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**American Scheherazades – Auto-orientalism, literature and the  
representations of Muslim women in a post 9/11 U.S. context**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Martina Koegeler**

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Abstract of the Thesis

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**2012**

The genre of Arab American novels has experienced a veritable boom in the last decade, which opens up a wide field of questions concerning the aesthetics and politics of Arab American literature in a post 9/11 U.S. context. In my thesis, I propose that Arab/Muslim American women writers employ varying forms of auto-orientalism to gain access to the U.S. literary market via citation of orientalist tropes and thus actively participate in the majority discourses surrounding Islam, Muslim women and Americanness. Citation of established orientalist tropes provides access to publication by way of its mutual legibility by majority discourses and minority writers. While such citation can easily confirm existing stereotypes, it might also work as a space for contestation and subversion of a binary/feminized orientalist reference. Even though the most common form of auto-orientalism is an essentialist type in the popular ‘oppressed Muslim women memoirs’, I argue that a recent wave of Arab American novels challenges East/West binaries by squarely placing Islam within and as part of American culture via strategic auto-orientalist references. In this analysis I look at Mohja Kahf’s novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* and her poetry collection *Emails from Scheherazad* as examples of such a strategic form of auto-orientalism in search of its characteristics, transformative possibilities, and potential impact on American audiences. I build on Christina Civantos, Stuart Hall and Gayatri Spivak and conclude that a strategic form of auto-orientalism can be part of a discursive intervention and relinking of meanings around Muslim womanhood in America. Further, I connect Kahf’s strategies with an alternative women of color feminist framework, because her work opens possibilities for Muslim American women’s subjectivities in the in-between, as cultural mediators that defy East/West binaries and thus destabilize a clear cut notion of a stable U.S. culture based on normativity and escape a neoliberal logic of validating only certain kinds of diversity.

## **Dedication Page**

To my partner Hakim, my family and my friends.

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## Chapter 1

Hijab Scene #2: “‘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” (Mohja Kahf: 42)

Random Encounters at JFK Scene: “If you work on Islam and feminism you should definitely read this memoir, this memoir ... I forgot the title, but imagine, the American woman working in Iraq could not even receive a salary and they had to pay her under the table” (Martina Koegeler)

### 1.1 Introduction

The supposed opposition of ‘Islam’ and ‘Feminism’ is at the core of a popular Western orientalist discourse that conflates Muslim womanhood with victimization and places American women as superior and freer beings. This intersection of orientalism with Eurocentric imperial feminism goes far back to colonial discourses; an early and often quoted example in this respect is the case of Lord Cromer, the British consul general in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Egypt. He famously appropriated ‘feminist’ arguments to supposedly save Egyptian women by unveiling them, while he himself opposed the suffragette movement and political enfranchisement of British women in his own home country. More contemporaneously, the same victimization stereotype has experienced a strong revival in the rationale for the Afghanistan and Iraq wars after 9/11. Laura Bush’s infamous speech that the military intervention in Afghanistan was supposed to save Muslim women employs the same logic and obscures endemic sexism within the US (Jamarkani: 159 f). The U.S. military intervention has little to do with actual concern for Muslim women’s well being; rather Bush’s neocolonial rhetoric about Islam’s inferiority employs the century old orientalist trope that uses the status of women in Muslim societies as justification for political domination and intervention in the Middle East. The U.S. mainstream focus on Muslim women is usually limited to concerns about sexual and personal liberties of, for example, Afghan women. This concern is symbolically encapsulated in debates about burkas, but overlooks the



much more complex web of immediate and more urgent economic, political and educational challenges Afghan women face. Further, this partial view obscures the role of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War in co-creating such misogynist regimes as the Taliban, and the moral juncture of women's rights and imperialism divides the world in an easy grid of good and evil. Building on these insights, McAlister (282) argues that 9/11 and the subsequent moment of trauma in the U.S. enabled a national amnesia and a new narrative about the essentially 'good' and benevolent nature of US imperial power, manifest in the incredulous phrase 'Why do they hate us?', that effaces a long historic involvement of the U.S. in the Middle East.

From a feminist critical perspective on the uses of representations of Muslim womanhood, Volpp (1197) points out that "(...), it also important to keep in mind that women and national identity have been yoked together as much in the West as in Muslim majority countries, especially during nationalist movements and anticolonial struggles." Thus, women carry the burden to represent the 'progress' of culture in Euro-American orientalist and Arab nationalist movements. This representational burden and the Western perception of Muslim women's victimhood negates any agency to Muslim women themselves, to the effect that in popular discourses in the U.S. today feminism and Islam are perceived as mutually exclusive positions (Badran: 1). Fatima Mernissi takes up this paradox and makes it very clear that both Western and conservative Muslim perceptions of feminism as a Western movement alien to Islam are entirely wrong: "We 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, which is embedded in a longer history of emerging Muslim feminist thought.

Badran (1f) outlines that secular-nationalist feminist movements emerged parallel to Western movements for women's rights in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Egypt, Syria and among other anti-colonial movements. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century these secular trends also received a religious counterpart, Islamic feminism, and present Muslim feminists draw from both these discourses. While both secular and religious 'Muslim' feminisms build on the premise of gender equality in Islam, Islamic feminism has excavated the often forgotten, old school of thought of *ijtihad*. The Quran and the Islamic Holy Scriptures explicitly call for gender equality in public and private,

even though men's interpretations in patriarchal contexts have not always acknowledged 'inconvenient' passages or possible alternative meanings. If following *ijtihad*, it is the responsibility of every Muslim to interpret the scriptures critically and individually. This entails the possibility to re-interpret and alter patriarchal traditions that limit women's rights by going back to the original, religious sources and their potentially very empowering alternative interpretations (Manji: 51).

However, Islamic feminism should not be confused with Islamist revivalist women who, as Saba Mahmood demonstrates in *Politics of Piety*, also use their agency to actively be a part of and promote the Islamist revival of recent decades, but without challenging the four accepted Islamic schools of law and thought. These very different perspectives on womanhood among various groups of practicing and secular Muslim women are indicative of the current wider struggles over the meaning and practices of Islam within the Muslim communities. Despite a Western tendency to view "Islam" as a monolithic religious and/or cultural practice, Reza Aslan (263f) points out that many of the conflicts in the Muslim world today are not between the "West" and the "East", but rather between different schools of thought and interpretations of Islam internally. To avoid terminological confusion between the conservative Islamic revival and Islamic feminists like Leila Ahmed, Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi, I refer to the feminism based on *ijtihad* as Muslim feminism instead of Islamic feminism. Even though Muslim feminism has to struggle for legitimacy in many Western and Muslim eyes and oppression of Muslim women by some fundamentalist Islamic groups exists within a wider complex web of economic and other forms of postcolonial exploitation, the situation of women in the Muslim majority countries from Morocco to Indonesia is so varied and specifically different depending on race, class, sexual orientation, region and their individual views on religion that I believe it is necessary to examine Western orientalism and its representational politics to better understand the emergence of this incredibly homogenous stereotype of 'the' Muslim woman. While McAlister and others have studied how the West has created and used such monolithic representations in service of various U.S. interests, so far there has been little attention paid to how Muslim women themselves react to, participate in and contest the stereotypes about being the victims of their cultures they face within dominant Western discourses.

In this thesis I am particularly interested in examining the response of Muslim American women writers to popular stereotypes and the way they adopt and negotiate Muslim and U.S.

women of color feminisms. Since orientalist discourses emerge from European and American contexts and not the Middle East, I believe it is essential to examine the effects of this significant cultural and neo-orientalist production of meaning about Muslim cultures on actual Muslim women living within the U.S. and the general American public. Amira Jamarkani has traced the popular representations of Arab womanhood in the U.S. throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a constant backdrop to U.S. domestic policies that assert cultural superiority against a timeless ‘barbarian’ Eastern referent. However, going beyond majority cultural productions, she calls for more investigation into the responses of Arab American women themselves toward these representations. Thus, I follow Jamarkani’s call and add the question how writing and feminism work together within the specific context of contemporary Arab American women writers. Writing and literature have been a central part of U.S. and Third World women of color feminisms to write themselves and counter distortions of self perceptions via misrepresentations in general. Given the popularity of a constantly growing literary market for Arab and Muslim American women writers I am interested in exploring in how far these publications use feminist and/or orientalist strategies to enter into and responded to U.S. orientalist forms of representation in and through literature.

In terms of genre, women’s memoirs especially have been an integral part of the production of meaning of Muslim women as victims. While these authors claim their own voice in representing personal experiences of oppression, their work may invite orientalist and wholesale condemnations of Muslim cultures because it only focuses on Muslim women being victims of Islam, obscuring economic, political and other factors (Ahmad: 105ff) . This creates the paradox that such women authors speak out, but are read as native informants and sometimes even strategically forfeit their own voice to cater to mainstream American audience expectations. However, on the other side of the genre spectrum there has been a surge of more recent Arab American novels that have started to address gender injustice in more complex and nuanced ways. Thus my focus is on the question of how Arab and Muslim American writers – located within the U.S. and confronted with stereotypes about Muslim womanhood – participate in and/or resist these cultural processes and mainstream orientalist discourses. My hypothesis is that literary productions by American Muslim writers are caught in a demand for auto-orientalist representations to be published on the present ethnic literature market. I ask then what forms of auto-orientalist strategies co-create or challenge mainstream assumptions about Muslim women,

and if this struggle over representation of Muslim womanhood creates spaces for Muslim women's subject positions other than victim/escapee as full members of an American multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

My analysis is situated between frames of multi-ethnic US literature, women of color feminism as a comparative methodology and the intersections of literature with politics in general, and the especially charged political meaning these intersections take on in the figure of the "Muslim woman" in a post 9/11 U.S. context in particular. Key concerns of my analysis are thus the question of representation and defining forms of auto-orientalism. Representation is a rather slippery and ambivalent concept that can work for and against Muslim women authors. On the one hand, representations may be simply considered as talking mimetically about the 'outside reality' (Hall: 443), which reduces ethnic authors to native informants held accountable for being 'authentic' to a majority's point of view. We see this understanding of representation at work in the above mentioned memoirs about and by Muslim women that have become popular in the US. However, on the other hand, Stuart Hall argues that while structures exist outside discursive spheres, they only take on meaning within specific modalities and discursive limits. Thus, representation is constitutive of the social and political domains, which in turns influences identity formation processes. This definition confers agency to authors that intervene in the representational space to help trigger discursive shifts, which in turn might allow different forms and spaces for subject formation.

In my thesis I first briefly discuss the controversy around Azar Nafisi's memoir as one prominent example of the popular 'Muslim women as victims' genre, but the main emphasis of my analysis is on the work of Mohja Kahf as representative of the recent rise of a decidedly hybrid Arab American novel genre. In both cases I analyze auto-orientalism as one possible, literary strategy to access and intervene in majority discourses for Muslim women writers. This strategy has so far not been clearly defined in this context and I offer a definition of an essentialist and a strategic form of auto-orientalism through their respective works. While both authors enjoyed commercial success in the U.S. literary market, I argue that the contrast of Nafisi's gestures as native informant about remote, exotic, victimized Muslim women to Kahf's critical redeployment of Muslim women's possible and empowered subjectivities within and as part of the U.S. exemplifies these different forms and effects auto-orientalism. I believe these questions are highly relevant, since Hall refers to orientalism in general as the prime example of

a hegemonic discourse that renders the Other primitive in order to constitute a superior ‘white’ self. Thus an orientalist discourse commits epistemic violence in the representational spaces of a Western public domain in both terms of gender and race. Western orientalist discourses often follow the binary of a male/superior/West pitted against a female/inferior/East, but orientalism does not exist as one homogenous discourse either and is internally contradictory and context specific (McAlister: 9f). Beyond Said’s intervention in understanding the way Europe has seen and created itself via the Middle East and how these views are also intertwined with American interests, I am very interested in analyzing how orientalism plays out in the domestic anxieties over the U.S. multiethnic identities and to ask if and how these fissures allow Arab Americans auto-orientalist interventions, turning the objects of orientalist representations into subjects and authors of these very discourses. I also follow McAlister’s argument that U.S. orientalisms are constantly shifting and gender ambivalent, which further increases the complexity of identification processes and the challenges any Muslim woman author that attempts to write in, in between, or against these representations.

