

*'In love, she remains whole': Heterosexual Love in Contemporary Arab
American Poetry Written by Women*

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Abstract:

Since the advent of Arab American feminism in the 1990s, Arab American women writers have become prominent figures in the field of Arab American literature. At the same time, the victimization of Arab women and the stereotyping of Arab men have grown in the West. Given this mainstream perception of Arabs, this article aims at exploring the positioning of Arab American women towards Arab men, taking into account the feminist fight against sexism and racism. Analyzing the articulations of heterosexual love made by Arab American women in their poetry (including Mohja Kahf, Suheir Hammad and Pauline Kaldas), this article will examine the potential political use of poetry.

Keywords: Arab American; feminism; masculinity

You are my Yemen and my Damascus
You are the goal of my winter journey and my summer
You are my city and its streets
You are my village and its fields

Mohja Kahf, "You Are My Yemen" (1996)

This Arab American portrayal of love employs images of the Arab world in an exercise of nostalgia for the Middle East, putting together the affection for the loved one and for one's origins. The Arab American identity stems from this need for remembering one's ancestry as well as a necessity for acceptance from mainstream America, who considers this cross-cultural identity a contradiction in terms. In the midst of this attempt to make sense of one's identity, Arab American women have found a sound space of resistance in their literary writings, particularly in their poetry. The women of this ethnic group are offering an ambivalent depiction of heterosexual love stemming from their feminist struggle against sexism and racism. In an effort to counter the stereotyping of both Arab men and women, they take a stance against their double colonization as ethnic women,

but they continue to believe in the possibility of love. Love towards one's origins, towards Arab men, and towards oneself are articulated in the poetry written by Arab American women such as Mohja Kahf, Suheir Hammad and Pauline Kaldas. These are the writers that will be examined in this article, which will start by analyzing the influence of Arab American feminism on contemporary Arab American writers. Afterward, an analysis of the main stereotypical discourses currently related to Arab men will be contrasted to the nuanced articulation of heterosexual love provided by contemporary Arab American women writers.

Arab American women writers are greatly indebted to Arab American feminism, which has empowered them and enabled the voicing of their concerns through literature. Arab American feminism started in 1983 with the creation of the Feminist Arab-American network, which appeared as a response to the refusal of the US National Women Studies Association to condemn the Israeli invasion of Lebanon of 1982. Feeling they were being treated as inferior by mainstream feminism, Arab American women saw the need to set up a separate feminism that would tackle both ethnic and women's issues. This feminism gained force during and after the First Gulf War (August 1990 – March 1991), because as a consequence of it, the anti-Arab discourse in the United States was exacerbated, reinforcing the need for Arab American organizations to fight racism. However, the more racism was being fought, the more sexism was being silenced in the Arab American community: the Arab American organizations that appeared in response to racial discrimination were structured according to rigid traditional gender roles which denied a voice to Arab American women, and so they put to the fore the need to reassert the Arab American feminists' claim against sexism.

As a result, in the 1990s three main Arab American feminist discourses appeared and circulated. Firstly, there was Arab American nationalist feminism, which promoted assimilation as a means to counteract racism and sexism. Then, there was Arab American liberal feminism, which advocated an individualistic fight against racism, celebrating heritage but denying racial classification. Thirdly, and most significantly, there appeared Arab American women-of-color feminism, which has been the most successful one among Arab Americans—and I would argue, the most fruitful one—and which aligns the experiences of Arab American women with those of other minorities. This feminism stems from “[a] self-conscious definition [of Arab American women] as members of an ethnic minority” (Hatem 1998:382). One must bear in mind that Arab Americans had been considered white for a long time by American political institutions; the US Census, for instance, did not acknowledge an Arab ancestry until the year 2000. The identification of Arab American women as women of color, then, stems from their self-perception as an oppressed group because of their gender and ethnicity. By putting themselves next to other people of color, there is the possibility for Arab American women to explore the interaction and intersection between their two cultures, and between sexism and racism. Michelle Sharif makes clear, in her essay “Global Sisterhood: Where Do We Fit In?”, that Arab American feminists need to work together with other women of color. She points out,

Arab-Americans belong to both cultures and therefore occupy a unique position. We can and must help this dialogue develop. Our struggle, like all women of color, includes overcoming racism as well as sexism. By joining women's groups in the United States, we can put issues such as anti-Arab

racism on the agenda. Our time for recognition and respect in western feminist movements has come (1994:159).

