about the place of post-Revolution Iran in global politics.¹²

11 In English-language journalism and scholarship, however, *Nylon Road* received little critical attention. An anonymous review in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, one of the few newspapers to cover it, criticized its “anger.”¹³ Online, Jonathan Liu’s review in *Wired* ignored its political acuity, remarking: “What [*Nylon Road*] really reveals is how little the two cultures really know about each other, let alone being able to understand and sympathize with each other.” To date, my critical essay on *Nylon Road* is, to my knowledge, the only one in English.¹⁴

12 A comparison of the two versions of the cover of *Nylon Road* suggests a possible reason for its lack of impact in North America. The illustration originally used for the German and Spanish covers, which does not appear elsewhere in the comic, captures Bashi’s dilemma as a diasporic subject caught between conflicting national and political identities (Fig. 1). In it, Parsua, the narrating ‘I’, sits in a full-frontal, cross-legged position, gazing at the viewer as she draws on a sketchpad. Each of her stocking-clad legs is inscribed, one with Persian characters, the other with Roman-alphabet letters and numerals.¹⁵ The nylon stockings signifying feminine fashion mark Bashi’s uneasy location between opposed cultural and linguistic worlds along the ‘nylon road’ of women’s contemporary transnational transmission of image, fashion, and

¹¹ Stajić states, “In addition to the pure narrative [Bashi] also visually depicts some fundamental debates of modern society: How far should freedom of opinion go? Isn’t criticism of Islam at times counterproductive? And how fully do women in the West really lead independently empowered lives?” (My translation of: “Abseits des bloßen Narrativs bebildet sie auch einige Grundsatzdebatten der modernen Gesellschaft: Wie weit darf Meinungsfreiheit gehen? Ist Islamkritik manchmal nicht auch kontraproduktiv? Und inwieweit führen die Frauen im Westen tatsächlich ein selbstbestimmtes Leben?”).

¹² Parsua Bashi wrote the following to me about the reception of *Nylon Road* in media for Iranian audiences: “There were three Persian press reviews, a couple of interviews and some more reviews in some Iranian Blogs: BBC Persian website, Radio Zamenh website, Radio Farda (VOA Persian radio branch in Prague) and some others that I have not recall (*sic*) now, and yes they were definitely have been read (*sic*) by Iranians inside Iran. But as you might know all the mentioned websites are filtered (blocked) by Iranian Gov., so we could say they were read by Iranians unofficially” (PC). Ordering books published elsewhere through websites is also impossible because online money transfer outside the country is not allowed.

¹³ “There’s a lot of anger here, not only that of the mullahs and their minions, but that of Bashi, appalled at how more than 2,000 years of Persian history and culture had been lost in the dark backward abyss of religious fanaticism.”

¹⁴ The only scholarly attention *Nylon Road* has received in English in North America that I am aware of is in two papers that I presented at international conferences and my original essay, a longer version of this article.

¹⁵ Afsaneh Rezaei, a PhD Student in the Department of Comparative Studies at The Ohio State University, advised me that the lettering on the right stocking leg “is likely Persian” (though the words she discerned could mean something in either Persian or Arabic), noting “There are a couple of instances where I think I can see the letter گ, which is only in the Persian alphabet. And the date and location printed right under her elbow say Zurich ۱۳۸۵ زوری/خ ۱۳۸۵—the number referring to a year in the Persian calendar (1385, would be 2006/2007).”

sexuality. Thus, as an adult migrant to Switzerland, Parsua is literally at a crossroads of conflicting ideological, religious, and social views between the Iranian-Muslim and Western-secular worlds that she inhabits. With its binocular optic her ‘fashion statement’ cover embodies that tension.

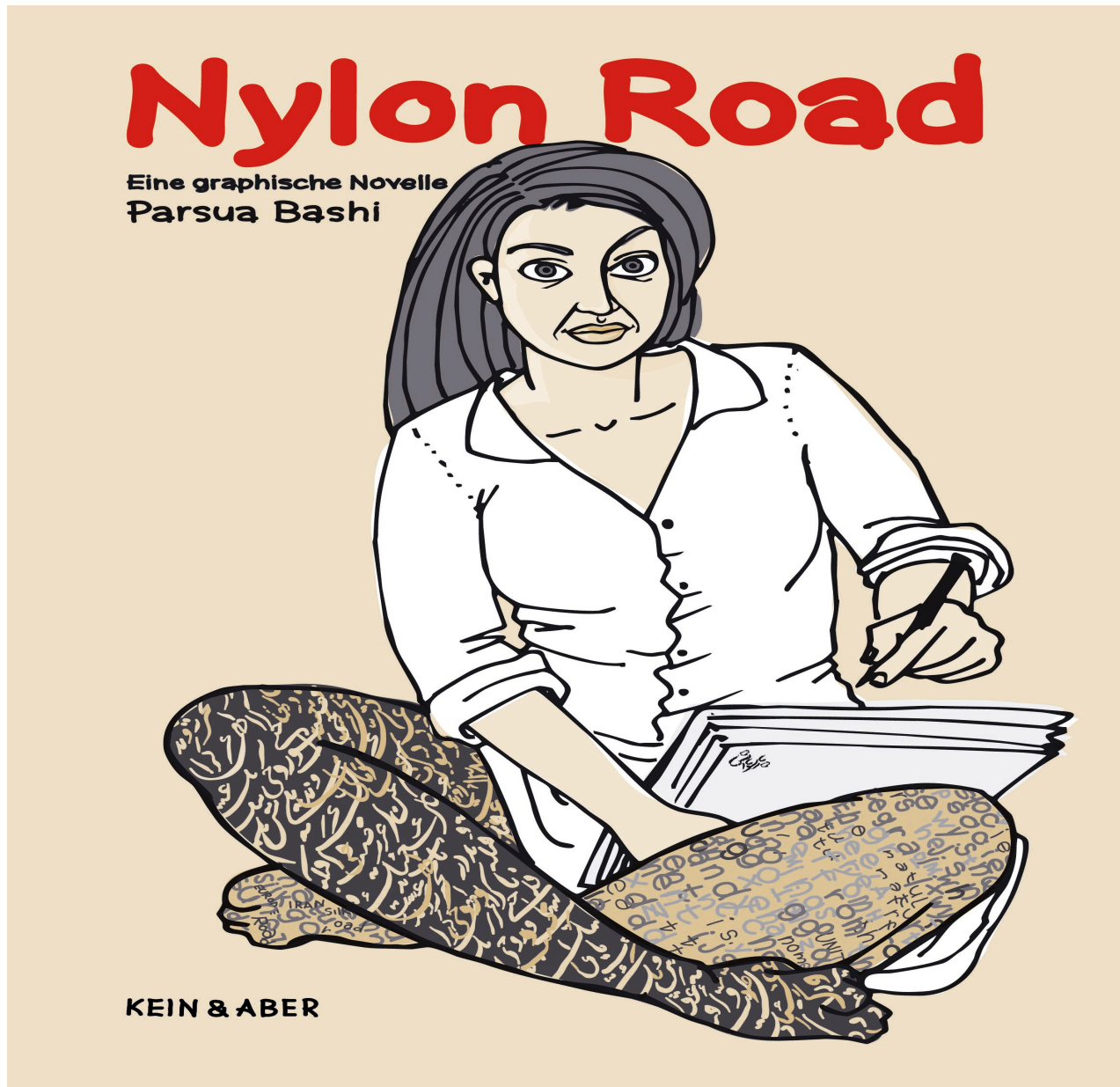


Fig. 1: Front cover, German edition. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.

13 By contrast, the cover of the English-language edition chosen by the comic's publisher, St. Martin's Press, reproduces a frame in the book depicting a child-woman emerging from a line of shadowy, veiled female figures who are submerged in dark shrouds (Fig. 2).