To navigate these multilayered and unstable interconnections, I chose to focus on auto-orientalism as one possible lens to make these negotiations between a dominant orientalist discourse and American Muslim women’s own voices and struggle for self representation visible. I take the concept auto-orientalism from Christina Civantos’ study of how Arab Argentines accessed political power through auto-orientalism defined as “the essentialization of the self based on preexisting archetypes” (22). This Arab Argentine self-essentialisation into the Ur-figure of the gaucho in literature and politics provided them access to ‘European’ Argentine subjecthood, and I believe this strategy is also at work in the U.S. ethnic literary market. To gain access to publishing, Muslim American women writers respond to or participate in majority discourse by citing orientalist tropes in either essentialist or strategic forms of auto-orientalism. In both cases access depends on the referent being mutually recognizable by a majority and Arab American audience.

The first part of my thesis is dedicated to analyzing the political and literary frames of Arab American writing, and introduces the re-appropriation of the Scheherazade figure as a nexus of Muslim feminist rewriting of distorted orientalist representations of Muslim womanhood. This figure is mutually recognizable by Eastern and Western audiences and holds subversive, auto-orientalist potential. However, the second chapter also addresses the pitfalls of

essentialist auto-orientalist appropriations that do not challenge the stereotypes they are based on. Many memoirs and other ‘Muslim women as victims narratives’ have co-opted orientalist expectations in an essentialist auto-orientalist gesture that offers a reinforcement of certain stereotypes which sell very well in a neoliberal multicultural market place. In this part of the thesis I limit my analysis to the Nafisi controversy as one example of the ‘victim genre’, given the extensive literature that already exists about these memoir trends in recent years. Instead of going into the text itself, which many reviewers have done in the course of the controversy surrounding this text, I take a step back and look at the controversy itself as a context to gauge the interdependence of the author’s position in a neoliberal multicultural marketplace with marketing and audience responses as a fluid nexus that co-creates the meaning and success of any auto-orientalist publication. I then turn to a much more detailed textual analysis, of the work of Mohja Kahf. She represents a new wave of Arab American writing that not only places Muslim culture as part of American cultures, but I argue she practices a form of what I call, paraphrasing Gayatri Spivak, strategic auto-orientalism. The strategic use of orientalist references provides access to publishing, while at the same time Kahf uses this access to undermine stereotypes and create new spaces for Muslim women’s subjectivities. Far from being exhaustive or representative of all Muslim American women writers and let alone Muslim American women, I believe the growing interest and public attention to literature by Muslim women within a post 9/11 US context warrants an analysis of prominent authors such as Azar Nafisi and Mohja Kahf. As public figures their work may help to gauge the contradictory demands literary markets and public expectations place on ‘ethnic’ authors in general, and on representations by and of Muslim women in particular. Within this context I seek to understand how auto-orientalism may function strategically to resist and rewrite Muslim womanhood as heterogeneous and self determined.

## **1.2 Arab American literature**

Steven Salaita attempts, in *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader’s Guide*, an overview of the fast paced growth of Arab American fiction in the last years. While all genres within Arab American Literature are relatively new elements of the American literary tradition, the last decade has seen a quantitative and qualitative explosion of Arab American fiction overtake the historically well established traditions of Arab American drama and poetry starting with Khalil

Gibran in the 1920s. The category ‘Arab American Literature’ in itself opens up many questions about the inadequacies of the term ‘American’ (including U.S., Canadian, and Latin American authors) and it does not account for the multiple ethnic and religious groups subsumed under the term ‘Arab’ or Middle East either. Nor does the monolithic orientalist perception differentiate between differing contexts of Muslim women’s experience. A prime example here is the surge of Iranian women memoirs from the mid 90s to the present, among them Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Iranians are often Muslims, but not Arabs. However, McAlister’s (198ff) analysis of the Iranian Hostage crisis sheds light on how this event linked the U.S. public perception of Muslims as ‘Arab and threatening’ regardless of their ethnic and cultural origins. The hegemony of Islam in both Iranian and Arab cultures and the simplistic association of Islam with fundamentalism after the Iranian revolution, and more recently the terror attacks of 9/11, have collapsed Arab and Iranian Americans into simply Muslim Others. I thus follow Abdulhadi et.al.’s (xxiv) approach in that “this logic makes it imperative that we deal with individuals and communities perceived as Arab or Muslim when we deal with anti-Arab racism, despite the many ways in which these categories do not perfectly fit onto one another.” Another irony in this context is that half of ethnically Arab Americans are Christians and there is also a significant Arab Jewish minority. The impossibility of a clear ethnic label for Arab Americans is starkly opposed to the demand for authenticity, of course from a Western point of view, in representation of an ethnic/’Muslim’ experience in Arab American literature. Definitions of Arab American writing as ‘ethnic’ literature are at risk of reducing art to the authenticity of cultural production. In response to this simplification, Salaita (7) calls for more literary criticism and attention to aesthetics and styles to describe the heterogeneity of Arab American fiction. He suggests the ‘eastward gaze’ of Arab American literature as its defining attribute, which refers to the frequent aesthetic device to look back at and through the Arab world to explore the present American context (Salaita in Zarbel:133).

However, in my approach I look at the dangers for political misappropriation of such a purely ‘eastward gaze’. I believe Nafisi’s memoir could be classified in this category, so I am interested in following Lisa Suhair Majaj’s argument (123) that the aesthetic-political potential of Arab American authors is to turn their gaze east and west at the same time, into America. This literary strategy brings Arab American writing in close proximity to U.S. women of color’s literary strategies. Their homes are the in-between spaces where transnational Americanness and

its literary expressions are negotiated, and also Arab American authors face the fact that to fight the “Master’s imprint” on the selves of women of color (Lorde: 99) they have to either write themselves or be written (Majaj: 125). I argue with Majaj from a transnational feminist angle that the American home is the present space between the east/west dichotomy that enables negotiation of future possible identifications and subjectivities. Majaj (130) attests that the current shift in Arab American literary genres to prose writing enables the emergence of feminist Arab American writing and a process of ethnogenesis in general. I understand ethnogenesis here not in the sense of a fixed definition of Arab Americanness, but as a process to transform and expand ethnic boundaries and to create new subject positions for Arab American women beyond the dichotomy of ‘native informants’ or ‘oppressed victims’, which I argue might also happen through an auto-orientalist appropriation of the seminal figure of feminist Arab story telling: Scheherazade.

### **1.3 From Scheherazade to Arab American feminism**

Fatima Mernissi traces in her study, *Scheherazade goes West*, the transnational and transgenerational processes of translation, oral story telling, and written adaptations of the medieval Arab tale, *Thousand and One Nights*, told by the Persian princess Scheherazade. While Western adaptations have often silenced Scheherazade’s prominent and political role in the tales, or reduced her to a sexy adornment, the original tales explicitly link humanism and feminism in a woman’s agency. The figure of Scheherazade changes her entire world and a violent despot through dialogue, her intellect, and her masterful story telling: “The mysterious bond existing between pluralism and feminism in today’s troubled Islamic world was eerily and vividly foreshadowed by the Scheherazade-Shahrayar tales” (Mernissi: 51). Even though the tales are based on the patriarchal and paranoid tyrant Shahrayar killing over 100 brides after their wedding nights, because his first wife betrayed him which in Mernissi’s view already an act of rebellion against the harem hierarchy, it is not the sexual act of defiance by the first wife, but the intellect of Scheherazade that is able to understand, capture, and change the misogynist Shahrayar. Thus, clearly Scheherazade goes beyond a sexual politics of a war of the sexes, carving out a newly possible, politically powerful subject position for Muslim women based on dialogue, equality, and mutual respect (Mernissi: 46).



However, according to Gauch (viii) the subversiveness of the Scheherazade figure was completely lost in Western adaptations. In a Western context Scheherazade loses her prominent role as a narrator. Galland chose to highlight elements of sex, adventure and the male heroes in the stories of Aladdin, Sinbad the Sailor, or Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, but he cut out the repetitive framing of Scheherazade's voice. Antoine Galland translated and expanded fragments of the 14th Century manuscript of the *Thousand and One Nights* in the 17th Century and by 1800 more than 80 editions of an orientalist adaptation of Scheherazade as a slave to her master's pleasures and as seductress were circulating from Russia and Europe to America. The image of Scheherazade as an odalisque, the Turkish term for women slaves, contradicted her original role as successful agent in the tales. However, the European orientalist culture was so centered on visual codes that images spread like wildfire and appropriations of Scheherazade were increasingly based on Western fantasies of harems by famous painters such as Ingres, Matisse, Delacroix, or Picasso. These early orientalist renderings were highly influential in reducing Western representations of Muslim women to their bodies only.

These images developed into the Hollywood and Disney versions of a scantily clad belly dancer in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which further popularized the notion of a backward, monolithic and unchanging Muslim world (Mernissi: 14). Also these representations were in a stark contrast to the transnational and pluralist nature of the original tales, displacing the authorial, self defining act of storytelling by Muslim women for a visual image of Muslim women. The original tales also precede present transnational, cultural interconnectedness in that they combine influences from India, Persia and Arabia. This cosmopolitan outlook on Islam and the subsequent misappropriations and translations in very different cultural contexts create a certain indeterminacy and fluidity about the tales, which in turn entails many possibilities for a re-writing and re-appropriating of the Scheherazade figure by modern Arab American woman writers scattered with the Arab Diaspora throughout the world.

In this spirit, my thesis places the figure of Scheherazade as a site for auto-orientalist contestation at the center of all the intersecting demands literary markets, home communities and feminist activism place on Arab American writers. My hypothesis is that Scheherazade's popularity in the West offers a way to first gain visibility through an auto-orientalist adaptation of popular US notions of Muslim womanhood and then the possibility to re-write Muslim women's subject positions. Mernissi (4f) cites her own grandmother as an example of how

Muslim women across the world have adapted Scheherazade's tales orally, forgoing censorship of official written versions and creating their own local feminist twists. Recent generations of Muslim women writers have taken up the challenge that comes with the changing currency the Scheherazade figure has both in the 'West' and the 'East'. "As a result of her journeys between East and West, Shahrazad has become a powerful trope for contemporary Arab and Muslim women writers, particularly those who address international audiences" (Gauch: xi).

Scheherazade's visual link to orientalist discourses is so overdetermined that the use of only her image may reinforce Western stereotypes, and also handicap Muslim women writers fighting gender inequality in Muslim majority countries, where feminist agency could be perceived as a Western intervention. I believe a successful/strategic auto-orientalist citation of her figure needs to return to her voice beyond her image. In other words, a re-placement of the orientalist image for Scheherazade as an author, a Muslim women and agent may cite and translate

Scheherazade's multidirectional, boundary crossing legacy transculturally and transtemporally.

For Rothberg, multidirectionality depends on triggers, aesthetic, political or otherwise, that spark and produce memory across temporal, spatial and then by definition as well national boundaries and imagined communities in that acts of "remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites" (11). In literature such a multidirectional aesthetic might provide a platform for minority writers to articulate their struggles through more prominent, widely understood memories or tropes thereof. This is not to say that these two different contexts collapse, but the citation is structural, for example, modern Schereherazades might cite the agency and transnational currency of the original figure or of Eastern/Western adaptations and translate these structures into their respective and different present contexts.

There are no guarantees multidirectionality functions against violence and competing victimhood and any reception of art depends on the context and its audience. However, a multidirectional aesthetics always entails a potentiality to do so and according to Gauch( xiii) the *Nights* tales have never ended and thus the stories continue to change and grow. This offers Arab and Muslim women the possibility to control the representation of their worlds beyond the 'merely' textual via multidirectional citations that help to turn essentialist into strategic auto-orientalism.

In a present American context, such structural parallels with very different, specific concerns also connect various women of color and Arab American feminisms. Even though Arab American feminists have a historically ambiguous standing in the US women of color feminist

communities (Elia: 223ff) both movements strive to represent their hybrid experiences as equally valid parts of a pluralistic American society (Darraj:1f). While it is important to keep the specificity of racisms and anti-Arab racism in the post 9/11 US environment in mind, I am interested in how far 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 Jabar may help strengthen and define an Arab American feminist movement, for example, by referring back to the common ancestor of Scheherazade as the first Muslim woman's voice to travel West and a source of an early transnational Muslim feminist agency.