Arab American feminism has had a very important role in enabling Arab American women to voice their concerns. However, this is not the only reason why women of Arab descent have actively published in the last decades. Nada Elia argues in her article "Islamophobia and the 'Privileging' of Arab American Women" that Arab American women are encountering fewer difficulties to publish than their male counterparts because they are seen as "harmless" in contrast to Arab men, who are stereotypically related to terrorism and perceived as a political threat (2006:158). Be it the reason or not, the truth is that Arab American women have published more than men in these last two decades, and their accounts, mostly heterosexual, have been prominently focused on the figures of Arab men.

Arab men have been looked at under a negative light in the United States particularly since the mid 1950s. As Michael Pickering argues, notions of Orientalism rose with US colonialism and international politics in the Middle East, that is, for example, in relation to the Suez crisis of 1956 or the Arab-Israeli conflict (2001:164). As a consequence, negative discourses about Arabs started to appear in popular representations, especially centering on the Arab male. Edward Said talks about this pejorative depiction of Arab masculinity, relating it to popular cultural artifacts:

In the films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low. Slave trader, camel driver, moneychanger, colorful scoundrel: these are some traditional Arab roles in the cinema (1995:286-7).

Furthermore, the Arab American scholar Jack Shaheen has documented over a thousand Hollywood films which portray Arabs in an offensive manner in his books *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture* (1997), *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), and *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs After 9/11* (2008). He talks about the "b' factor", arguing that Arabs are always portrayed as billionaires, bombers, Bedouin bandits, buffoons, or bargainers, and they are also related to four myths: being wealthy, barbarian and uncultured, sex maniacs, and terrorists. He thus concludes that these stereotypes are very rooted in America's mind and that, as a result, there is racial discrimination.

This vilification of the Arab male has gone hand in hand in the Western imaginary with the portrayal of Arab women either as victims or as exotic belly dancers, part of a harem. In this respect, Evelyn Shakir writes:

According to popular belief, all Arab women can be divided into two categories. Either they are shadowy nonentities, swathed in black from head to foot, or they are belly dancers – seductive, provocative, and privy to exotic secrets of lovemaking. The two images, of course, are finally identical, adding up to a statement that all Arab women are, in one sense or another, men's instruments or slaves (1988:39).

With their writings, Arab American women prove these stereotypes to be wrong. Influenced by feminism and therefore schooled in the analysis of gender, Arab American women writers are aware of these images, and use them in their writings. They show a strong stance against the men's projection of them as exotic, while, at the same time, they cannot avoid a certain ambivalence towards Arab men. Arab American feminism is known for its struggle against both sexism and racism. This joint fight places Arab American women writers in a complex position when depicting men of Arab origin, since they need to fight sexism without falling into racist stereotypes.

Mohja Kahf's poetry, for example, expresses feelings of love for Arab men which are not exempt from nuances. In the different poems that are part of Kahf's volume *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003), she puts forward her affection for Arab men, clinging on to their common origins, while at the same time she acknowledges the existence of sexism from her male counterparts. Nathalie Handal, when commenting on this anthology, explains, "all of Kahf's poems are love poems – we find joy and pain, trust and distrust, beauty and horror, pleasure and repugnance, peace and conflict, we find the world and the self" (2005:3); that is, we find the ambivalence Kahf feels towards love and towards men.

In her poem "You Are My Yemen" (1996), Kahf makes her love for Arab men and their shared culture evident. The poem starts with a reference to Muhammad's *hadith* "God bless our Yemen and our Damascus", which appears quoted under the poem's title, and is paralleled in the very poem, which starts: "You are my Yemen and my Damascus / You are the goal of my winter journey and my summer / You are my city and its streets / You are my village and its fields". The poem continues providing a series of images that remind the reader of the Middle East and that relate the feelings of love of the narrator to this specific geographical context. Through a vivid imagery that involves sight, sound, and taste, Kahf proclaims her love both for her significant other and her ancestry, with verses such as "I shimmy up palm trees to wait for you / To squint into the sun and watch for you / You are my caravan loaded with lentils and cracked wheat / Snacking its way into town / We the city-dwellers trill with joy / Layla and Majnun will fry chopped onions tonight!". These colorful and savory details are used by Kahf to celebrate both her beloved and her Syrian origins, which come together once again at the end of the poem through the equation of the lover's face and the horizon: "Here are the long-awaited evenings. / Here you are. Here am I. / Your face / the horizon / I want to see".