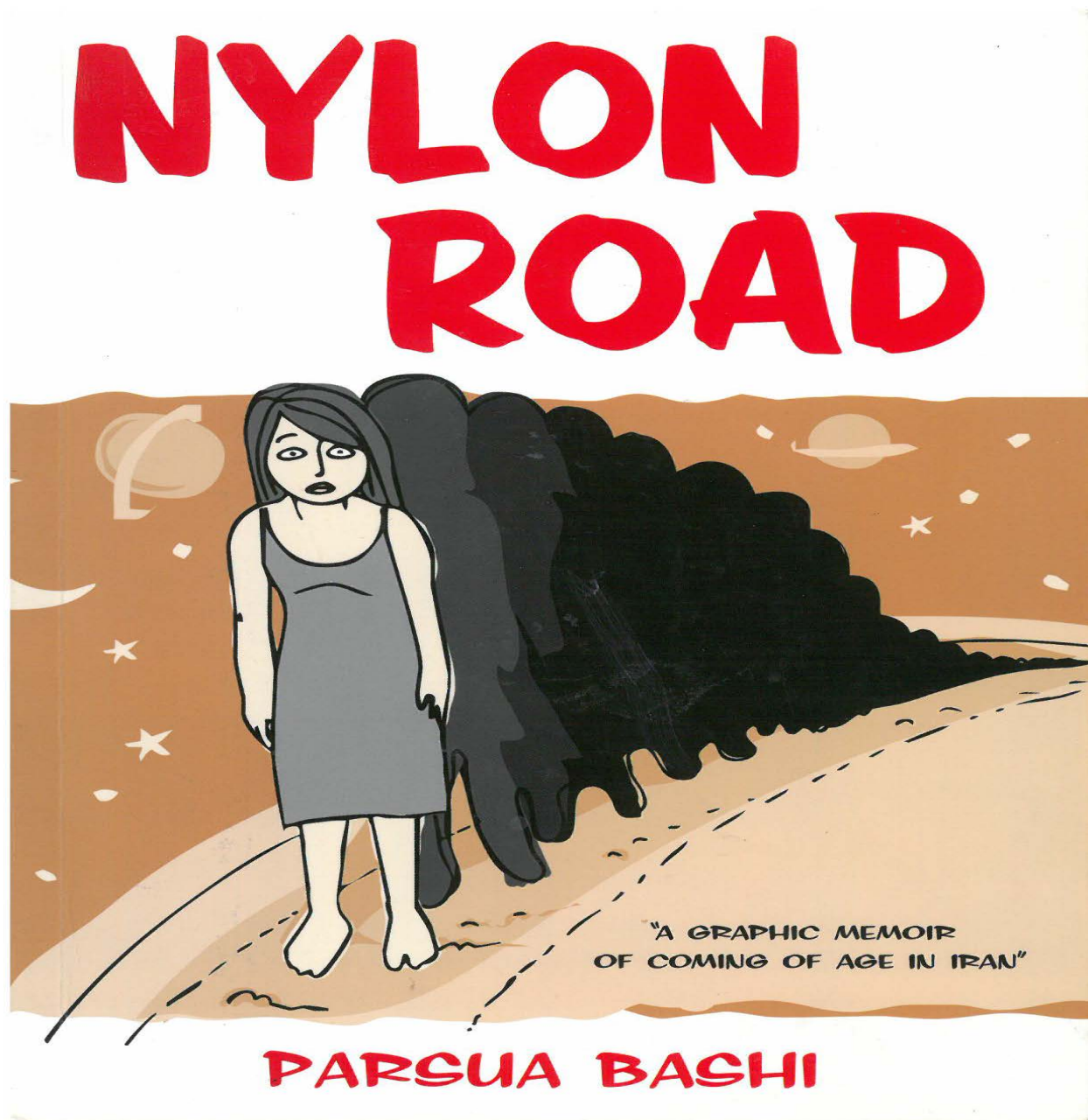


Fig. 2: Front cover, English edition. Reprinted by permission of St. Martin's Griffin, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.

She is barefoot, slumped in dejection, and wears only a slip as she stands on the round surface of the globe against a vaguely Zoroastrian planetary background.¹⁶ While this pose characterizes an initial moment of abjection after Parsua's migration to Zürich, her helpless appearance is untypical. The different affects of the two covers are striking: While the original Swiss cover suggests the ironic self-representation of an acknowledged transnational artist, the English-language one depicts a dislocated refugee as global victim, although Bashi left Iran voluntarily for a romantic interest. Similarly, while the original German subtitle is simply *eine graphische Novelle*, "A Graphic Novel", the English version is subtitled *A Graphic Memoir of Coming of Age in Iran*, which places Bashi's comic within the Bildungsroman tradition of education as accommodation to Western norms and values, stylizing the comic as a 'soft weapon', in Whitlock's phrase, in the American 'war on terror', which is at odds with the narrative that unfolds within it.¹⁷ That is, Bashi's artistic agency was undermined in the English-language publisher's design and cover of the book. While these differences in cover choice may seem slight, they are linked to larger distinctions about the circulation of Bashi's graphic memoir and the receptivity of Western and diasporic audiences to its dialogical conversations.¹⁸

Narrative Structure in *Nylon Road*

14 In working out a graphic mode to represent her psychic and political struggles, Bashi uses a fluid line reminiscent of contemporary magazine illustration and visual techniques drawn from portraiture. Her style of presenting encounters between her narrating and embodied past 'I's is a visual dialogic that represents confrontations by shifting the positions of the 'I's within the frame to signal the opposed points of view. Bashi described her process of composing the comic as it moved from what Hillary L. Chute calls hand-drawn "marks" to final form, writing me: "First I draw quick pencil sketches on paper, then draw them again in a final form by ink on paper, scanned the outlined versions, and colored them in computer by a drawing software. The bubbles with the text was the last layer" (PC). That is, the 'I' who appears in each chapter as both narrator (in rectangular boxes above the frames) and speaker (in text bubbles of dialogue) is embodied in

¹⁶ The cover design is by Lisa Marie Pompilio under the St. Martin's Griffin imprint in New York.

¹⁷ Bashi expressed to me her concern about the different covers used to market her graphic memoir, noting that "for the English version the publisher wanted to change the cover design with one of the panels of the book. Honestly talking, I do not like either their choice of the drawing or the layout." (PC). Other than cover image, subtitle, back cover, and paper size, the pagination and materials of the two versions are identical.

¹⁸ *Nylon Road's* translation into colloquial English is, in my view, well done, faithful to the original German yet fresh and funny.

a kind of visual ‘language’ that organizes multiple, fragmented moments of remembered experience. While the outlined figures and a two-color scheme (terracotta, gray, black, and white) of *Nylon Road*’s graphics have a different, more cartoon-like ‘look’ than, say, the boldly beautiful images of *Persepolis*, they use visual self-representation to create a collage of witnessing to four decades of history.

15 *Nylon Road* shuttles contrapuntally between narrator Parsua’s life in Tehran from the early 1970s till 2004 and her life thereafter as a migrant in Zürich. Its twelve unnumbered chapters are separated by untitled pages, each with a small cartoon pulled from a detail in the text. Each chapter returns to the frame story, with Parsua in her narrative present of Zürich, engaging with a self from her past who serves as an eyewitness to that historical moment. As these past selves conduct increasingly contentious dialogues with the narrating ‘I’, they demand an account of who she has become in her present migrant life, while as readers we shift continually between the dramatically different contexts of past upheavals and the apparent serenity and stability of Switzerland. The eleven avatars whom Parsua confronts in various chapters are distinguished by their ages, clothing, and hairstyles, as well as the hijab or headscarf worn by the adult Parsuas in Iran – visible evidence of *Nylon Road*’s ‘binocular’ view of the Iranian Islamic Republic. And the narrator’s dialogue with her increasingly adversarial former I’s, who are presented associatively rather than in chronological sequence, brings competing truth claims into view that parallel their divergent appearances. Teenaged Parsua is ideologically invested in Marxism: her young adult self is stunned by changes that are introduced with the Khomeini regime; a later self becomes an active resister, first against the post-Revolutionary fundamentalist government and then, in Europe, against the excesses of neoliberalism and the ubiquity of racial prejudice. As both verbal and a visual dialogic, these conversations juxtapose various Parsuas’ earlier dissident views on the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent Islamic Republic to the narrating ‘I’’s perspective as a montage of historical flux. Although *Nylon Road* does not draw on intergenerational memory (unlike many others of the Iranian diaspora), in its assemblage of decades of remembered experience during and after the Revolution Parsua’s selves perform a kind of ‘eyewitnessing’ to events that occurred after many Iranians had emigrated. Bashi’s strategy of giving voice to her former embodied selves, rather than simply recalling memories, situates Bashi in the gap between her former positions and the narrator Parsua’s new migratory consciousness.