Overall the movement of Arab American feminism arrived 'late' on the scene of civil rights struggles in the US. Joanna Kadi published the anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers* in 1994 in a first major effort to document and trace the development of Arab American women writing and feminism. Kadi (xv f) explicitly links her anthology to the editing efforts of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Barbara Smith and Beth Brant before her, documenting an overlap with U.S. women of color feminism in their position in the in-between, in wondering whether their multi-rootedness means loss of home or the strength to create new homes within America, but she also writes to fight for visibility among both whites and other women of color. This first collection on Arab American writing has led to the publication of the first major anthology specifically on Arab American feminism: *Arab and Arab American feminism: gender, violence and belonging* by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber in 2011. In this anthology the editors consider Arab American feminisms as part of a transnational feminist effort for gender justice and against heteromasculinist and xenophobic politics. As with most other feminisms, Arab American feminism has many forms and in my view occupies a hybrid in-between space, drawing from secular and Muslim feminisms that build on the Islamic principle of gender equality just as on the U.S. and transnational feminist movements. Even though the approaches to what constitutes this gender equality may vary greatly, the Arab and Muslim experience within the U.S. after 9/11 and the abuse of the 'Muslim women as victims' trope to justify wars against Muslim majority countries, may help to partially define the specificity of Arab American feminism through a shared

commitment to the necessity of resistance against hegemonic liberal US feminisms that reinforce Orientalism and racist discourse on Arab and Muslim women. These feminist frameworks call for an end to what they define as inherent 'cultural' or 'religious'

practices that they take out of historical and political contexts while ignoring historical and political realities (xxxv).

Within this context, I am interested in analyzing how and if present American Muslim women writers create a form of feminism that helps them to express themselves without being co-opted into neoliberal multicultural, U.S. imperial, minority nationalist, Islamic fundamentalist or other dominant, repressive discourses.

#### **1.4 Frames and Questions of Methodology**

Arab American feminism, writing and activism are located at the intersecting frames of race/ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality just as they are interspersed with a postcolonial condition and related to U.S. women of color and transnational feminism (Abdulhadi et.al: xxv). The ambivalent racial classifications of ‘Arab Americans’ demonstrate the socially constructed nature of race and, at the same time, the harmful and very material impact of these classifications, especially in a post 9/11 context. In my analysis I recognize that despite its biological invalidity the concept of race remains a necessary category of analysis due to its material effects, and yet it is also an inherently unstable and changing relation. “Race is always historically specific. At times, a confluence of economic, social, cultural, and political factors has impelled major shifts in society’s understanding (and construction) of race and its constitutive role in national identity formation” (Ngai: 7) Ngai (8) further argues that modern race conceptions are based on a conflation of the cultural and national with physical difference. Thus, despite the collapse of race into ethnicity in ‘non-white’ groups, which turns then white Anglo-Europeans into the only group ethnically/racially unmarked, I center my analysis on ethnicity as the dominant lens to describe the social component in the creation of Arab American women’s subjectivities. Conceptions of ethnicity and race are too closely intertwined to analytically separate them, but with regard to the fact the perceived threat of Arab Americanness is located more in religion/culture than phenotype and that the Arab American ‘racial’ experience is marked by its ambiguity, ethnicity takes a central role in the creation of a Muslim Other.

Arab Americans could pass as ‘white’ and are still counted as Caucasian in the U.S. census and their racial status has historically shifted between ‘not-quite-white’ and ‘not-quite-people-of-color’. In terms of ethnicity, however, the media and cultural representations of Arabs as terrorists has solidified a very narrow ethnic profile into a normative identity category

subsuming a wide variety of Muslim and Arab communities (Abdulhadi et.al.: xxxiv). Puar (xif) pushes this argument even further. He considers how normative sexual politics have incorporated certain forms of queerness as accepted into its ranks, much in line with forms of neoliberal multiculturalism I will explore further in the Nafisi case study, which in turn excludes non-normative queerness that in conjunction with racialization plays into the construction of ‘queer terrorist assemblages’ of Muslim Others as terrorist/racialized bodies. Puar considers “the interplay of perversion and normativity” (xii) as integral to the biopolitical, hegemonic management of life, and thus ‘racialization’ today departs from, even while still overlapping with, its historical usage as a category towards a process of specific social formation.

These processes of social formation based on normativity/perversion in ethnic/racial/sexual/social and religious identity support the need for Stuart Hall’s call to redefine ethnicity ‘newly’ so that it truly captures process of ethnogenesis in the creation of subjectivities beyond the hierarchically cut blanket terms of nation, culture and ‘race’ in its old terms. The old use of ‘ethnicity’ is built on a racist usage that designates only non-whites as ‘ethnic’ instead of recognizing that everybody is ethnically/racially located and that all our subjectivities depend on it specifically and in different ways: “The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated and that all knowledge is contextual” (Hall: 446). This definition of ethnicity also opens up the possibility of intervening and creating counter-hegemonic discursive positions and it posits a view of ethnicity as a diverse, descriptive and non-coercive concept. In terms of the religious component of his ‘new ethnicity’, talking about the Rastafarian movement, Hall (143) asserts that “turning the text (the Bible) upside-down they remade themselves (...) they *became* what they are.” Thus literary self-representation and the rewriting of dominant, normative subject positions, religious and otherwise, entails the possibility of casting ethnicity as a situational, shifting and not inclusive identity marker. Returning to the question of Arab American women self writing, this is especially relevant for the marketing of ‘ethnic artists’ in popular culture and literature, which confines ‘ethnic texts’ to their sociological informational value about the other culture and demands monolithic representations or cheery fictions to please the majority, ethnically unmarked audience, while it could also re-write American ethnicities in a new, non-hierarchical way (449).

By marking the Anglo American majority as equally ethnically constituted, Arab American women writers help to contest and redefine Americanness within the broader literary struggle of US women of color writers. However, despite the similarities and coalitions with other ethnicities among women of color, within these contestations the location of Arab American women writers is specifically determined through orientalism. Nada Elia (223) points out that the relationship of 'white' Arab American to other women of color feminist groups had been tenuous before 9/11 at best, and another question my thesis aims to address is how Arab American feminism includes and intersects with US feminisms in a post 9/11 context. (Abdulhadi et.al xxxi) To frame this question, I follow Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson (2f) who point out that beyond ethnic/cultural politics, gender and sexuality politics are central elements when comparing racial formations within the US, and that despite historic similarities in oppression, each coalition needs to negotiate the highly diverse needs of members of any ethnic group instead of assuming homogeneity as early identity politics and minority nationalisms did.

Can auto-orientalist practices intervene in representation and create space for difference within the highly monolithic orientalist discourse? This question is literally of vital importance for Arab American women and men. With the changing power structures after decolonization and the current neoliberal trends in economic globalization that create new classes of global citizens while degrading undesired humans to bare life (Mbembe: 12), "populations are rendered vulnerable to processes of death and devaluation over and against other populations, in ways that palimpsestically register older modalities of racialized death but also exceed them" (Kyungwon et.al.:2). While the effects of this neoliberal and neoimperial politics affect many people differently according to class and other 'assets' that might provide them with what Aihwa Ong has called graduated sovereignty and flexible citizenship, Mbembe (12) lays out how the U.S. politics of a suspended state of emergency after 9/11 opened the gates for a wholesale perception of Muslim citizens as potential terrorists. These perceptions palimpsestically registers over orientalist renderings of Muslim men as feminized, inferior and queer who at the same time barbarically oppress Muslim women, which in my view serves as a screen for Western men to project and fantasize about unrestrained, patriarchal 'masculinity'.

Despite this dire confluence of dominant orientalist discourses with a neoliberal rhetoric of individual responsibility and human worth based on normative "U.S." values, queer of color

feminism and the women of color movements and theories hold the potential to create an alternative comparative method that challenges epistemic violence against any groups that differ in ethnicity, class, religion or sexual orientation. Kyungwong Hong posits that women of color's positions are illegible in the dominant U.S. Anglo discourse, but might penetrate and enter into discursive negotiations through their cultural productions and function thus as Foucauldian heterotopias. These locations hold together and newly arrange cultural fragments and their meanings to undermine the epistemological certainty of the utopia of a stable 'U.S.' culture. At the same time the editors warn of the danger of co-optation of 'diversity' as a marker of neoliberal multiculturalism. Here I will argue that an essentialist form auto-orientalism supports this form of co-optation, for example in Nafisi's memoir, but I add that the production of meaning with such an essentialist auto-orientalist discourse also depends on audience responses that co-produce such meaning. Books may also produce neoliberal multiculturalist assumptions through (mis)readings by part of the audience or essentially auto-orientalist books might trigger a multidirectional association beyond competitive zero sum logics in any given reader. Thus I am interested in exploring further how an auto-orientalist intervention functions within a heterogeneous women of color comparative framework and on the U.S. literary market. Clearly, the orientalist component is highly legible to an American audience, so can auto-orientalist adaptations and clarifications of stereotypes achieve the epistemological uncertainty necessary to alter parameters of dominant U.S. discourse about Muslim womanhood?

Given the restrictions of this project, I focus on the role of recent popular literature as an example of the discursive field that produces orientalist representations of Muslim womanhood, but also as a space where Muslim women can write back to either support or fight these forms of representation. The dominant trend among literature by and about Muslim women is the highly popular genre of 'Muslim woman as victim narratives', which are also a clear example of the perceived opposition of feminism and multiculturalism that has marked the dominant U.S. discourse about Muslim womanhood. Leti Volpp (1185) argues that "to posit feminism and multiculturalism as oppositional is to assume that minority women are victims of their cultures." 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 U.S. violent interventions to ‘save brown women’. Such an approach obscures, for example, that it was U.S. geopolitical interests at the end of the Cold War that intensified religious fundamentalism, while today Islam is abstractly charged for oppressing women (1206). A further irony is that a Western-centric feminist mission often plays into the hands of local patriarchal cultural nationalists, because it allows them to represent their own resistance against imperialism as part and parcel of the need to maintain traditional gender roles for Muslim women and to preserve their culture against Western feminist influences. This view of women representing the fixed essence of their culture, keeps local feminist women trapped in a binary logic (2026). For my analysis of alternative uses of auto-orientalism I chose to focus on Mohja Kahf’s work, who writes exactly at and against this binary logic. As a Muslim writer in the West she has to negotiate the demand of the market for a ‘Muslim woman as victim’ narrative with the pressure from her own community not to “air dirty laundry” ( Abdulhadi: xxxvii). Can her auto-orientalism overcome the split view of sexism/homophobia as cultural and thus private, separated from public/political issues of racism and imperialism?

Transferred to the U.S. literary market, the perceived opposition of feminism versus multiculturalism translates into an approach to “fiction as a transparent, practically invisible conveyance for ethnography” (Ahmad: 105). While Western representations can be complex and ironic, ‘ethnic’ literature is considered purely mimetic. Even if the narratives themselves are nuanced, their marketing may support a reading that allows American audiences to sympathize from a distance and feel culturally superior and ignore political processes that implicate the U.S. in bringing about repressive regimes. Ahmad concedes that there are possibilities of alternative representations that challenge a purely ethnographic reading, but reception often remains problematic. To achieve a critical reception, Ahmad (127) suggests taking the publishing apparatus as part of the text and look for Muslim feminist texts that build on past feminist resistance, rely on anti-universalizing and heteroglossic strategies that, much in line with a comparative women of color methodology, represent the multiplicity within Muslim women’s communities and stories.

Within this framework, I am interested in how these representations can function autobiographically and beyond without being reduced to being the authentic native informer, and ask with Stuart Hall how individual experience theorizes a migrant and hybrid experience,



bringing together a postmodern theoretical with a political condition (Morley:13). While Hall asserts that the identity politics of an essential blackness and a measure of strategic essentialism helped to intervene in the representations of blackness in mainstream popular culture, he questions if these kinds of politics are still appropriate today (Morley:18). I would like to extend this question to ask if auto-orientalism functions similarly to strategic essentialism and what kind of representational politics the Arab American community needs today to intervene in neo-imperial US orientalism. Have Arab Americans already ‘lost their innocence’ before having established an identity politics in the first place? Can they afford not to be ‘essentialist’ and can auto-orientalism in close vicinity to strategic essentialism actually represent diversity in experience and socially constituted subjectivity?