Nevertheless, this love for Arab men is complicated in the rest of Kahf's poetry, where it appears imbued with an acknowledgement and questioning of the stereotyping of Arab men in the West. In "I Can Scent an Arab Man a Mile Away" (1992), there is a humorous acceptance of the stereotypes attributed to Arab masculinity, although ultimately, the "I" persona's love for Arab men remains unquestioned. The poem starts by referring to the looks traditionally associated with Arab men (where darkness, hair, and traditional clothes are emphasized), and then ironically delves into the ideals they have (in relation to tradition, on the one hand, and to the Israel-Palestine conflict, on the other). The poem reads: "My stubbly-chinned, / black-haired, tawny-skinned / Arab male kin, the white-robed / and the black-tied of them, / milling on the male side of a wedding, / can be counted on for many good things: / To be politicized about Palestine / from the third grade, at the latest". Then, Kahf takes a feminist stance and turns to

explore the stereotypes associated with Arab men through an exhaustive enumeration, only to finish by asserting her love for them:

They may be
mustachio'd, macho, patriarchal,
sexist, egoistical, parochial –
They may, as men may,
think themselves indomitable,
being easily manipulable,
- but they're mine, my
sleek and swarthy, hairy-chested,
curly-headed lovers of the Prophet
and lovers of the Virgin,
sons of the city street and village boys,
wanderers tribal and global.

Her affection for Arab men seems to come from their common ancestry, their common tradition, a fact which is further developed in the following part of the poem, where the "I" persona goes on to explain that she loves them because she knows them, that is, because of their shared origins and their shared language (making specific reference to the Arabic letters *ghayn*, *dad*, and *kha*). As Kahf puts it,

I know them by the rims around their eyes
I know them by the sheen upon their skin
I know them by the growling *ghayns*
and gnawling *dads* and hoarse hungry *khas*
that rumble up from the hollow in their chests
and fill the throat and swell the cheek,
distend the lips and pearl off the tongue,
and emerge, a language, theirs-ours-mine.

Once again, in this poem, Kahf takes on the same idea that we have seen in "You Are My Yemen", the intertwining of romantic love and love for one's origins, to make evident the importance for Arab Americans of acknowledging their ancestry. At the same time, here in "I Can Scent an Arab Man a Mile Away", the familiarity the "I" persona defends, is also used to make an ironic account of stereotypes about Arab men, rendering them as untrue. This is done throughout the poem and is especially evident at the end, with the last verse, which reads: "(God, they look so sexy in those checkered scarves)". The use of humorous irony in this poem becomes a strategy Arab American women may use to be able to critique both sexism and racism. Acknowledging stereotypes is a good means to proclaim love for Arab men but making clear at the same time that sexism also needs to be fought.

As a consequence, it can be argued that Kahf's declaration of love for Arab men does not leave her powerless in front of them. In the poem "The Woman Dear to Herself" (1996), love empowers women:

The woman dear to herself lives in the heart
alive to the everywhere presence of divinity
the woman dear to herself does not lose herself

in the presence of a man
woman or child.
In love she remains whole.
She knows the geography of her body
and how to give good directions home.

Kahf refers to overall love, and especially, love for oneself, as women's ultimate power. In the last two verses ("She knows the geography of her body / and how to give good directions home"), Kahf also makes an erotic reference to the woman's body, an image that is recurrent in her writings. These two verses convey the idea that not only do Arab American women have power because of their knowledge of their own bodies, but also because of their origins. The images used to ascertain this knowledge and love for oneself come from the association made between romance and origin, body and geography, which can be taken as a feminist critique of the "double colonization" of women (that is, appropriation both through colonialist and sexist practices). In the poem, this link is subverted in giving the power over geography to the woman, thus breaking the connection between colonialism and patriarchy.