16 That is, the way that Bashi strategically places her contending ‘I’'s on the page confers an authority on her past selves because of the dominance of the image in graphic memoir. The effect of *Nylon Road* is unlike the linear thrust of written autobiography, with its privileging of the present-tense narrator because Parsua’s varied past selves are contrapuntal figures rather than the evolutionary self characteristic of the Bildungsroman, with its teleological view of life. Her narrating ‘I’ does not have a consolidated identity, but a fractured and provisional one. While she may be a mature and accomplished woman at home, she is an innocent abroad, unprepared for the cosmopolitan world of Zürich at the same time that she sees through its complacent materialism. Thus Bashi’s narrative undercuts the fantasy of integrating past and present selves through migration to the West. Her recollections are involuntary, summoned as embodied selves radically different from the present-time narrating ‘I’ at the same time that they ‘know’ her. And memory shifts from being a merely personal function to focusing on public events that foreground how the customs and values of the Islamic Republic differ from those of the secular West, represented as the Züricher. *Nylon Road* thus sets up an ideological debate through the power of its images and its presentation of contending political positions, even as it deconstructs the binary stereotype of ‘Islam versus the West’ as an inadequate framework for the complexity of women’s lives in the shifting gender relations of both post-Revolutionary Iran and Western Europe. I now turn to a discussion of *Nylon Road*’s chapters at length.

The Dialogics of *Nylon Road*

17 As a tale about the trials of an Iranian woman after the Revolution first to stay and struggle in her native land, then to accommodate to living as a migrant in Zürich where she is perceived as an ‘other’, *Nylon Road* ‘talks back’ to what the narrator perceives as Westerners’ smug superiority. Although Bashi’s later return to Iran is not part of this story, her ambivalence about adapting to her new land dominates it. As Parsua’s self-inquiry engages in non-chronological order with eleven avatars at different ages – 6, 13, 16, 18, 19, 21, 23, 29, 33, 35, and 36, the ideological combat with each past ‘I’ intensifies. (I signal this by using ‘Parsua’ to refer to the narrating ‘I’ and put the age of each former self after her name, to mark their different points of view.)

18 In the frame story that begins Chapter One Parsua the narrator is introduced in a half-page panel depicting her in a blouse and pants, with uncovered long hair and folded arms, gazing calmly at the viewer as a 37-year-old woman who left Tehran in April 2004 after falling in love

(a story she omits). She discloses her expectation that, after emigration, she would become not just another immigrant, but someone able to engage in “real life” in her “new society” (8). Subsequent frames detail her struggle to learn both German and Swiss-German dialect, find a job appropriate to her graphic-design skills, and develop a social circle. But the difficult process of cultural and linguistic assimilation leaves her feeling discouraged and displaced. Migrant Parsua sums up her dilemma: “I started to feel like a useless asshole” (Fig. 3).

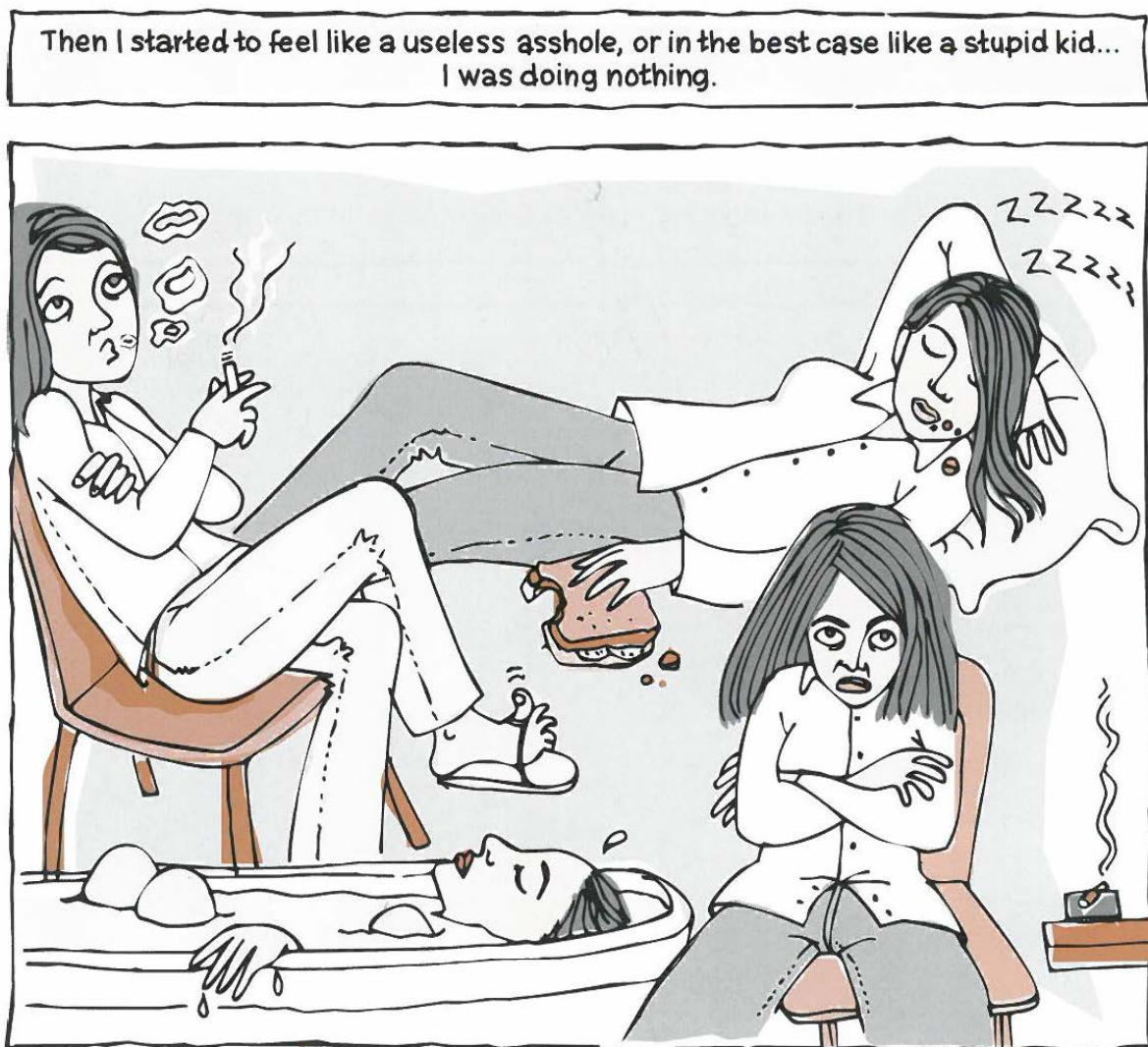


Fig. 3: *From Nylon Road (p. 12) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.*

In the panel four images depicting her as idle and disgruntled occupy a single visual plane, a style Bashi will develop further in subsequent chapters. And this moment of self-recognition in frustration spurs further reflection.

19 While the narrator stands brushing her teeth, “a happy-go-lucky little girl” of 6 appears in shorts and sandals, holding flowers and toys. Recognizing this grinning apparition by her birthmark, the narrator, stunned, asks, “How could I have forgotten me?” (15). Parsua-6 responds, “The only reason I’m here is because you called.” She proceeds to say that Parsua is out of touch with herself – “I was the one who had lost contact” – and informs her that there are “more of us waiting to see you”, establishing the narrative convention of visits by past selves that anchors *Nylon Road*’s plot. What might seem a Western cliché of getting in touch with ‘the child within’, is here used to inaugurate an autobiographical quest (18, bottom half. See Figure 2 illustration.). Disclosing her unhappiness as a dislocated migrant, Parsua identifies the moment as a turning point and awakening: “I was alone, hopeless, desperate, and apparently unable to deal with the situation. ... They were here to remind me that what I am now is the result of their lives” (18).

20 Unlike the search for unequivocal rescue from the Islamic Republic that many Iranian diasporic memoirs recount, as Chapter One goes on, Parsua begins to regard her migration to Zürich as producing a traumatic gap in her life. The revelation – “I saw my entire life in a flash” – is drawn as “MY LIFE!”, a jagged-topped building of concrete blocks that have broken apart the edifice of a formerly coherent self (19, top left). But in a close-up portrait, the next frame reveals the other side of that moment, a simultaneous “ENLIGHTENMENT” or “Aha!” awareness, with literal light bulbs in Parsua’s eyes. She is awakened to a double consciousness that stirs a desire to examine her past – and inaugurate her story (19, top right).

21 Bashi wrote me about this moment: “The Idea of having conversation with myself came from a real emotional/psychological situation that I was in at the time of writing this book” in the “Vacuum space” that she experienced between her Iranian past and new Swiss life (PC). The felt space, depicted as a gap between parts of the building, is echoed in the gutter between the two frames that juxtapose “The interruption” and “ENLIGHTENMENT,” as Parsua feels that her life became “absurd and meaningless” (19 top left).¹⁹ This unresolved traumatic space marking the narrator’s awakening to autobiographical consciousness is thus a difference that produces rupture, rather than the consolidation of an edifice of the self.