Stuart Hall defines Anglo mainstream cultural politics in his essay “New ethnicities” as a normalizing representational and discursive space, which is based upon a ‘white’ aesthetics that requires a ‘black’ Other as its object of representation. He outlines (441f) two forms of intervention to this politics: The first is for black artists to gain access to representation – in my analysis this corresponds to Muslim women representing themselves and I argue that auto-orientalism is a crucial element in this effort. By participating in legible majority discourses, self-representation might achieve access, but access by itself does not guarantee that a woman of color’s cultural production is being read as, or actually produces, a counter-hegemonic effect, as I will further analyze in the chapter 2 on U.S. orientalisms and the Nafisi case study. The second possible intervention for Hall is to actively contest marginality and stereotypes by creating a counter image of ‘positive’ blackness to “change relations of representation” (442). In chapter 3 and 4 I analyze how Mohja Kahf employs this strategy based on the auto-orientalist access her work grants her. Chapter 3 strives to find a working definition of strategic auto-orientalism based on her novel, and Chapter 4 traces the connection of artistic and political representations in Kahf’s poetry.

Despite the difficulty of creating spaces for new subjectivities as an individual author, Hall (141f) acknowledges that especially within religious communities that build upon the textual/Holy scriptures, cultural interventions may negotiate alternative subject positions if alternative interpretations of these texts start to be shared by the wider community. This is exactly the strategy at work in Muslim feminist efforts of re-interpretation, but it also holds interesting parallels to literary authors’ position within a hegemonic, discursive field that

misrepresents and narrows the options of Muslim women's being. In other words, the actual creation of new subjectivities depends on more than an individual effort; it needs a change in the discursive formation that is mutually intelligible for religious/social ideological forces and its individual members. For Hall this change of or intervention in the unity of a discourse depends on articulation, that is, its possible but not necessary linkages between different elements: "Since those articulations are not inevitable, not necessary, they can potentially be transformed, so that religion can be articulated in more than one way" (142). Thus, intervening at the point of articulation, at the connection of form and certain meanings and the processes of these linkages between different elements of experience and representation, may contribute to a wider discursive shift.

Spivak follows a similar approach in her view of authorial intervention in 'sign chains', even while she still considers the strategic use of certain essences necessary to express and intervene in discursive negotiations about representation, as opposed to Hall's view that any form of identity politics is outdated. For example, in her essay on "Deconstructing Historiographies" Spivak reads (198f) the work of her Subaltern Studies group in a deconstructive and transactional manner, that is, for her it is possible to read the concept-metaphor of the 'social text' they produce in a fluid manner, as a constant displacement of functions of signs, which thus allows a form of critical reading that does not reduce the text to the purely sociological or any form of truth/essence while still addressing social issues. Similar to articulation, Spivak builds here on Nietzsche's sign chain and the possibility of authorial intervention in disrupting and relinking and re-appropriating this chain – a move that mutually constitutes subjectivity and text in the process of writing and reading. This approach acknowledges the place of any writer/researcher/author of any sign chain in and against majority discourses at the same time, which directly relates to Mohja Kahf's strategy of subverting stereotypes by citing and thus writing herself into them, consciously or subconsciously for that matter.

In sum, I intend to build on Spivak's strategic essentialism and on Hall's insight of the 'end of the innocence of the black subject', which means that blackness is socially constructed and thus so different and specific in its historical experiences that also the aesthetical intervention of creating positive 'blackness' is not a satisfactory strategy of intervention anymore. What kind of representational politics can then "work with and through difference"

(444) and where does auto-orientalism belong on the continuum between essentialist minority nationalism to strategic essentialism to complying with majority discourse representations? Opposed to the memoir genre, does a fictionalized auto-orientalism serve as a “strategic narration instead of confessional or positivist testimonies” (Abdulhadi et.al.:xxx)? In Nafisi’s case, how does the literal and personal auto-orientalism of rendering herself as a modern Scheherazade recreate the vicious circle of abusing Arab women’s testimony to cement their status as victims, and can Kahf’s fictionalized auto-orientalist strategies carve out new subjectivities through strategic forms of self narrating? Given the fact that the success or failure of creating a range of visibly different subject position for Muslim women in the U.S. majority discourse has material and political consequences in terms of personal safety, citizenship and other civil rights, the next chapter outlines the political and cultural representations of Muslim women before turning to the specific manifestations and interventions of auto-orientalism within these discourses.

## Chapter 2

### 2.1 Cultural and political representations of Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11

While the political repercussions after the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001 were immediate, the forging of a discourse of a ‘war on terror’ had been in the making for decades. This discourse considerably helped the Bush administration to argue for the need to wage war to defend human rights, an argument which at that time was not as immediate and inevitable as it might seem in retrospect. Domestically, the discourses of national unity and heroism were soon followed by the notion that “everything had changed” (McAlister: 266). Soon a self-conscious search for heroes among first responders was deployed to reassert Americanness as masculine and brave, paving the way for association of patriotism and heroism with military prowess. This shift allowed the old US pattern of exercising patriotism through the exclusion of certain ethnic groups to re-emerge, which manifested itself legally in the U.S. Patriot Act in November 2001. Leti Volpp (1f) makes the case that this official condoning of racial profiling, based on the perceived affiliation of individuals to Islam or Muslim majority countries and cultures, helped to create an atmosphere that excused hate crimes as patriotic and justified extended surveillance of Muslim citizens and lawless detention of Muslim non-citizens. The government went as far as to ‘voluntarily’ interview thousands of Muslim citizens, but McAlister (275) also points out that in opposition to the hate crimes many non-Muslim U.S. citizens also voiced their solidarity with their fellow Muslim citizens and disagreed with the majority discourse.

Taking a step back from the immediate consequences of 9/11, McAlister examines the recurring and changing tropes U.S. politics have deployed about the Middle East since the end of World War II. While U.S. foreign politics have constantly constructed and redefined the U.S. interest in the Middle East in the last 50 years for economic and strategic reasons, it is also important to note that the intersections of political and cultural representations of the Middle East have also been central to the domestic politics of race and gender. The frequent concern over Muslim women’s ‘oppression’ runs parallel to the rhetoric that a morally superior U.S. depended on the virility of its men and the ‘freedom’ of U.S. women who ‘choose to freely subordinate’ (McAlister: 305) themselves into the hetero-normative family model as foundation of the nation. From a contemporary vantage point, the term domestic has acquired a political tenor that

emphasizes much more readily the global linkages of American culture. Most notably, as Amy Kaplan points out, “Domestic has a double meaning that links the space of the familial household to that of the nation, by imagining both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home”(86). The American home thus needs the sense of the foreign to exist, but Kaplan also stresses the irony that the appropriation of the term homeland in the creation of the ‘homeland security’ department places ‘home’ outside of U.S. national borders for many Americans.

The incessant cultural representations of Muslim women as victims of their cultures and of Islam as monolithic and antithetical culture to ‘Western civilization’ form thus part of the making of the meaning of 9/11 in the years thereafter. McAlister analyses the conscious cultural work put into the creation of the ‘war on terror’, not just by the Bush administration but mainstream media and other agents of cultural politics alike: “representations of the Middle East have been and continue to be a site of struggle over both the nature of the U.S. as world power and the domestic politics of race, religion, and gender” (xviii). The constant and growing U.S. concern with the Middle East in domestic politics may explain why the silencing of opposing discourses in the process of re-inventing Americanness in the post 9/11 moment and redeploying neo-orientalist discourses required the “self-renewing menace potential” as evidence of “the future reality of threat” (Massumi: 53). Massumi’s lucid analysis lays out the impossibility of proving the threat of weapons of mass destruction (standing in for the threat of Islamic cultures) and thus the justification for the Iraq war as wrong, because the felt threat and the potentiality of Saddam ‘would have if he could have’ sufficed to obscure the validity of factual arguments. However, this artificial narrowing of political rhetoric opens up once the affective charge of the moment subsides, and I believe we are today at a point where the immediate affect has passed and we can look back at the ‘facts’ and intervene in the meaning making processes about 9/11 and subsequent possible political subject positions.

Leti Volpp summarizes the specific consequences of the changed political climate had on both state practices and on an American majority afraid of Arab American Muslims, or any people that appear ‘Middle Eastern’ in general, in her essay “The Citizen and the Terrorist”. Most prominently, the wake of 9/11 saw thousands of hate crimes against ‘Muslim’ citizens committed by ‘average’ Americans, while at the same time the conflation of the appearance of being Muslim, Arab or ‘Middle Eastern’ consolidated into a new identity category. This category

has been further charged with a wholesale suspicion of being terrorist, which has also turned the public opinion against racial profiling from inefficient and discriminatory to being a necessary evil. U.S. officials deported more than 320000 noncitizens with ties to countries where al-Qaeda operates and investigated thousands of Muslim U.S. citizens. The confluence of political, cultural and economic factors also changed domestic perceptions of ethnicity. At first glance it seems paradoxical that this singling out of 'Middle Easterners' has actually widened the ethnic inclusivity of Americanness. Now not only Anglos, but also African Americans, South Asian Americans and Latinos, and in terms of sexual politics U.S. lesbian/gay people, functioned as signifiers of legitimate American citizens that denote supposed U.S. pluralism and inclusiveness. This intersection of nation, identity and citizenship is clearly inscribed in orientalist and racial discourses of power, as, for example, nobody took issue with Anglo national identity when Timothy McVeigh carried out his terrorist attack in Oklahoma City. Further, the parallels in political representation of a racially clearly defined minority in the U.S. that makes it 'impossible' to distinguish 'good' from 'bad' citizens and thus requires surveillance and even interment shockingly resembles the representation of Japanese Americans as a collective threat to the nation during WWII and their subsequent interment. Leti Volpp (5) considers the Japanese interment and the aftermath of 9/11 as two pivotal moments in American orientalism.

These extreme political consequences and marginalizations are also connected to an American imagination that considers citizenship synonymous with 'American' identity as a static concept and a consequence of the U.S. imperial/orientalist discourses that conflate Arab culture and Muslim identity in and outside the United States into the opposite of 'culture' and 'civilization' (Abdulahdi et. al: xxff). In this view Muslim citizens lose their public legitimacy even if they are formally entitled to U.S. citizenship. In addition to ethnicity, access to citizenship also varies according to class and degrees of assimilation to U.S. values. Within the present late capitalist economy Aihwa Ong points out that, in her example, elite diasporic Chinese US citizens participate selectively in orientalist discourses to secure economic advantages in the form flexible citizenship, defined as "strategies and effects of mobile managers (...) who seek to both circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investment, work, and family relocation" (136). Thus, minority representatives as native informants like Nafisi may negotiate a status as elite Muslim U.S. citizens. The case study below will further analyze how Nafisi makes use of neoliberal multiculturalist currents to

trade her ‘insider report’ for a position within U.S. academia, which materially rewards native informants that cater to U.S. self perception through certain cultural representations of Muslim culture. Despite these elite advantages based on Nafisi’s investment in an US orientalist economy of knowledge production, there are structural limits to this citizenship – the most important one that even the flexible, rich citizen still represents the culturally ‘incorrect’ ethnicity.

Further, we also find this ambiguity about cultural diversity and American self-perception engrained at the very concrete intersections of cultural representation and politics of backlash against Muslim Americans. For example, the suggestion that President Obama could be Muslim had explosive political force among conservative and evangelical voters, which can only be understood if Americanness is perceived as irreconcilable with Islam. Or New York City sells itself as a city that cherishes and celebrates its diversity, and yet, today in 2011 the NYPD still had an informant in every Mosque in the city (Web NYPD). This blunt racial profiling of the whole Muslim NY community as potential terrorist suspects defies any civil rights legislation, which in turn represents criminalization of Arab and Muslim Americans as a very specific form of racism in the post 9/11 area. (Abdulhadi et. al: xxff) Although the relations of the U.S. to the Middle East are undoubtedly more complex beneath the surface of official narratives, cultural productions, like films and novels, helped to remake U.S. national, racial and religious identities. The next chapter will also examine how these political and cultural representations intersect in the discourses of American orientalism, which sometimes also included a spirit of religious affiliation and transnational solidarity between Muslims, Christians and Jews, especially among African American Muslims and fundamentalist Christians. The scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed history of the manifold manifestations of U.S. orientalisms (see McAlister), but after a brief overview I focus on the particularity of the deployment of images of Arab womanhood and possible definitions of auto-orientalism.

### **2.1.1. Popular literature and the representation of Muslim women**

Within the cultural representations of Muslim women, popular literature has played an especially prominent role. I agree with McAlister (7) that cultural productions do not reproduce one to one ruling elite’s discourses, but that their appearances in conversation with certain other discourses is no mere coincidence either. Thus a critique of texts and the meanings made through them

needs to include audience response and the location of publication, and both these elements were highly active in the creation of what Ahmad (107) has called the “oppressed Muslim women” genre. These narratives are based on the view that “a liberated and even utopian West provides the only conceptual escape for the narrator’s viscerally rendered captivity.” (Ahmad: 110) The enormous popularity of Muslim women’s memoirs often forces them, either through the text itself, the text’s reception or both, into the role of a native informant who not only enables American audiences to be global literary tourists, but also to justify U.S. global rule by representing other cultures as static and provincial. Further, Ahmad (107) notes that there is an astounding uniformity in the way Muslim women are portrayed in all kinds of fiction and non-fiction, adult and children’s literature, and even when the texts try to be nuanced, their marketing and reception tend to flatten out any variation of the narrative that women are victims of Islam.