Furthermore, Kahf also advocates love, female empowerment, and the female body in "My Body Is Not Your Battleground" (1998), where she makes her powerful stance against war clear. As Nathalie Handal puts it, "In the poem [...], she criticizes the nations and rulers, more specifically the U.S. government, whose arrogance seem limitless as they use God's name to conquer, kill, to justify the unjustifiable" (2005:3). The first three stanzas of "My Body Is Not Your Battleground" focus on different body parts, starting with breasts, continuing with hair, and finishing with torso. The first stanza puts together the woman's ownership of her own body (her breasts in this case) with a pacifist stance towards the nationalistic view of land ownership (referring to the battles of Badr and Uhud, and rejecting any flags or banners). As Kahf puts it,

My body is not your battleground
My breasts are neither wells nor mountains,
neither Badr nor Uhud
My breasts do not want to lead revolutions
nor to become prisoners of war
My breasts seek amnesty; release them
so I can glory in their milktipped fullness,
so I can offer them to my sweet love
without your flags and banners on them

The second stanza uses the image of the hair (and the issue of whether having it covered or not) as a way to critique the notions of progress and tradition. It ends up advocating once again women's ownership of their bodies, and their freedom to use them with their loved ones. It reads,

My body is not your battleground
My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,
neither the cause of your disarray
nor the path to your liberation
My hair will not bring progress and clean water
if it flies unbraided in the breeze

It will not save us from attackers
if it is wrapped and shielded from the sun
Untangle your hands from my hair
so I can comb and delight in it,
so I can honor and anoint it,
so I can spill it over the chest of my sweet love

The third stanza, defends again women's ownership of their own bodies, paralleling them to a besieged city and, thus reflecting, once more, the "double colonization" of women that has already been pointed out in "The Woman Dear to Herself". In this case the traditional images that link the colonized land and the female body are used to make a point against war, colonialism, and sexism:

My body is not your battleground
My private garden is not your tillage
My thighs are not highways to your Golden City
My belly is not the store of your bushels of wheat
My womb is not the cradle of your soldiers,
not the ship of your journey to the homeland
Leave me to discover the lakes
that glisten in my green forests
and to understand the power of their waters

The next stanza in the poem is full of eroticism, as Kahf states that the female body is only hers: "Leave me to fill or not fill my chalice / with the wine of my sweet love / Is it your skin that will tear / when the head of the new world emerges?" Finally, Kahf finishes with a reflection on boundaries (both physical and political), reasserting her rejection of both male and colonial illegitimate appropriation:

My body is not your battleground
How dare you put your hand
where I have not given permission
Has God, then, given you permission
to put your hand there?
My body is not your battleground
Withdraw from the eastern fronts and the western
Withdraw these armaments and this siege
so that I may prepare the earth
for the new age of lilac and clover,
so that I may celebrate this spring
the pageant beauty with my sweet love

This reflection on the women's body and the rejection of its appropriation is taken one step further in Suheir Hammad's poem "Exotic" (2002), which is a powerful standpoint against the exoticization of Arab women. In this poem, Hammad starts with the claim: "don't wanna be your exotic", which is followed by a powerful reasoning. She starts by rejecting the notion of Arab women as vulnerable: "don't wanna be your exotic / some delicate fragile colorful bird / imprisoned caged / in a land foreign to the stretch of her wings". Then, she attempts an empowerment of Arab women by using different arguments. First of all, she advocates for egalitarianism, stating that she is not different,

This powerful stance against sexism is condensed in Mohja Kahf's poem "Men Kill Me" (1998), where the "I" persona calls out against men who try to exert their power over women, who try to subdue them. Although in previous poems she had pronounced her love for Arab men, her love does not overcome injustice, and so, in "Men Kill Me", Kahf firmly advocates equality between men and women, saying that it kills her that men diminish women's freedom and constrain them to keep their power. Stanzas such as the one that follows illustrate this feminist viewpoint: "Men kill me / How they think the sun is all for them / and the water is all for them / How they accept the wind at their backs / as if the wind was the handmaid of their father / and they inherited her without a murmur".

This strong stance for gender equality underlies all the aforementioned poems. They all sustain the Arab American feminist claim against sexism and racism, resulting in an ambivalent portrayal of love, passion and desire. Completely aware of the stereotypes about both Arab men and women, contemporary Arab American women writers are articulating a discourse of ownership of their own bodies (feminine and ethnic) that constitutes a very powerful tool against their "double colonization", that is, against the sexism and racism that they are subject to. Contemporary Arab American women poets join forces with Arab American women of color feminists, offering potential sites of resistance against sexism and racism. Despite their ambivalent feelings towards traditional masculinities and their acknowledgement of both positive and negative aspects Arab men may share, they present love for Arab men as a desired possibility as long as women are aware of the need to love themselves first. As Kahf puts it, "In love, she remains whole".

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