22 In this crisis of self-reflection, as Parsua listens to the radio, the second avatar to appear is her 16-year-old self from 1982, situated during the Iran-Iraq war and in the wake of the Cultural

¹⁹ Chute observes that “the gutter [is] ... the figuration of a psychic order outside of the realm of symbolization, a space that refuses to resolve the interplay of elements of absence and presence” (*Disaster*, 35).

Revolutionary Council's installation of a rigidly fundamentalist Islamic system. Parsua-16 voices a critique of the "relaxed" European view of the world reflected in feel-good broadcasts, while in Iran "other people are dealing with shit" such as mandatory prayer in school and the conscription of all 18-year-old men for the war (24). In Bashi's depiction this moment is a collision of two versions of herself, differently embodied in Parsua's long hair and blouse and the veiled garment of the patriotic teenager sternly admonishing her. The hippie Western woman they glimpse while strolling, who has appropriated a prayer shawl to wear as a skirt, appalls Parsua-16 because of her ignorance that the shawl is a traditional head-covering for many Middle Easterners, from Palestinians to militant fundamentalists (25). In the ensuing argument between Parsua's two selves, each makes points about the perception of Islam, dramatized on the page by their shifting body language, gestures, and dominant or subordinate placement in the visual dialogic.

23 During Parsua's reflection in Chapter Three on whether she is "homesick" for her "hometown" or has just forgotten the violence of Iran's past in nostalgia, her 18-year-old self of 1984, the fourth year of the Iran-Iraq war, appears in pants and a ponytail to narrate the painful personal losses of those years: the brother she felt close to was smuggled to Turkey to avoid the army; and many of her family and friends left for Europe or North America, trips that turned into a kind of permanent emigration that was "seriously tearing families apart, some forever" (30). Eventually "none of our family or friends were left", except her parents, yet Parsua-18 seeks to remain true to her ideal of what the nation, which once was Persia, could again be (33). As narrator, Parsua sums up her conflicted feelings: Was it worse to abandon her native land – "I was young [but] strictly against emigration" (32, middle) and leave it to "a bunch of mediocre midgets" (32, bottom)? Or to feel "abandoned" in not leaving a place that, in the view of many, had betrayed its Persian history (33, top right)? Despite the urging of her parents, Parsua-18 remains staunch in her determination to study fine arts at the University of Tehran. Responding to Parsua-18's question about the most difficult part of migration, Parsua acknowledges that she felt more in exile at home – "most homesick in my own hometown" (35). At the same time in her adopted new land she is virtually speechless without her mother tongue, as she confronts the difficulty of integrating into Swiss-German society (34, bottom). While the experience of crisis in Iran has "vaccinated [her] against" homesickness, she is left without a "home" anywhere (35, bottom), a familiar theme of migrant life writing.

24 The narrator's belief in her self-sufficiency is next challenged by her 23-year-old self (in 1989) who calls on her to recall a moment when the revolutionary guards were busily rounding

up what she calls “THE USUAL SUSPECTS” – political activists, boys and girls together, journalists and artists, writers and intellectuals, monarchists, dealers of music cassettes and alcohol, “bad hejabs” – for alleged crimes in appearance, ideas, or expression (Fig. 4).

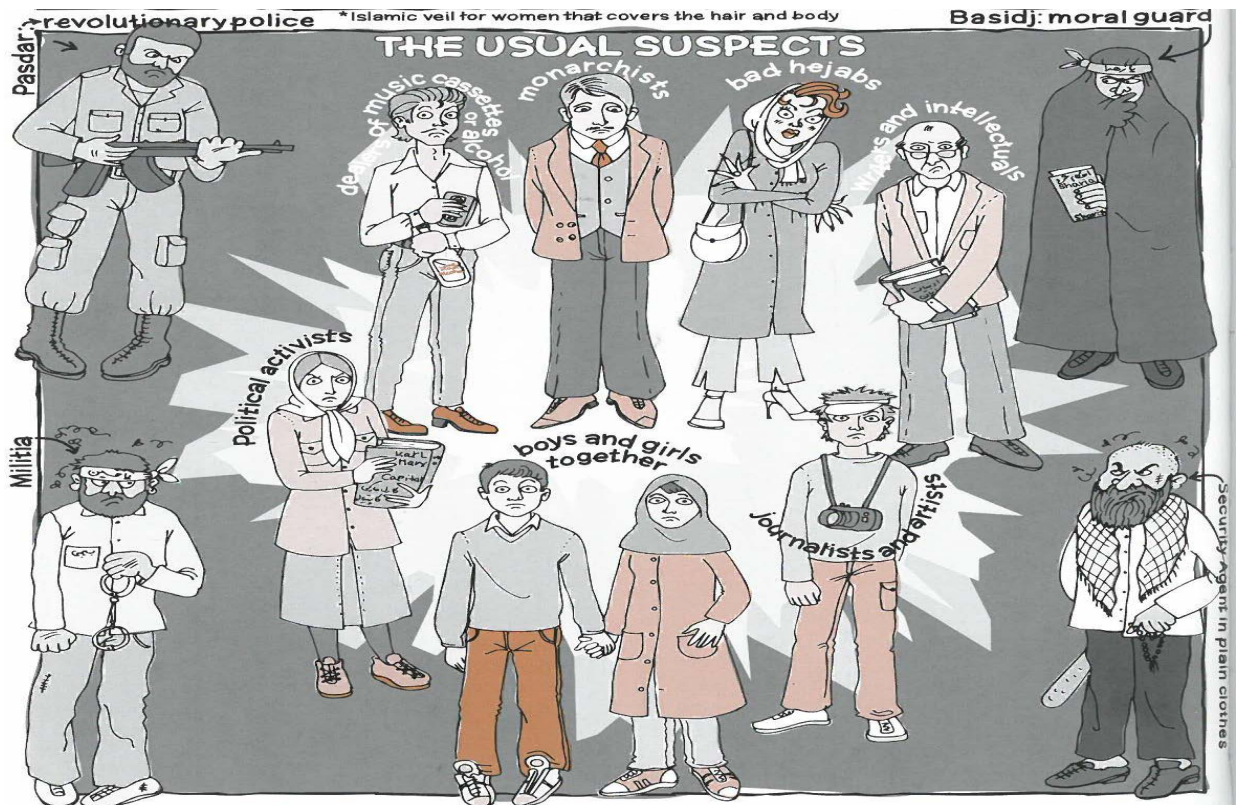


Fig. 4: From *Nylon Road* (p. 42) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.

In Tehran, Parsua-23, lonely without her friends, develops an inexplicable crush on a male artist colleague, drawn as portly and dominating, who envelops her in a sea of words (45, panel, second row). When she is caught walking on the street with a male classmate by a Pasdar (member of the Revolutionary Guard) who accosts them for associating in public, she defiantly responds that Sharia law does not prohibit such acts. For this retort she is sent to the Islamic Court and sentenced to seventy lashes (44). Summing up her response to this painful moment, the narrating ‘I’ recognizes that her sense of citizenship was violated in Iran: “I felt enormously ashamed to be part of such a society” (44).

25 Depressed and humiliated, she turns to her boyfriend, despite their differences. When he asserts that he will “protect her” – “I’ll make a PERFECT woman out of you” – she agrees to be married and, three months later, discovers she is pregnant (45). Although Parsua now regrets her

“stupid decision” to wed this tyrant and the impact it had on the daughter to whom she gave birth, she consoles her younger self for the bitter experience. The narrator goes on to observe how the limiting laws of religious fundamentalism lead young people into bad marriages in Iran; conversely, in Europe, people can get to know each other before marriage (47). Finally, both Parsuas resolve their quarrel by admitting that young people can make mistakes anywhere because both Middle Eastern and Western European nations exert forms of domination over their citizens.

26 This critique of personal life is extended, in Chapter Five, to a critique of political conservatism in both the Middle East and Euro-American nations. In Zürich Parsua has an encounter with a passionately pro-Persian Iranian-migrant woman expatriate. When this other woman speaks as “we PERSIANS” and denounces Arabs as “CAMEL RIDERS”, the four-page spread juxtaposes icons of Persian culture, displaying the splendors of the empire before the Arabs arrived that she enumerates, with an ever-closer focus on her screaming mouth. But Parsua’s response, as a cosmopolitan subject, is pained: “I was so embarrassed” (54), she confesses, denouncing the woman as “a chauvinist racist” (55), expressing unease with the pro-Persia woman’s nostalgia, reminiscent of the ‘Iranians of the imagination.’