Ahmad first analyses clear cut examples of the “oppressed Muslim women” genre, such as the infamous memoir *Not without my daughter* by Betty Mahmoody or Jean Sasson’s *Princess Trilogy*, opening for example with *Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*. However, Ahmad also includes to some extent more nuanced examples like *Reading Lolita in Teheran* by Azar Nafisi in the ‘oppressed Muslim women’ genre. She defines these narratives as neo-orientalist, in the sense that they provide ‘insights’ into a ‘world behind the veil’ and thus pretend to fulfill the old colonial desire to gaze at hidden Arab womanhood. The change here is that Muslim women speak for themselves, but they speak in highly legible – or orientalist – terms that cater to an imperial feminist discourse of Western women’s superior liberty. Further, all these narratives are characterized by omitting any link between U.S. foreign policy and the rise of misogynistic, fundamentalist regimes, by focusing on the desire of the protagonist to be just like Western women. Ahmad (124) drives her point further, though, arguing that even texts like *My forbidden face* by Latifa, which harshly criticize the hypocrisy of the Taliban and are thus not fully part of the genre, are packaged and read in a way that precludes any agency among Muslim women who are in need of saving. She closes her argument stating that the obscurity about U.S. and Taliban or other fundamentalist’s groups complicities also doubles as a smokescreen for the lack of full female empowerment within the U.S.



## 2.2 American orientalism and representations of Arab womanhood

The term ‘orientalism’ itself has multiple layers of meaning and has been recast for different projects at different points in history. Originally, orientalism referred to the work of European scholars in the 18th and 19th century writing in and about the languages and literatures of the ‘East’. Thus, a first defining characteristic is the definition of peoples and cultures geographically east of the European ‘center’, which manifested itself in art forms and styles commonly associated with Eastern nations from a European perspective. These artistic representations soon triggered and also morally justified the shift from orientalism as style to orientalism as a corporate colonial institution. This style of thought was based on epistemological and ontological distinction between Orient and Occident and propagated a partial view of Islam and Arab people as inferior. Thus, orientalism became deeply engrained as a naturalizing principle in imperialist politics supported by a large scholarly tradition about oriental cultures far into the 20th Century (McAfee: 1f).

While there have been attempts at critical intervention into the oriental discourse before Edward Said, no other work was as influential in recasting the meaning and exposing the imperial functions of the intersection of representation and politics in orientalism as Said’s seminal book *Orientalism* published in 1978. Said exposed the Orient as a product of the European writers’ and painter’s minds that assisted in creating a superior, rational and masculine Western self in opposition to a backward, passive and feminine Orient. Said’s “contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (3).

Said’s intervention has opened a new field in postcolonial and other studies, and many scholars have built on his insights, albeit with some modifications and qualifications. A major point of critique against Said’s approach is that he creates orientalism as a totalizing framework in a clear cut binary between the East and West. Lisa Lowe (ixf) argues that there has always been heterogeneity in resistance to, and in objects of, orientalism. These inherent contradictions and multiplicities have rendered orientalism an instable discourse, which varied greatly from context to context. In this paper I will not go further into the differences between British and French orientalism (see Lowe), but focus on the specificities of American orientalism and the

possibilities of further interventions into the meanings of orientalism by the supposed objects of these discourses themselves. For my project of finding and defining a different form of auto-orientalism, I will build on Lowe's insight that the illusion of simultaneous fixity and fluidity and different theories and practices that constitute orientalism also entail a multitude of positions from where to enact resistance and intervene in the epistemological process.

While Said acknowledges in his last chapter the different trajectory of U.S. orientalism in a post World War II era into area studies as producers of knowledge about the Other in the context of Cold War politics, McAlister specifies that in the creation of U.S. interest in the Middle East and its media representation "the meanings of the Middle East in the United States have been far more mobile, flexible and rich than the Orientalism binary would allow. Appropriation, affiliation, distinction, and mobilization were all, at times, central to an evolving set of uneven relationships" (304). Historically, in a U.S. context external imperialism arrived comparatively late, and the Middle East occupied mainly a mythical space of religious origin locked in a far away time and place in the American mind of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. However, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with the closing of the frontier, US interest in overseas imperialism grew and domestic industrialization and the rise of new images of masculinity upset the security of a Victorian world view. In this context, U.S. orientalist imagery shifted from depictions of the virginal Holy Land to the exotic and sensual belly dancers as the industrializing nation became obsessed with images of harems and Arab womanhood "as nostalgic foils for U.S. progress" (Jamarkani: 7). Jamarkani argues in a detailed analysis that the deployment of belly dancers at the Chicago world's fair brought orientalist images of Arab womanhood in wide circulation in U.S. popular culture for the first time at the turn to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Her analysis examines the interconnections of shifting representations of Arab womanhood to growing industrialization, mass consumerism, and the recent collusion of imperial and multinational capitalist interests. In these shifts, U.S. orientalism has coined its own take on the veil, the harem and the belly dancer as endlessly recurring motifs far from their actual context (186)<sup>1</sup>. These representations relate to fantasies of patriarchal domination in timeless, imaginative spaces where Anglo men may safely project heteronormative erotic fantasies that blend into constructions of national power and masculinity (8f).

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, the 1977 James Bond *The Spy Who Loved Me* or the 1960s TV show *I Dream of Jeannie*, and more recently Disney's *Aladdin*, *The Simpsons* and *Sex and the City 2*.

In terms of post 9/11 politics and representations, images of Arab and Muslim womanhood build structurally on previous images and anxieties about progress and nation building. The veil continues to be the most overdetermined signifier of the U.S. liberation discourse and the old colonial trope of the ‘lifting of the veil’ as supposed liberation is alive and kicking. These symbolic barriers, structurally repeated by the walls of the harem, are also linked to the perceived threat by and border to Arab cultures and the domestic anxiety about the very presence of this ‘threat’ among Americans. Together with the veil, these symbols offer a superficial reference to Muslim backwardness and hide U.S. neoliberal and political interests that cast the Arab world and its resources as the new frontier of oil wealth (Jamarkani: 162f). Further, the frequent depict of Arab womanhood in commercials and politics stands in for ‘conflicts of impulses’, which translate for U.S. consumers into being fascinated and repulsed by the ‘Oriental’ at the same time. Jamarkani (188f) concludes her analysis with the insight that despite the representational ambivalence about Arab women being simultaneously signifiers of civilized, rich futures and barbaric pasts, U.S. orientalism is invested in creating a linear progress narrative that obscures the actual processes of U.S. nation building.

This leads us back to Lowe’s point and the question of how orientalism never functions as a homogenous, totalizing discourse but is internally contested. In the American context, McAlister points out that the multi-ethnicity of the U.S. plays out in different investments in orientalist discourses. For example, Timothy Marr (524f) analyses how U.S. writers of the 19th Century, e.g. Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Herman Melville, use the luminal presence of Islamic difference to negotiate and contest racial hierarchies and tensions within their nation. While Marr finds that African Americans could achieve less repression if associated with ‘whiter’ Islamic cultural difference in this period, McAlister argues that the Black Muslims in the US used their affiliation to a decolonizing Arab world in the 60s to fight internal white, Christian supremacy. As these two examples show, Said’s East/West binary does not hold and McAlister (9ff) attempts a definition of the specific characteristics of American orientalism in comparison to Said’s views. In her view the U.S. has a much more pastiche like approach to the “Middle East”, which mixes elements from China to Morocco as ‘oriental’ and, as previously shown, Said’s characterization of east/feminine/private and west/masculinity/public does not theorize the deployment of Arab womanhood in US public and citizenship discourses and the way these discourses use the family and the private to represent

the public and the nation. For example, after the Iranian hostage crisis in the 80s the public discourses framed the US as suffering, as an aggrieved nation and thus a ‘traditionally’ feminine space, while the military success during the Gulf Wars and present anti-terror politics stress the U.S. as masculine and superior again (42) to the very ambivalent gendering of present anti terrorist discourses.

### **2.2.1 Auto-orientalism**

In search of a definition of auto-orientalism as a potentially empowering Arab American feminist strategy toward subjecthood, I think it is important to also heed McAlister’s cautioning call that not all stereotypes against Asians or Arabs are orientalist. Some are ‘simply’ racist and exotizing, but if so, how is orientalism specific and different? In McAlister’s view (12), an orientalist discourse depends on three basic characteristics: it is binary, feminized and citational. Turning to my own analysis and the attempt of a preliminary definition of auto-orientalism, I argue that a central feature of auto-orientalism has to be its citational nature. However, the way this access to representation via citation is used may result in (at least) two different forms of auto-orientalism: citationality can be essentialist or strategic. That is, a citation of an established orientalist trope, for example the veil as a symbol of oppression, provides access by way of its mutual legibility by majority discourses and minority writers. However, while I contend that citation can obviously easily confirm existing stereotypes, as it does in the deployment of veiled women as oppressed women on literally all covers of the ‘oppressed victim narratives’, it might also work as a space for contestation and subversion of a binary/feminized orientalist reference. In other words, citation can but does not necessarily require mimetic repetition and a binary/feminized nature. Auto-orientalism may easily reproduce the superior West/inferior East equation, as I will demonstrate in the Nafisi case study; however, a subversive citation of a binary and monolithic femininity may also open a space for multiplicity and a different kind of auto-orientalism. In my view, these second characteristics determine if auto-orientalism results as either essentialising or strategic subversion.

I build my definition of auto-orientalism on the work of Christina Civantos, whose book *Between Arabs and Argentine: Argentine Orientalism, Arab Immigrants, and the Writing of Identity*, shows the extent to which multiple versions of Argentine orientalisms contribute to and contest an Argentine national identity. In this case, ‘European’ Argentines rooted their masculine

and ethnic identity in the figure of the gaucho, the Argentine cowboy living the ‘frontier’ life in the pampa, to differentiate themselves as superior and native as opposed to subsequent immigrant waves. However, ‘Arab’ Argentines participate in a form of auto-orientalism to position themselves as the “Ur-gauchos”, the true original Argentines, by arguing that the gauchos were the offspring of the first settlers who were arabized Spaniards. Arab Argentines so successfully hijacked the gaucho discourse of masculine superiority and Argentine-ness that Carlos Menem, a Syrian Argentine, attained the presidency in the country. So while auto-orientalism here maintains a patriarchal self-conception, this essentialization also raises questions about multiplicity in Argentine identity. Effectively, Arab Argentines have turned a gesture of rejection of immigrants, the elevation of the gaucho myth to the status of pure ‘Argentineness’, into a gesture of inclusion, the “entry point for the Arab immigrant into Argentine subjecthood” (22).

This example demonstrates the unpredictable ways multiple discourses can change the meaning and effects of orientalism, especially if objectified groups intervene and position themselves in the dominant discourse. Civantos’ preliminary definition of auto-orientalism as “the essentialization of the self based on preexisting archetypes” (22) triggers many questions about the political effects of a ‘literally’ strategic essentialism. As argued above, Civantos’ definition of auto-orientalism does not change the binaries of superiority/masculinity against inferiority/femininity, even though it expands the criteria of a citational nature to citations of culturally and locally specific orientalist archetypes outside the European tradition. However, while the essentialist auto-orientalism she proposes achieves access, what Stuart Hall has argued is the first step toward changing negative representations of the Other, I am interested in finding evidence for a different strategic essentialist use of auto-orientalism based more on Spivak’s terms. Spivak (370) emphasizes that strategic essentialism is not part of perpetuating ethnicities or simply creating superior standpoints from which to speak, but an attempt to keep essences fluid, to strategically employ them in a given situation without solidifying them. Spivak insists that there needs to be a minimalizable essence to articulate and negotiate difference, which in the case of a strategic auto-orientalism could be the citation of orientalist tropes to achieve access and then use the access granted to keep these essences fluid and actively change them. In other words, a ‘strategically essentialist’ auto-orientalism would be a counter-hegemonic intervention in the orientalist images of Arab womanhood, and thus reveal these images to be empty signifiers

detached from actual practices. I situate auto-orientalism as a change in representation, a form of identity politics fraught with all the complexities and dangers of this strategy. Identity politics may narrow and essentialise, but I also believe there is a potential for a non-essentialising, flexible identity politics that subsequently may open spaces for new subjectivities. I believe, if achieved, a form of non-essentialist auto-orientalism could function more akin to the successful renaming of the previously racist category of ‘women of color’ into a subject position of self definition and empowerment and an umbrella term for very differently situated women of color subjectivities within.