27 In response, “one of my most patriotic selves” appears, the 35-year-old woman of 2001, a few years before Bashi migrated. Initially the two Parsuas argue about their justifications of the Islamic Republic and the ‘West’, their upper and lower positions within the frame alternating as each makes her argument. ‘Patriotic’ Parsua-35, committed to the relative freedom of pre-Revolutionary Iran, denounces Islamic fundamentalism and proclaims, in angry profiles, the excesses of Muslim leaders as “terrorists” who subject their own citizens to cruelty. In response Parsua challenges her former self’s view as “poisoned by rage” for claiming that the Islamic Republic’s imposition of religion is at fault for all Iran’s woes, not least because Islam has been merged with Iranian culture for 1,400 years (56-7). Their dispute, captured in a montage of close-up profiles of the two women sparring, induces Parsua to regard fundamentalisms as “simply for political purposes”, “propaganda . . . based on those false clichés” that use avowals of a “sacred mission” to hide their “dictatorial regime” (58). When her avatar charges that the fundamentalist Islamic Republic makes laws mandating the veiling of women and prohibiting alcohol, the narrating ‘I’ retorts that the West deports Middle Easterners as terrorists and, in France, condemns head-scarf-wearing as a religious symbol at the same time that it condones right-wing Aryan-nation protests and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The so-called ‘holy war’ of

fundamentalism thus links right-wing conservatives in East and West like ‘a double-sided blade’ in which they use mutual hatred to impose undemocratic limitations on their citizens’ rights. Her two selves, despite their different dress and locations, ultimately share a moment of insight in the last frame (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: *From Nylon Road (p. 61) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.*

The chapter, then, does not suggest that Parsua ‘reconverts’ from her Westernized tastes to Iran-nostalgia; rather it shows her recognition of repressive practices that underlie the ideologies of both the Islamic Republic and Western neoliberalism. As the final frame concludes, conservative propaganda in Iran, by shoring up the theocentric regime’s claim of a “holy war”, masks real issues of poverty, hunger, unemployment, and censorship of speech, enabling the dictatorship to mystify its power as religion (57). In parallel fashion, the West resists acknowledging how its own media reports can fuel attacks by immigration police and right-wing groups directed at Muslims (59-61). Thus the narrator’s dialogue with ‘patriotic’ Parsua-35 structurally links Islamic fundamentalism with its seeming opposite, the West’s avowed liberatory humanism.

28 Chapter Six takes up Parsua-the-narrator’s encounter with her divorced 29-year-old “mother-self” who lost custody of her daughter because she asked for a divorce from her jealous and possessive husband (65). Yet when weeping Parsua-29 recounts her sad story, Parsua rebukes her for refusing to recognize that she had a need to survive, despite her pain about the personal loss of her child and communal loss of her homeland, recognizing that these fueled not only her

grief, but her critique of Iranian custody laws favoring the husband as a “religious” policy (66). And she draws a political conclusion that her younger self couldn’t see, namely how ‘religion’ masks the Islamic Republic’s underlying ‘political purposes’, in frames of the prejudicial court process that caricature the judge and lawyer. When the judge assigns the child to her father, saying “True Muslim women live their lives with husbands even if they get beaten every day”, the scales of Justice are depicted as toppling (69).

29 Parsua-29 summarizes the social and professional rejection she experienced in a “JUST DIVORCED” composite drawing that represents her pariah status in Iran, including the many men who offer help privately in exchange for sex. Parsua urges her former self to let go of her victimage as “a poisonous habit of begging for sympathy”, drawn as the coat of pain and sorrow that she can only flush down the toilet at the chapter’s end and reminds her 29-year-old self of the leap she took to become independent (72). Their conversation becomes an occasion for feminist critique, as Parsua notes that, on the one hand, Iranian women had the vote earlier (1963) than their Swiss counterparts (1972); yet, on the other, in Iran women earn 30% less for the same jobs (72). Ultimately, “women all over the world are struggling for their rights. Some more, some less” (72). Thus the narrating ‘I’'s encounter with Parsua-29’s beliefs and position becomes an act of consciousness-raising that exposes socio-political contradictions globally and, personally, enables her to move beyond loss, though the memory of losing her child is drawn as a knife that still stabs Parsua to the heart (74). In this passionate dialogue one self’s point of view does not negate the other’s but, in dialogical fashion, leads to self-forgiveness and insight, if not the end of personal pain (74).

30 The next former self to confront Parsua is her most recent, the 36-year-old who owned a graphic design studio in Tehran. Although Swiss Parsua introduces her as an embarrassing, “almost arrogant” and “loud” feminist (76), Parsua-36 provocatively extends the critique of the West, pointing out how even the figures of accomplished Western writers and artists are used as a “consumer product” in advertising campaigns, “selling the female body in public” (Fig. 6-1 and 6-2). Parsua-36’s sweeping condemnation observes that, at the same time in Iran, brave women defending human rights were imprisoned and even killed, events that Western media sensationalized by representing them as victims in burqa (which are not worn in Iran) – among the many ways in which the Western artists display ignorance of Middle Eastern cultures. Yet the narrator’s encounter with “loud” feminist Parsua-36 also points up a didactic lesson: how

ignorant citizens of both the global north and south are about each other's cultures. "I learned that not knowing is not a sin. Not knowing and yet being prejudiced is where the problem starts" (79).

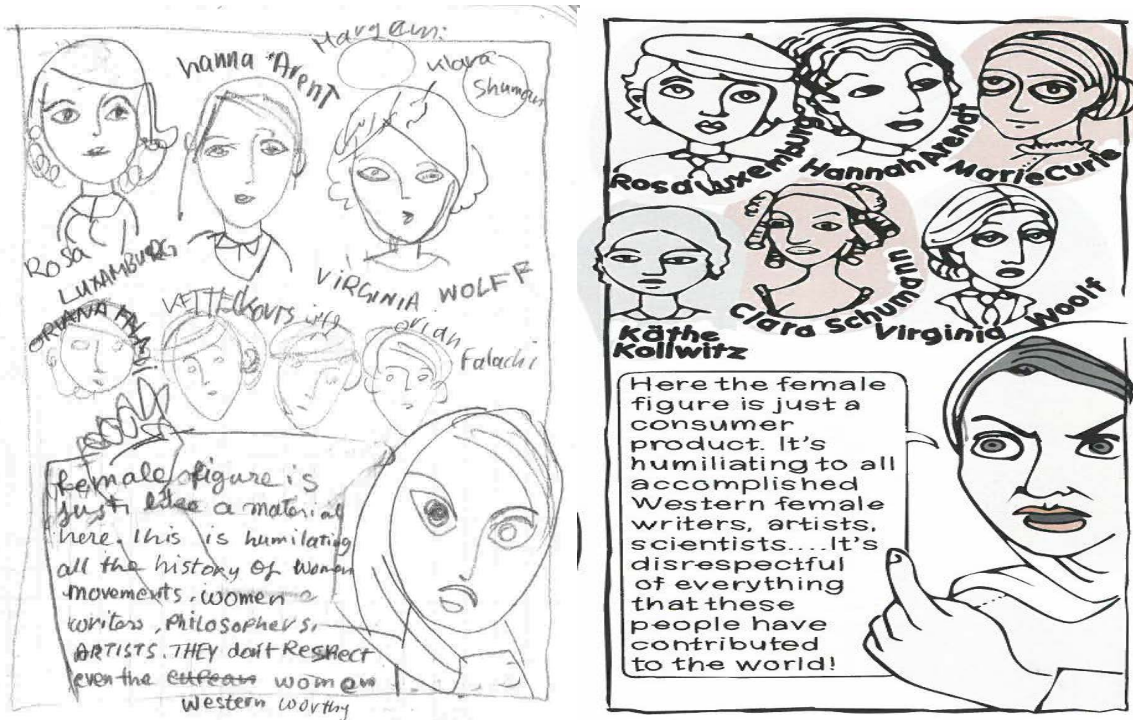


Fig. 6-1: Parsua Bashi, Sketch for Nylon Road, published by permission of the artist.

Fig. 6-2: From Nylon Road (p. 77) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.

31 Parsua's younger avatars can be harshly critical of the narrator's seemingly 'free' and comfortable status in Zürich, particularly 21-year-old Parsua in 1987 in Chapter Eight, who appears on the scene to narrate her years of privation during the Iraq-Iran war. The urgent voice of this younger self compels the narrating 'I' to reflect on the greedy myopia of the Swiss gourmet dinners she now enjoys and her new friends' preoccupation with vacations and consumer luxuries—like the truffle oil that she tries for the first time in Zürich (84, 88). Parsua reflects on the limits of her past self's memory, which could not know that in the nineties some things got better in Iran under its fifth president, Khatami (1997-2005)—although repression and human rights abuses intensified thereafter. But a lack of perspective, she suggests, may be shared by emigrants and Westerners (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: *From Nylon Road (p. 85) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.*

Parsua-21 also recalls contradictory aspects of wartime life in Iran. On the one hand, food was rationed and oil poured into plastic bags, while in Europe even chocolate is elaborately packaged; there were ration coupons and long waiting lines in markets; and the lack of cosmetics made hygiene a struggle. On the other hand, there was solidarity in Iranian family life for middle-class families like hers who sewed their own clothes modeled on pre-revolutionary catalogs; took photos to document both war and propaganda; held “exhibitions” of their paintings and photos, watched banned movies, and made live music inside the walls of their homes; and had endless private conversations about harsh realities that generated an everyday intimacy that Parsua finds rare in the commodity-obsessed Swiss world (86-92). To Parsua-21, Europeans are “sissies” (92), unlike the leftists who stayed in Iran and “dealt with the hardship” of everyday life (93). There are of course exceptions in both settings, people who crawl out of what Bashi depicts as European cocoon pods to help others struggling in the developing world (93). As the ongoing dialogue with her former selves makes clear, the claim to superiority of either the Islamic Republic or Western nations can be challenged by countervailing evidence. By the chapter’s end Swiss Parsua recognizes that her survival in her new social world, as in the old, depends on acts of forgetting and normalizing the burden of accumulated memories.

32 Reminded repeatedly by her former selves of repressive realities that marked post-revolutionary life in Iran, Parsua remains aware that nostalgia for the past is a form of false consciousness – in what is perhaps a textual barb directed at earlier emigrants. This is also borne

out in Chapter Nine, which charts how young Parsua-19's study of graphic design at the University of Tehran in 1985, after its reopening, was hindered by "conditions where nothing was allowed to be seen or heard" in the aftermath of the revolution's "explosion of light" depicted on a propaganda poster to ironic effect next to a sign proclaiming "OUR UNIVERSITIES ARE MAN-MAKING FACTORIES", both of which evoke scorn in Parsua-19 (98). She goes on to narrate the widespread censorship that fine-arts librarians exercised on viewing the work of Western artists – such as Egon Schiele's provocative naked bodies – in art books and Western design journals. Fraternizing with male students or bringing in materials from other countries were rule violations that could occasion severe punishments. But as Parsua-19 narrates this tale of the universities' repressive stifling as the 'new normal', she details the innovative kinds of resistance that it spurred. The chapter's drawings of posters, books, magazines, and videos, as well as the caricature of the library's monstrously "fat, spinsterly, old virgin" (97) and malevolent director, reveal that its narrated memories are both vivid and tough, driven by the students' shared determination to learn about a wider world of arts and culture.

33 As *Nylon Road* expands its critique to broader political and ideological targets, the narrating 'I's harshest critic emerges in the pigtailed teenaged self of Chapter Ten. Parsua-13 speaks from the position of the heady moment in 1979, just after the Iranian Revolution began, when she chose, among the available versions of leftist theory, to identify as a Marxist-Leninist and immersed herself in its prescribed reading of Marxist classics (103-05). Parsua, as narrator, ironically mocks the teenager's study of party tenets, texts, and mandated practices of group "self-criticizing" (106) and body-building as "A teenage fashion just like any other", comparable to the fad – and pain – of getting a tattoo (109). From Parsua-13's perspective, however, Europeans are superficial. They can be split into the complacent bourgeoisie and the proletariat without agency, and their personal styles reflect gendered and classed forms of oppression. As a rejoinder Bashi's full-page drawing suggests that the teenager's study of "dialectical materialism" was useful in getting her own way in the family – in the name of "rights" (108). But while Parsua-13 rejects seeing the martyred youth of Iran in 1981 as following a 'fad', Parsua the narrator defends her view in a startling way: she compares the fate of the youth of Iran to the ways that capitalism conforms young women to styles of dress and behavior that repress individual expression, a form of what Marcuse termed "repressive tolerance."²⁰ In the narrator's

²⁰ Admittedly, Bashi articulated and published her comic at a moment in Zürich when she was free to air her discontent with both the intolerance of the Iranian regime and the consumerism of Switzerland, without threat to

view political positions are inevitably compromised because they are embedded in the ideologies of specific regimes and political moments.

34 Parsua-13 also offers a novel defense of her point of view in this debate, visualizing a fantasy of young women costumed in different garb to display capitalist, religious-fundamentalist, and socialist modes of conforming girls to three kinds of ideological “cults” (Fig. 8).

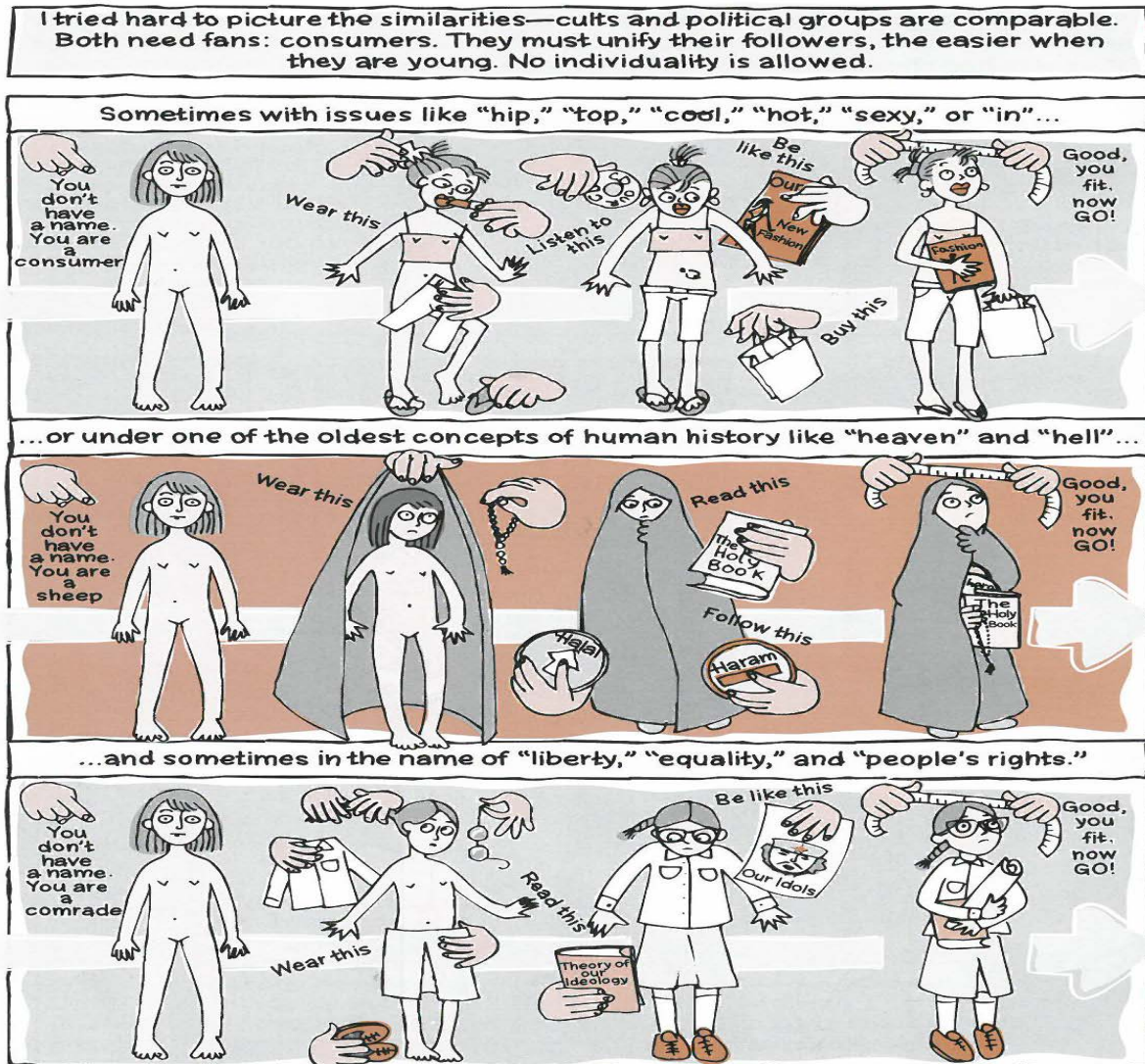


Fig. 8: From *Nylon Road* (p. 110) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.

herself. But a careful reading of the comic’s critique of ‘repressive tolerance’ à la Marcuse, undercuts any easy binary in which the West emerges as a ‘freer’ or more liberated location for integrating Parsua and remaking her migrant self as a Western citizen. Marcuse asserts, “Tolerance is extended to policies, conditions, and modes of behavior which should not be tolerated because they are impeding, if not destroying, the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery. ... Tolerance is turned from an active into a passive state, from practice to non-practice” (95).