#### **2.4 A case study: Essentialist auto-orientalism and the Nafisi controversy**

Azar Nafisi’s choice to write a memoir and the ensuing controversy about her work have to be seen in the wider political context of her publications and the surge of Iranian women’s memoir of the last two decades. Malek (361f) warns against underestimating the huge popular demand for Iranian women’s memoirs from the 1980s onwards, first due to a public curiosity towards understanding the Iranian revolution and in a post 9/11 era with regards to an even stronger perceived threat of ‘Muslim’ terrorism. However, Nafisi’s commercial success, even within the popular genre of Iranian women’s memoirs, was unprecedented. Her memoir remained six weeks at the top of the New York Times Bestseller List in 2003 (365), but did this success create awareness for the liminal position of Iranian exiles in-between the US and their home cultures – the simultaneously east and westward gaze in Majaj’s definition of Arab American literature– or does it testify to a successful essentialist auto-orientalization that reinforces stereotypes against Muslim culture in performing a purely eastward gaze? I argue that Nafisi caters to US orientalist notions of Muslim womanhood instead of challenging them, but the answer to this question remains contested among academic reviewers. So instead of contributing further to the extensive criticism about the text itself<sup>2</sup>, I analyze the controversy surrounding it as a co-text to gauge the intersection of author, publishing and reception in the creation of essentialist auto-orientalist meaning. First, I provide an overview over the scholarly controversy surrounding *Reading*

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<sup>2</sup> See: Dabashi, Hamid. “Native informers and the making of the American empire”, DePaul, Amy. “Re-Reading “Reading Lolita in Tehran.””, Donadey, Anne and Huma Ahmed Ghosh. “Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran”, Levinson, Nan. “Literature as Survival. Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books by Azar Nafisi.”, Malek, Amy. “Memoir as Iranian exile cultural production: A case study of Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis series “, Rastegar, Mitra. “Reading Nafisi in the West: Authenticity, Orientalism, and “Liberating” Iranian Women.”

*Lolita* and its popular resonances, and then I look at this controversy through an auto-orientalist angle.

In my view, Nafisi literally auto-orientalizes herself as a Scheherazade figure that provides insights into the ‘harem’, in other words, her Ivy league office and by extension her living room in Tehran, which reinforces the American orientalist tradition by providing insights into the ‘harem’ as the hidden world of ‘Iranian women’. In the memoir Nafisi, a professor of English, returns to the University of Teheran during the Islamic revolution and fights the restrictions on her teaching and personal liberties by creating a seminar/book club for her students in her own house. She uses Western literary classics to reflect on the issues surrounding her and her students’ lives and in a very specific context her novel presents a relatively nuanced picture of Iranian middle and upper class female students and their agency. However, Ahmad (119) emphasizes that Nafisi never qualifies the specificity of her experience in favor of uncritically rendering the West as the only free, superior space. Western literature is her only tool of empowerment and she disregards the involvement of the CIA in Iranian history or any critical stance towards the U.S. interest in the Middle East in general. Ironically, Nafisi briefly cites *A Thousand and One Nights* as an example of subversive storytelling (Ahmad: 120), but the chapters and literature she works with are Jane Austen, Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Vladimir Nabokov, which obscures any agency and sources of empowerment from within the Muslim literary traditions and politics even while Nafisi creates herself as a supposedly subversive storytelling Scheherazade. Thus, I argue her appropriation of the Scheherazade figure is based on orientalist adaptations and distortions of the tale, because her essentialist auto-orientalist self fashioning cites and repeats the binary of a weak, oppressed Muslim woman as opposed to a liberated and superior American woman without any room for agency or subversion.

#### **2.4.1 The academic controversy**

Before turning to the manifold criticisms brought up against Nafisi’s memoir, it should be noted that the first rounds of popular and scholarly critiques right after the publication of *Reading Lolita* in March 2003 were overwhelmingly positive and her memoir was considered empowering for Muslim women. For example, Levinson (24f) casts the memoir as a prime example of how literature promotes survival under totalitarian regimes and actually attests that

Nafisi's literary skills keep the memoir from collapsing Oprah's book club with girl-victim literature and orientalism. The praise for her memoir centered on her validation of the power of imagination and fiction, but in 2004 the scholarly critiques turned their attention to the total lack of critical awareness beneath this literary focus as to how Nafisi's memoir addresses the American imagination about themselves in contrast to Muslim Others. The controversy culminated in Hamid Dabashi's biting critique of Nafisi as native informer in 2006, he charged Nafisi personally for acting as a handmaiden of the Bush administration's politics (DePaul 73f). In retrospect to this controversy I agree with DePaul (77) that there is little doubt Nafisi's publication was well timed and has been taken up by the conservative establishment under the Bush era to justify his wars and a firm Anti-Iran policy, but that it is too simple to condemn Nafisi as intentionally promoting the war too. Her enormous popular success, audience responses, the deliberate orientalist marketing of her book ( I will discuss the cover image in the next chapter) and the changing political context in Iran itself go beyond Nafisi's control. All this is not to say that Nafisi did not intentionally auto-orientalize herself, but authorial intent, reader response and a text itself may function in very different ways. So while her individual persuasion might even have been against the Iraq war, it cannot by mere coincidence either that the memoir was published in March 2003. As a case in point, it is striking that the conservative newspaper *Weekly Standard* actually cited *Reading Lolita* and its 'global' success as proof of the need to strike Iran (84).

For this project, it is relevant how the controversy around Nafisi as a native informant informed her access to, and status as a global citizen in the US. Interestingly, the explicitly neoconservative and orientalist scholar Bernard Lewis, who coined the infamous term 'clash of civilizations', wrote the blurb for the memoir and Nafisi thanks him in the acknowledgments for "opening doors" (78). While these endorsements do not translate one to one into the political message of the book, it does raise questions in how far auto-orientalizing did not only open US markets for Nafisi, but also opened her doors to elite cosmopolitan citizenship and a high position in graduated sovereignty within the US, which is a success for the visibility of a formerly unknown Iranian American college professor. However, I believe Jodi Melamed's (82f) recent contribution to the scholarly controversy is needed to fully grasp the intersection of auto-orientalist representation and U.S. politics. She states that the multicultural underpinnings of the memoir are far from being as apolitical and neutral as Nafisi claims them to be, and that the



text's hegemonic comparative method disguises neoliberal multiculturalism and its racialized structures of socioeconomic privilege and stigma. I argue that this stigma and racialization go in tandem with Nafisi's self essentialising, according to neo-orientalist U.S. perceptions. Her authority as a story telling American Scheherazade is based on Melamed's insight that Nafisi only promotes access to 'freedom' and U.S. citizenship for a certain class of assimilated Muslim women, which leaves prejudice against Islam and possible alternative subjectivities for Muslim women untouched.

Nafisi's adaptation of essential U.S. archetypes confirms rather than subverts a view of "Americanness" in opposition to Islam. While her memoir nuances the representation of Iranian women within a middle class context, DePaul states (80) that the text nevertheless reinforces neoconservative perceptions of the world. It transfers the Cold War binary from the USSR to the Middle East by equating Marxism with totalitarian Islamism and Nafisi overstates the pre-revolutionary status of women in Iran. Her account of Iranian history is very selective, but she does not highlight her own subjectivity in selecting it. Rather, she speaks for Iranian women, which ignores class difference and socioeconomic issues – the situation for poor women has actually improved as compared to the repressions under the shah (Rastegar: 110f) – and the diverse way women and citizens in Iran resist. Further, Nafisi left Iran in 1997, just when a more moderate government was about to take office, so the historic specificity of her experience may get lost when her American audiences are not familiar with Iranian history. Even though Nafisi may not have intended her memoir to be taken as a literal representation and explanation of Iran, it invites a literal reading and Western audiences to just reaffirm their beliefs about Muslim women as helpless victims of Islamic repression. Donadey and Ahmed Ghosh put the crux of the matter very succinctly: "Nafisi is painfully aware of the overdetermination of women under fundamentalist Islamic law: women 'were never free of the regime's definition of them as Muslim women' (2003, 28). Yet she seems strangely unaware that Muslim women are also never free of Western readers' definition of them as inherently oppressed"(637). Instead of using her transcultural position to mediate between cultural perceptions and promoting mutual understanding, Nafisi uses this location of power to cast herself as an agent of change who saves the native women, an imperial narrative that simply places herself in the dominant 'Western' position without altering orientalist binaries. However, this power is highly depend on her commercial and popular success, (Rastegar: 122) and I believe, it is in the end significant how

Nafisi's audience reads and reacts to her auto-orientalism to determine the political effects of her representational choices.

#### **2.4.2 Reader responses**

For U.S. audiences, Nafisi's felt authenticity is key. She has spent half her life in the US and the other in Iran, and she is very aware of preexisting conceptions of the Middle East, so her auto-orientalism turns her into a participant and observer of US orientalist discourses at the same time. In the U.S. literary market, then, Nafisi may be totally unrepresentative and exceptional among Iranian women, but it is exactly this outsider status that renders her authentic and an insider, capable of sounding authentic for her Western reader and thus performing auto-orientalism (Rastegar:114). To further understand how the audience co-produces the neo-orientalism enabled through the memoir and to see if there are instances where her auto-orientalism is read and rendered more flexible, I looked at 15 popular reviews (Web references attached) on literary blogs that review *Reading Lolita* either based on book club discussions or on a private reading experience often discussed in an ensuing forum.

Summarizing prevalent trends across all the blogs, it is apparent that exotic qualities sell and they are in turn what fuels neoliberal multiculturalism and allow superficial 'integration' of certain kinds of diversity without deconstructing present ethnic and cultural hierarchies. The most common themes that run through the majority of the blog posts is that the novel is 'enlightening' to read, everybody should read it, it opens the American mind, which often goes hand in hand with being thankful for 'American freedom' as opposed to the victimized Iranian women. For example: "And it certainly makes me appreciate my freedoms and the rights we have to think and live and dream in North America" (Web 6). There is occasionally a warning voice that Nafisi is not representative of all Iranian women, but the informative value is still considered valid: "It gave me a clearer picture of the Iranian perspective and attitudes toward Western culture. I remember thinking to myself at times: well, no wonder they see us that way! (Though I am well aware not all Iranians share the opinions depicted in the book)" (Web 9).

However, there are quite a few 'mixed' reviews too. While most readers are 'inspired' by Nafisi's representation of how literature may alleviate the oppression of Iranian women, a frequent overtone is that the audience had different expectations of the memoir. Several blogs agreed that the literary value was the insight into the life of the characters, while others also

considered her characterizations as too vague, and her literary self-fashioning as overpowering. Some readers were even annoyed by the focus on oppression of women as the sole ‘interesting’ factor of the memoir. “But is that it? After that, what is all the hype about?” (Web 11), and “In rapid fire fashion, she goes from discussing literature to ranting about the oppression of women, confusing and too long” (Web 12). While for the overwhelming majority the literary connection to women’s lives was a nexus of empathy, albeit one that elevates American women to superiority by identifying against poor ‘oppressed’ women, some readers also reacted cynically to Nafisi’s legitimization of her work by representing women’s oppression.

A few examples also slightly contradict the political tensions scholarly reviews have identified in the memoir. There is the perception that Nafisi is not personal and authentic at all. A self-described avid reader complains, “To my deep chagrin, I cannot say I got an accurate image not even of the author’s private students, “her girls” as she used to call them.” (Web 5) While this entails a possibility for criticism of the inadequacy of auto-orientalism to function as ‘native informant’ or being mimetically representative, the reader takes an opposite interpretation. Interestingly, the reader takes his orientalist view even further, much beyond any reading Nafisi could have wished to imply, by blaming the characters (sic!) themselves: “ from start to finish, I observe that they have no clear image of themselves; they can only see and shape themselves through other people’s eyes-ironically, the very people they despise.” This quote, together with another ‘defense’ of Nafisi’s memoir as “either these women tell their stories to America now, or they may not be able to tell them at all” (Web7) were the most blunt orientalist appropriation of the memoir to bolster US imperial perception of needing to save Muslim women. While Web 7 credits Nafisi for her efforts to save Iranian women, Web 5’s dismissal of the ‘character’s’ human capital and agency contradicts a reading of Nafisi’s ‘girls’ as a multicultural, neoliberal elite. Again, I don’t take this individual opinion to undermine the relevance of Melamed’s analysis. Rather, this dismissal supports Ong’s qualification that also successful essentialist auto-orientalism in the service of flexible citizenship still entails an ‘incorrect’ ethnicity and overt racism, even if Nafisi and the ‘characters’ play by the American majority’s rules.