Each kind of costuming produces consumers who suffer the disciplinary effects of their interpellation in unquestioning adherence to their governments. Parsua sums up this critique of ‘the power of wealth’ to shape political belief in her contrast of three kinds of regimes, embodied in their leaders: ‘fashionista’ capitalism crowns designer Karl Lagerfeld; the Islamic Republic honors the Ayatollah; and Soviet-style socialism heralds Stalin – all with wads of money in their hands (112). While an offer of ice cream cannot reconcile Parsua-13’s Marxist self to the narrator’s critique, Parsua concludes the chapter with a powerful insight: despite her selves’ bickering about positions, a “lost childhood” was the price of her early fervor during the Revolution (112). Yet Chapter Ten suggests how deeply Bashi, as a teenager, was steeped in dialectical materialism, which likely contributed to *Nylon Road*’s dialogical structuring and use of visual counterpoint.

35 The most provocative avatar of all steps up in Chapter Eleven: Parsua’s 33-year-old self, now a graphic designer who has been awarded her first prize (117). She is interested in Western fashion but becomes angry when the narrating ‘I’ shows her a spread in *Vogue* entitled “Colonial Girl”, featuring “Calcutta Cat” and “Delhi Doll”, derived from women’s garb in colonial India (116). While Swiss Parsua defends free expression, tolerance, and the celebration of difference as practices enshrined in the West, Parsua-33, a tough and self-assured urbanite, searingly critiques the cynicism of the global fashion industry as sustained by colonial and racist practices that emerged with the Enlightenment and the modern nation-state. Fashion magazines, Parsua-33 alleges, “make a profit from their own crimes of history by pretending that colonialism was just an aesthetic phenomenon” (116). Disgusted at the fascination the narrating ‘I’ exhibits for Western consumerist fashion, however, this younger self alleges that the narrating ‘I’ is blind to how cynically the West commodifies history as fashion statements. When the narrating “I” contrasts the freedom of artists to criticize politicians in Europe with the fundamentalism that constrains artists in Iran, Parsua-33 taunts her about the manipulative tactics of Western advertising. À la layouts in the fashion pages of *Vogue* or *Elle*, this younger self visualizes a fantasy: fashion lines of “Sweet Slaves”, complete with manacles and chains (121); “Hot 9/11” with models wearing Twin-Towers-explosion T-shirts; and models with shaved heads and Holocaust-camp shirts. As the two Parsuas’ heated debate about the conundrum of ‘free’ speech continues, Parsua-33 argues that the Eurocentric West ignores taboos on trivializing genocidal acts that are Indian-, African-, or Asian-related even as it valorizes Eurocentric events (123).

36 Their debate, located at what Art Spiegelman called the “intersection of personal and world-historical events”, focuses the narrator on the blind spots of belief systems, all of which construct an “other” and set limits to the critique of their own histories (Spiegelman, unpagged). But at the end of their dialogue Parsua remains stymied, like the narrating ‘I’ at the crossroads depicted on *Nylon Road*’s original cover, between the clashing systems of different cultures and traditions. Finally, reconciliation with her former self is impossible. When Parsua as narrator poses the irresolvable conundrum of freedom and censorship that – for her – constrains the exercise of democracy in societies, Parsua-33 responds, “Why bother writing a book? Why not just shut up? ... your theories are BULLSHIT!” (124). In the witty graphic metalepsis that follows, Bashi captures the chapter’s lack of closure as the narrating ‘I’ jumps out of the comics page on which she is drawn jumping out of the page, chided by finger-pointing Parsua-33 (124). Confronting the spectrum of attitudes of her former selves, Parsua is shown at an impasse – and yet, her narrative succeeds in displaying the challenges presented by both post-revolutionary Iran and the ‘civilized’ West.

37 *Nylon Road*’s final Chapter Twelve is brief, two facing pages that juxtapose alternate views of Parsua the narrator. On the left side, in nine close-up portraits, Parsua is visualized full-face, smoking and pondering how to conclude her story in a way that is funny but not “paranoid”, “two-faced”, or “simply crazy” (126). The rejoinder on the right page is a self-portrait in which seven of her collective younger selves, led by the six-year-old, orchestrate an end to her process of self-reflection by holding aloft a banner reading “The End.” This picture within the picture of the little figures surrounds a self-portrait of Parsua the narrator that is clipped onto the bookshelf in her study. Below it her drawing hand appears in profile, at rest and holding the pencil for Bashi’s comics drawings (Fig. 9). The artist’s hand is a metaleptic gesture familiar in autographics and other forms of self-portraiture, from Dürer and Parmigianino through Van Gogh and Kollwitz, that emphasizes the recursive nature of graphic storytelling and signals the performative artist-maker. In this binocular structure, Parsua, the narrating ‘I’ of the comic is revealed as a projection of Bashi, the agent whose invisible hand has drawn, written, organized, and edited her memoir. Thus, Parsua is as much an effect of her former selves as a speaking subject—and still a migratory subject in transit. In dialogical fashion this visual and narrative self-examination cannot be resolved into a portrait of the Bildungsroman’s consolidated public citizen. Rather *Nylon Road* presents an ‘I’ who both asserts her role in directing the narrative and is unmasked as a constructed fiction by her past.



Fig. 9: From *Nylon Road* (p. 127) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.

Conclusion

38 The figure of Bashi's Parsua in *Nylon Road* remains a locus of competing claims about the 'truth' of her experience. Neither her present-time 'I' nor any of her past selves emerges as

the victor in this clash of views. Through the lens of graphic memoir the succession of encounters shows how forming an identity is an intersectional process of construction across national, religious, and ideological borders in which women are inevitably devalued as gendered subjects. The narrator, whether as leftist Iranian resister in the Islamic Republic or ‘liberated’ Euro-migrant, is a dialogical subject whose dynamic and ever-incomplete project of self-invention is inflected by her multiple, conflicting identity positions. Although Swiss Parsua seeks to be neither nostalgic nor in denial about her past experience in Iran, the dialogue with her past selves discloses that subjects are inescapably interpellated by location and historical moment.

39 Thus *Nylon Road* poses issues for both readers of the Iranian diaspora and those in the West. At the same time that it acknowledges – in often funny and sometimes harrowing detail – the post-revolutionary excesses and blind spots of the Islamic Republic, it also suggests that neither Western market capitalism nor Soviet-style socialism can adequately redress forms of prejudice toward outsiders and violence toward women. Its dialogical structure resists the binary logic of much testimonial memoir in which the West serves as a locus of rescue for Middle Eastern emigrants, a transnational identification that requires reconfiguring memory. Particularly in light of Bashi’s 2009 return to Iran, her ironic rendering of violent repression in the Islamic Republic of Iran, compulsory conformity under Soviet socialism, and materialist excess in the name of tolerance in the West, leaves readers with provocative questions about whether any ‘elsewhere’ can serve as an adequate locus of rescue.

40 In sum, Bashi’s open-ended, dialogical structure ensures that, while *Nylon Road* was written in the West, it is decidedly not ‘written for the West.’ At a time when the publication of memoirs critical of the Islamic Republic is impossible in Iran, *Nylon Road’s* summoning of the past, embodied in its active narrators, enables her to present controversial views of gender relations and probe stereotypes about the ‘looks’ and beliefs of women--Iranian, European, and globally--that produce a different self-recognition: “What I am now is the result of their lives” (18).

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Güner Yasemin Balci: *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger*. Fischer, 2016

By Anja Wieden, Oakland University, Rochester, USA

1 Güner Yasemin Balci's latest novel, *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger* (2016) (*The Girl and the Jihadist*, my translation), explores what inspires young women to radicalize themselves and join Islamist terror groups. Balci's sixteen-year-old protagonist, Nimet, is a hopeless romantic whose idea of a life in the Islamic State consists of preparing raspberry ice cream with a whipped topping for her jihadist boyfriend, Saed. Research into modern jihadist recruiting narratives suggests that, although fictional, Nimet's story is fairly typical for young, female Europeans being courted. According to Islamic studies scholar Hamideh Mohagheghi, the wish for an intact family can be a driving force behind women's decisions to join ISIS. In 2015, Mohagheghi published an elaborate commentary on the IS women's manifesto in *Frauen für den Dschihad: Das Manifest der IS-Kämpferinnen* (2015) (*Women for the Jihad: The Manifesto of Female IS Fighters*, my translation). The manifesto was written by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade, a kind of religious female police force that arrests and punishes women who do not abide by the strict dress and behavioral codes upheld in IS territory. In her commentary, Mohagheghi demonstrates how Al-Khanssaa paints a picture-perfect family idyll, in which women are able to thrive as mothers and housewives while their loving husbands provide financial stability and protection (131). In order to attract young women like Balci's Nimet who pursue this perceived domestic security, the authors downplay and idealize the strict Sharia laws as interpreted by Daesh that govern everyday life.

2 In the tradition of *Arabboy* (2008), *ArabQueen* (2010), and *Aliyahs Flucht* (2014) (*Aliyah's Escape*, my translation), *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger* is yet another example of a trademark Balci young adult novel. We immediately gain insight into each character's psyche and are therefore able to distinguish between manipulators and the manipulated. Again, Balci serves her reader a straightforward plot that avoids complicated metaphors and subtexts. Balci forgoes her customary preface, in which she assures the reader that her characters and events are based on her own experiences as a social worker in Berlin's problem borough Neukölln. Nimet is purely fictional, but her character and her social background resemble those of women who are systematically targeted by IS members. In her work *In the Skin of a Jihadist* (2015), French journalist Anna Erelle, for example, tells the story of Mélodie, a Facebook avatar Erelle created for the purpose of investigating IS recruitment tactics. Like Nimet, Erelle's Mélodie lives in a

predominantly Muslim working class neighborhood in a European city. After her parents' divorce, she misses her father deeply and tries to seek solace by converting to Islam. The lack of a guiding male figure in her life, combined with her social upbringing, makes Mélodie an ideal candidate for IS manipulators like Abu Bilel, who contacts the young woman and tries to lure her to Syria. Like Mélodie, Balci's Nimet longs for a happy and intact family, as she sees her mother suffer from depression after her father leaves. Nimet's recruiter, the devout convert to Islam, Nour, who follows Nimet around after a friend introduces them, puts her in touch with jihadist Saed, who becomes the object of her romantic wish for a male savior. She particularly enjoys Saed's Koran teachings, and she starts to observe Islamic customs, like praying five times a day and wearing a headscarf, with pleasure. Her peaceful way of observing and learning about Islam suddenly comes to a halt when Nour and Saed manipulate her into despising people who do not hold her newfound beliefs. Unfortunately, Nimet does not realize that the two merely abuse Islam for their own radical ideologies, which Nimet blindly follows. Her Facebook account begins to fill with anti-American propaganda and anti-Semitic slurs, and she starts to idealize a life in the IS territory under strict Sharia law, as instituted by Daesh. Moreover, she morally supports Saed's mission to defend IS territory, even if it means killing others. Eventually, she agrees to join the young jihadist in Syria.

3 On the surface, Nimet's radicalization seems like a stretch. Before she meets Saed, Nimet behaves like a typical teenager: she goes dancing, flirts innocently with boys, and revels in the latest fashions. If we dig a little deeper, however, we see that Balci constructs a young woman who we could pigeonhole into psychologist Ahmad Mansour's definition of "Generation Allah," put forth in his work *Generation Allah. Warum wir im Kampf gegen religiösen Extremismus umdenken müssen* (2015) (*Generation Allah. Why we have to rethink our opinion in the fight against religious Extremism*, my translation). For Mansour, Generation Allah consists of teenagers who grow up in predominantly Muslim parallel worlds in which any identification with Western culture is vehemently rejected. The influence of an isolated, albeit self-inflicted, milieu might potentially lead the way to more extremist forms of living out Islam, which plays into the cards of radical Islamists, Mansour argues. Many critics, including Abdassamad El Yazidi from the Central Council for Muslims in Germany (ZMD), denounce opinions like Mansour's that Muslims actively isolate themselves. In a 2016 statement in the ARD¹ political TV talkshow *Hart*

¹ The ARD is the association of public service broadcasters in Germany.

aber Fair (*Challenging but Fair*, my translation), El Yazidi explains that Germany's failed integration policies force Muslims into segregated neighborhoods. As a result of European society not accepting Muslim youth in their midst, some of those youths fall prey to IS recruiters. El Yazidi believes that German society as a whole shares great responsibility in young adults' radicalization. Much to his regret, El Yazidi observes that discussions on radical Islam always contribute to a fundamental lack of trust of all Muslims, even if only a small minority are amenable to extremism. In Balci's texts, we do not find a differentiated discussion of multiple external factors that might lead a young woman like Nimet to radicalization. Like Mansour, Balci risks potentially stigmatizing German Muslims in *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger*. She depicts a homogenous Muslim parallel world highly intolerant of Western lifestyles and protective of orthodox traditions like women's pre-marital virginity. Nimet's world consists predominantly of male and female stereotypes; Muslim characters who are progressive and would break up the gender apartheid are almost non-existent. Nimet knows that even the suspicion of having lost her virginity can make her a target for psychological and possibly sexual abuse by men in her neighborhood, as she has witnessed this happen to her sister and other women close to her. Nimet's safe and non-sexual relationship with the jihadist stands in stark relief against the male brutality in her midst. Her obvious devotion to one man, compounded with a newfound conservative appearance and religious demeanor, lifts her social status drastically in her familial Muslim environment. That immediate public confirmation, combined with her wish for guidance and protection, strengthens her ties to Saed and his ideologies. In that sense, Nimet's transition from a traditional male-dominated Islamic environment to a radical one is fluid; one feeds off of the other.

4 Güner Balci is, first and foremost, an activist for women's rights. Her public appearances, her films, and her writings serve to enlighten others about female suffering in the aforementioned 'parallel worlds' in Germany's cities. *ArabQueen* and *Aliyahs Flucht*, for instance, both tell the stories of young women escaping from their families who forced them, under the threat of corporeal punishment, to marry. The girls' paths to freedom are rocky, as the overbearing and powerful members of their neighborhood assist their families in their search for the lost daughters. While Balci's texts depict brutal realities, however, they never leave their protagonists high and dry. Balci allows her seemingly naïve and victimized characters to develop agency in moments of the utmost physical danger. This is also the case for Nimet. When she arrives in the IS territory, she realizes that she has fallen prey to Nour's manipulations. Saed is supposedly

dead, and Nimet finds herself in a kind of entrepôt for future jihad brides. Horrified, she develops an escape plan that leads her to the border of Turkey. Of course, the ease of her escape is unrealistic and tailored to the young adult audience. As in *ArabQueen*, Balci wants to inspire hope by constructing alternative and happy endings to stories that in reality would end grimly. The potential danger of such positive accounts might downplay the threat for women, who, as we know from actual cases like the murder of Hatun Sürücü², often pay for their courage with their own lives.

5 *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger* would be a perfect fit for an undergraduate class dealing with a gendered perspective on IS recruitment tactics in Western Europe. Balci's novel may also be used as a segue to discussing the shortcomings of German integration policies and the consequences for young adults. Problematic issues of *Das Mädchen und der Gotteskrieger* lie in the fact that Balci depicts Nimet's neighborhood in Neukölln as a misogynistic environment only, when in fact the majority of Muslims in Germany observe their religion in accordance with a progressive lifestyle. Instead, Balci chooses to create a closed-off universe, which, in her depiction, paves the way to radicalization. It is crucial that instructors critically discuss the novel's fluid transition from Islamic culture to Extremist ideologies. Such a simplified construction, even if fictional, might possibly lead to potential Islamophobic biases in uninformed readers. In order to prevent the spread of cultural stereotyping, instructors may discuss how the story might have benefitted from the inclusion of liberal Muslim characters who might have positively affected Nimet's life.

² In 2005, Hatun Sürücü was brutally murdered by her younger brother. He and the rest of Hatun's family felt provoked by her way of life after Hatun separated from her husband and decided to raise her son by herself. Hatun's murder was classified as an honor killing.

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