Among these mixed reviews, I want to briefly focus on an example that illustrates potential alternative responses to auto-orientalist representations. The blog by the Book’em book club perfectly fits the ‘native informant’ reaction among readers, but it also entails a potentiality for how Nafisi’s auto-orientalism could contribute to an actual cultural exchange and render her

auto-orientalist citations more fluid by way of different reception. The book club actually invited an Iranian friend to their discussions who “helped bridge the gaps in our knowledge and cleared up many areas of confusion” (Web 2). She not only clarified the difference between Persian and Arab cultures, but also explained “in most instances, their government's "party line" is not the reality people live by in their daily lives”. Even though apologetic, this doubling up in native informants is a first step towards engaging more with Iranian cultures and suggests that Nafisi’s memoir may trigger such encounters. On the other hand, ethnic literature and women memoirs are reduced to documents instead of literature for its own sake and the book club concluded “It portrays a life, especially for women, that is almost beyond our comprehension. We thank both the author, Azar Nafisi, and our cultural interpreter, Farnaz Shemirani, for allowing us the opportunity to walk in someone else's shoes.” As long as auto-orientalism performs here the paradox of casting women as incomprehensibly Other while at the same time allowing American readers to walk in their shoes, from a safe, superior distance, Nafisi buys her elite cosmopolitan status and gratitude of American readership by selling empathy under the imperial guise of Muslim women’s inferiority. However, this response points to a potentiality of change that I believe works in analogy to E. Ann Kaplan’s concept of vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma refers to the impact of media representations of direct trauma on its viewership that mostly triggers only empty empathy, but if qualitative and engaging enough also entails the potentiality of ethical witnessing and pro social behavioral change. ‘Walking in someone’s else’s shoes’ here is mostly akin to empty empathy, but could also entail the potential of ethical witnessing and change had Nafisi chosen a different kind of auto-orientalism to represent her experiences. Thus, I see a non-essentialist potential in the frequent ‘Walking in someone’s shoes’ sentiment built on Nafisi’s auto-orientalism, in tandem with the audience’s neo-orientalist sentiments. That is, if both the representation and audience response were qualitative and nuanced enough to trigger ethical witnessing instead of empty empathy.

#### **2.4.3 Definition of Nafisi’s essentialist auto-orientalism**

In conclusion, I believe any definition of the function and characteristics of an essentialist auto-orientalism in a post 9/11 U.S. context have to build on the intersections of questions of citizenship, neoliberal multiculturalism and U.S. orientalism. Thus, I sum up what constitutes essentialist auto-orientalist traits and the narrow avenue to a particular kind of accepted Muslim

subjectivity by building on Jodi Melamed's (82f) analysis of Nafisi's memoir as representative of a neoliberal multiculturalism. The presumably humanitarian, universally feminist and liberating language and story line obscures neoliberal hierarchies of valuation-devaluation that are not strictly defined by a color line anymore, but are nevertheless highly racist and dependent on a binary class of Muslims implicit in Nafisi's auto-orientalist representation. For Melamed, Nafisi's students represent a new elite class of global citizenship with human capital and mobility as opposed to other immobile, 'inflexible', lesser citizens which happen to be poor and conservative Muslims in Nafisi's memoir. In a neoliberal logic, this backwardness is their own fault (86), which creates a certain kind of desired 'multiculturalness' as a new form of whiteness/privilege. In the specific case of post 9/11 Arab/Iranian migration to the US, the requirements for free movement are not just affluence and education, but also a high degree of assimilation to U.S. 'values'. In this sense, Nafisi's memoir and life choices perform the function of native informant who affirms U.S. orientalist notions in exchange for access to citizenship and privilege. The currency of Nafisi's essentialist auto-orientalism is thus a self representation that builds on 'preexisting archetypes' of US views of Muslim women as victims of Islam. In analogy to the Arab Argentines' case of essentialist auto-orientalism, this gesture has also a literal purchasing power for political inclusion and citizenship, but only for her and a narrow new subject category of 'assimilated', affluent and educated Muslim women.

Melamed (93f) outlines how *Reading Lolita in Tehran* actually reads Tehran in Lolita, linking literary value to geopolitics, racializing gender and neoliberal multiculturalism, and I believe this analysis also describes the access criteria for the empowered subjectivity Nafisi legitimizes through her auto-orientalism. Key factors in this ideological substratum are a neoliberal vocabulary that equates 'free choice' with free access to a market and the hybrid genre of memoir-literary criticism itself, which neutralizes and universalizes Western literature, while at the same time simplifies complex Iranian history. Together, these factors establish binaries of free/unfree, good Muslims – neoliberal and aspiring to become Americans - and bad (male) Muslims. Her intersection of auto-orientalism and neoliberal multiculturalism establishes consumption as the index of female liberation, heterosexist romance as normal family values, and promotes a culture of privatization that paints the home as an 'apolitical' space. In this light, Nafisi's pretense to separate aesthetics from politics in her memoir actually is then a neoliberal, political statement in itself.

I further argue, going beyond Melamed's analysis, that auto-orientalism is a significant factor in negotiating Nafisi's and the text's position in the discursive power hierarchies of neoliberal multiculturalism, which allows her to personally benefit, but at the same time she maintains the anti-Muslim prejudice that also destabilizes her own position within US academia and society. A few of the above analyzed reader responses suggest that her memoir bolsters neo-imperial attitudes of Western superiority that could be used to legitimize political interventions directed against Muslims abroad, but also domestically. This leads me to my final question in this case study about which other potentialities are inherent in auto-orientalisms, even essentialist ones. Nafisi's auto-orientalism is statically essentialist and self-serving, and the conjunction of author, text and audience is always fluid and ambiguous. Does this confluence of essences with fluidity in the meaning making process also offer a potential for change from within the system? While Spivak would most likely condemn Nafisi for speaking 'for' instead of 'of' Iranian women and for essentialising Iranian women as victims, I believe Nafisi's memoir and its enormous popular success could at least hint at possible auto-orientalisms that use 'essentialism' strategically and fluidly, which I analyze further in the following chapter. In Spivak's terms (363) essentialism is not about what is real, but about the production of knowledge, which in turn is closely intertwined with a position of power of who gets to speak for whom. So Nafisi fulfills the demand of the U.S. literary market for native informants by "clinging to marginality" (363) for her own benefit, but on a minimal consensus she has achieved access to the U.S. public and representations of Muslim womanhood. Ong criticizes Said for assuming a silent oriental subject with no role to play in the Western hegemonic project and I believe that Melamed has perhaps also not accounted enough for how subjects may selectively participate in orientalist discourses to negotiate their own position as global citizens. Flexible citizens "both seek to circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes" (Ong: 136), so auto-orientalism provides native informers with certain leverage as 'middlemen minorities' (153), while being complicit with and perpetuating global inequality. Nevertheless, turning political constraints into economic gains, may have unpredictable future consequences if these transnational elite networks get re-channeled through the local popular nationalisms that could use the heightened visibility of 'Arab Americanness' as a platform for opening up ethnicity and subjectivity as spaces for contestation and change.

## Chapter 3

### 3.1 Mohja Kahf and *the girl in the tangerine scarf*

In the remainder of this thesis, I analyze how Mohja Kahf, a poet, novelist and scholar, born in Syria but having grown up in the U.S., tries to do exactly that: open up the space of ‘Arab Americanness’ for contestation and redefinition, which challenges both ‘Arab’ and Muslim communities, and ‘liberal’ U.S. perceptions of Muslim women’s subjectivities. It is impossible for me to claim to fully analyze new subjectivities that might have sprung from Kahf’s success as an author, but in the following chapters I am interested in the spaces of possibility her work opens up and the way she strategically relinks/rearticulates orientalist tropes and her experiences in a way that subverts and multiplies any narrow conception of Muslim womanhood. Kahf is painfully aware that her individual efforts will be barely able to trigger a broader discursive shift, but she also knows her work is situated in a long history—over 100 years—of Muslim feminist work and within a wider new generation of Muslim feminist Arab American writers and growing audience interest. She states: “It is not necessary to pick one perfect response to the Harem Stereotype (...) How about a multi-tactical approach, dodging and feinting, doing the Arab American feminist dance, sometimes playing, sometimes fighting clean, sometimes fighting dirty, sometimes deny deny deny, sometimes utilizing the stereotype for one’s own purpose?” (Web Kahf) In this spirit, this chapter works through her novel *The girl with the tangerine scarf* in search of the many different tactical moves Kahf combines into a bigger auto-orientalist and subversive strategy. I seek to define a strategic form of auto-orientalism that might be capable, via commercial success, to intervene in stereotypical U.S. discourses about Muslim womanhood as one strategy of many to create Hall’s desired new ethnicities and integrate Muslim women into U.S. subjecthood.

Opposed to Nafisi, Kahf roots her identity in the U.S. and Syria. She takes a feminist, postcolonial and, at the same time, observant religious stance, and in her literary work she represents identity as multilayered and shifting. She was born in Damascus, but grew up in the 70s in the Midwest. Before turning to fiction and poetry she embarked on an academic career earning a PhD in Comparative Literature from Rutgers University. Today, she is a professor of English at the University of Arkansas and her early academic work focused on European orientalism. She published *Western Representation of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to*

*Odalisque* in 1999 and Ahmad (108) credits her academic work for deconstructing the orientalist perceptions of Muslim women as 'essential and timeless' tropes of being odalisques, virgins or victims.

In 2003, contemporaneous to the publication of Nafisi's memoir, Kahf turned to poetry to express the contradictions and similarities of her Arab/American experiences. *Emails from Scheherazad*. She expands her channels of communication, using poetry to satirize and deconstruct the stereotypes about Muslim women in the U.S. In 2006 she wrote her first novel *The girl in the tangerine scarf*, which depicts the coming-of-age of a Muslim girl in a conservative missionary family in Indiana. This formal multiplicity in academic, fictional, poetic and even journalistic expressions already forms part of her varying tactics that work together strategically to create positive representations of and spaces for Muslim women's sexuality and empowerment; for example, she also writes a column on sexuality as a Muslim 'sexpert' for the website *Muslim Wake Up*, (Web XY) which maintains traditional Muslim perceptions of gender difference and dating culture. In her posts Kahf stresses that these cultural traditions do not contradict the positive Islamic approach to female sexuality and pleasure. However, she follows traditional Muslim interpretations also in their heteronormative and restrictive attitude to any form of extra-marital sex. Despite these essentialist restrictions on some practices of sexuality, the fact that she emphasizes the joys of being a Muslim woman and their sexual freedom within marriage, writes back against Western stereotypes of Muslim women being categorically oppressed in their sexual liberties. At the same time, by posing sexual pleasure and equality as a right of (Muslim) women she also challenges gender injustice from within Muslim communities and the general U.S. context. A further essential difference to Nafisi is that she never forgets that

Those people who reify "Islam" as the ultimate cause of the abuse of women in the "third world" seem blind to the fact that the global devastation of organic communities by transnational corporations with terrifyingly little accountability and the frightening gap between the world's poor and those countries whose consumption levels have strip-mined everyone else's economies are the biggest factors in the well-being or lack thereof of the vast majority of Muslim women. (Kahf in Abdulhadi: 122)

This stance against imperial feminism of any kind links her to definitions of Arab American feminism and her religious commitment connects her to Muslim feminism. Her writing makes connections between multiple communities and discourses, and thus I argue accomplishes Stuart Hall's call for a mutually intelligible change in discursive formations in order to work on



deconstructing and eliminating stereotypes and a multidirectional connection between U.S. women of color, Arab American and Muslim feminisms. Kahf is aware of the pervasiveness and often also the futility of such interventions from a minority writer's position, but as mentioned above she is committed to barrage the U.S. orientalist stereotypes from as many angles as possible: with her poetry, her more pedagogically infused fiction, her academic work and her newspaper columns intervene in dominant discourse about Muslim women and ethnic women writers in both form and content. Thus, even though access to mainstream perceptions remains a challenge, within a US multiethnic literary and feminist canon Mohja Kahf's work has carved out a niche for Muslim Arab Americanness based on women's empowerment, and her work has been published in most of the major anthologies on Arab American literature and/or feminism in the last ten years.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of which medium and mode of communication, Kahf (Kahf in Abdulhadi et.al: 111ff) fights not only against perpetuating simplistic binaries of the Western discourse of Muslim women as victims, which she calls the "Pity Committee", but also against a blind and apologetic refusal of any criticisms of gender injustice within Muslim communities, whom she names the "Defensive Brigades". She is invested in the fact that there are careful readers, both in the US and in Muslim majority countries, who are able to see through the narratives of either sides of this binary and who neither demonize Islamic difference nor accept gender injustice by reading critically, engaging in dual-critiques, finding cross-cultural parallels, remembering history and refusing to blend out economic factors. Kahf is acutely aware that the victim-stereotype is hegemonic in every level of U.S. culture and thus perceived as truth, but also that both discourses, the neo-orientalist and the Defensive Brigades, freeze a certain view Islam in time. Thus, Islamic viewpoints that demonize any woman who attempts to change present issues of sexism in Muslim societies participate in the flipside of the orientalist discourses in equally problematic ways. Kahf locates her own struggle against sexism in the wider quest against endemic sexism in the U.S., unfortunately present in Anglo mainstream, Protestant, Muslim and many other communities, and her main strategy to achieve this goal is to eradicate stereotypes that falsely generalize and distort the human dimension on both sides of the binary by focusing on the in-between.

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<sup>3</sup> For example: Abdulhadi et.al. *Arab and Arab American feminisms* or Darraj's *Scheherazade's legacy*

A central question, then, in relation to this double bind for her as a writer (120) and for feminisms in general, is how to write and read a book about Islam and gender issues without reinforcing these artificial battle lines. I would like to extend her own question by asking if Kahf achieves in her work a form of auto-orientalism that is not harmful and essentialising, but potentially supportive of her quest for more fluid Muslim and American identities. If she uses subversion of orientalist stereotypes as her overall strategy, in my view, she cannot avoid an auto-orientalist dimension. In what way does Kahf then employ gender and can she subvert orientalist tropes while simultaneously citing them? Or in other words, can she work against normative and hegemonic orientalist views without implicitly perpetuating them?

Salaita (32ff) reviews her novel *The girl in the tangerine scarf* as part of his reader's guide to modern Arab American literature and he credits her novel to be the first critically and commercially successful Arab American novel that addresses Islam and the diversity of its practices as its prime theme within a U.S. context. The novel not only explores the multiplicity of Islams in America, but also the ethnic diversity and multiple approaches to gender within Muslim communities. Further, Kahf is careful to humanize and show the independent-mindedness of both conservative and liberal Muslims, granting agency to practitioners instead of reducing them to a one-dimensional view on faith. Following her above expressed convictions that careful readers of artistic representation are able to look through reductive narratives of either side of the binary, Kahf includes a wide spectrum of Islam as a positive social and personal force, but she also represents negative aspects of dogmatic and contradictory practices within some Muslims communities, including intra-Muslim racism, classism and sexism. Salaita (41) also returns to the question of aesthetic versus sociopolitical value of 'ethnic' literature, and he argues that the poetic qualities of Kahf's language and its playfulness keep the novel from becoming overly didactic, even if in some instances she is explicitly activist and 'preachy'. Kahf uses the coming-of-age of the main character Khadra to symbolize the multiplicity of Arab and Muslim worldviews, but in her own words she is also always writing in a quest for "beauty and truth" (Kahf in *Legacy*: 8). Far from creating new master narratives of 'truth', Kahf states that she seeks her personal truth and voice and not to represent 'Muslim women' as a whole. On the other hand, she recognizes structural injustices and struggles Muslim women face within the U.S. Similar to other women of color writers she recognizes the harmful effects of the hegemonic, orientalist representations for women of color's selves, which is perhaps her most clear reference

to how she sees her work and the creation of positive images of Muslim womanhood as connected to the creation of potential new Muslim women's subjectivities (14). The need to write back and write oneself to be able to gain a self-determined subjectivity, links her work to earlier women of color feminist strategies by Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa and others, even though Kahf does not state this connection explicitly in her artistic work.

Despite the similarities between women of color feminism of the 70s and 80s and today's struggles of Arab American feminists, the post 9/11 decade is a different 'post identity politics' context and the explicit juncture of war, neoimperial politics, and U.S. orientalism poses also specific challenges to Arab American feminists and their possible interventions. Within this context, I believe Kahf's work fulfills Stuart Hall's second level of access to cultural production via her focus on representing Arab Americanness positively, but on other levels her in-between position and commitment to criticize both sides of the U.S./Muslim binary exceeds the identity politics Hall considers as too limiting to be effective in the present moment. Hall argues that today simply positive inversion is not a sufficient way to intervene in hegemonic discourses about blackness anymore. Since Arab American today face an increased and explicit surge of U.S. orientalism and an overwhelmingly homogenous and hegemonic representations of Muslim womanhood in the 'oppressed women' genre, it seems to me Arab American artists need to still work more directly with positive inversions such as Kahf's "Veils are beautiful" images to fight blunt stereotyping. However, at the same time the strategic elements of her auto-orientalism are vital to keep these identity politics fluid, re-articulate signs and meaning for the careful readers, and to represent the multiplicity and specificity of subjectivities within Muslim communities as well.

One of Kahf's strategies is thus to address multiple audiences, ethnicities and religious/secular communities within 'Muslim cultures' via her aesthetic choices simultaneously. The novel genre allows her to weave into each other so many different characters and their individual yet connected trajectories that this multiplicity keeps her identity politics from fixing essences. For example, in accordance with Stuart Hall's view (141f) that an individual's intervention in representation can trigger a discursive change in a religious and social community via using founding and other texts differently as long as they are mutually intelligible, Kahf cites and uses foundational Islamic sources, but via a Muslim feminist interpretation. This gesture at the same time addresses Anglo audiences' prejudice about the teachings and practices of Islam,

while on the other hand it intervenes in traditional and patriarchal interpretations of the Scriptures within Muslim communities. This double gesture might create space for new subjectivities for Muslim women and deconstruct orientalist stereotypes, even if it comes at the price of being didactic in order to educate the oppressor on both sides of the hegemonic representation binary Muslim women are caught in between. In my reading, this strategy triggers multidirectional associations to other women of color authors, such as Gloria Anzaldúa's lead in her landmark publication *Borderlans/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa was very aware that the demand of the majority discourse to be educated about the Other can be a dangerous trap that drains the energy of women of color's important struggles for educating themselves, and yet she realized that in order to facilitate dialogue, alliances, and change she also had to educate and reach out to the majority populations. Anzaldúa decided to dedicate some of her energy to 'educating the oppressor', and Kahf seems also to see to need to educate both the US and Muslim traditionalist mainstream to overcome the monolithic views of Muslim womanhood in addition to re-creating spaces for empowered Muslim womanhood. Also the Muslim 'Defense Brigades' seek control over artistic representation and Kahf (15) states any artistic quest for personal truth by Muslim artists develops under the specter of the Rushdie affair and pressure to self-silence any criticism. Rejecting both hegemonic U.S. and Muslim nationalist/fundamentalist pressure, she refuses fear as the basis of her art in either circumstance. At the same time, her position indicates that, concerning the question about aesthetic and political value of her art, she cannot yet take off the 'woman-warrior helmet' completely to write for aesthetics sake, a struggle which is very much at the core of bigger questions about politics, feminism and the minority status of 'ethnic' (here non-white) literature.

### **3.2 Auto-orientalism strategically redefined?**

The Nafisi case study revealed that the cooperation of text, author, readership and marketing has created an essentialist form of auto-orientalism that cites mutually intelligible orientalist tropes of Muslim women as victims and keeps strict binaries of feminized Muslim cultures and the distinct opposition of 'East' and 'West'. While I argue that Kahf's citation of orientalist stereotypes brings her efforts also in the realm of auto-orientalism, the following section analyses how she redeploys the three basic characteristics of auto-orientalism - citation, feminization and a binary East/West opposition - to promote fluidity and multiplicity, and to create a form of

strategic and maybe non-essentialist auto-orientalism. I build this theoretical modification on both Civantos's essentialist auto-orientalism and Spivak's approach of strategic essentialism. Spivak maintains that despite the pitfalls of essentialism in such politics there is a need for a certain kind of minimalizable essence to negotiate existing differences. Thus, minorities can use certain essences, or as I argue, citations of orientalist discourses, to gain access to representation. At the same time the citation is strategic, a practice that opens instead of fixes meaning in order to enable a conversation through and about differences without valued binary; rather, rendering the very essences at the basis of communication fluid and not deterministic might end the need for strategic essence one day.

If we link this strategic use of differences with Hall's concept of articulation and Spivak's view on the possible authorial intervention into sign systems/sign chains, I argue that this disrupting, relinking and re-appropriating of chains constitutes what I have called 'strategic auto-orientalism'. A Muslim woman author like Kahf thus may connect a highly legible orientalist discourse with an alternative women of color framework and thus destabilize a clear cut notion of a stable US culture based on normativity, which then escapes a neoliberal logic of validating only certain kinds of diversity. Even though a literary representation is never 'representative' of a whole group, it also points beyond the individual author's experience and I believe a strategic auto-orientalist gesture can mutually constitute spaces for subjectivity by relinking texts and references differently in the processes of writing and reading. This approach acknowledges the place of any writer/researcher/author of any sign chain in and against majority discourses at the same time, which directly relates to Kahf's strategy of subverting stereotypes by citing and thus writing herself into them. "The enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work" (201), so for Spivak this inherent failure, or in the case of auto-orientalism the element of perpetuation of hegemonic tropes by citing them, is actually the enabling factor of any deconstructive approach, because it allows the author to assume a position of authority to speak from, and the audience a position to connect to, which however constantly undermines itself and creates new conditions of possibility.

In sum, I argue Kahf's conscious taking on of an epistemological, in-between vantage point to deconstruct and reassemble representations of Muslim womanhood employs "a strategic use of positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak, *Cultures*: 205). Within this frame and in terms of my definition of the three auto-orientalist characteristics, Kahf

most consciously, and most successfully, addresses the East/West binary. She deconstructs and relinks the Western view of Islam as one homogenous religious practice and culture caught in a binary against the ‘West’ by multiplying views of and on Muslims as much as possible. In the following brief overview, I abstract the multiplicity of Muslim subjectivities Kahf weaves in her novel among both liberal and conservative practitioners in U.S. Muslim communities. This serves not only as evidence for Kahf’s auto-orientalist choices in that she takes up the orientalist trope “Islam/backward/oppressive” and relinks this with reference points across as broad a spectrum of Islamic practices as possible, but it also shows her sociological/didactical underpinnings addressing varying degrees of Anglo and Muslim audiences.

Kahf creates in her novel a wide web around Khadra’s family, friends and Muslim acquaintances to cover literally the range of diverse Islamic practices always with an eye to humanizing and particularizing the Muslims she presents. To do this, she employs a Western Bildungsroman growth narrative that takes the main character Khadra from the sheltered belief system of her parents and the conservative, yet also protective and nurturing, Dawha center they run, to the realization that this view on 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) In this ‘journey’, the Western reader would expect the enlightenment genre of the Bildungsroman to take Khadra from practicing Islam to becoming a ‘liberated’, assimilated Western woman, but Kahf also tweaks the genre form itself via subversive citation in that Khadra develops into a self-defined, empowered and yet deeply spiritual and practicing Muslim woman. This transformation is rooted in a Muslim feminist/female power tradition, embodied by her Syrian grandmother Teta, and is neither based on terms of neoliberal US expectations of assimilated multiculturalness, nor on the Muslim majority view of being a ‘modern’, yet devout and selfless Muslim woman and wife.

Within these developmental phases, Khadra experiences the strong social justice elements of Islamic teachings and the plurality within even her small community, but also intra-Muslim racism and sexism, which is especially disappointing in her journey to Mecca, where against all Quranic references the wahabist interpretations of Islam ban women from public life, mosques and exerting religious authority. However, Kahf contextualizes this necessary criticism of hypocrisy and double standards in a dual critique of Western hypocrisy and in a literal

onslaught of a multiplicity of references to all kinds of Islams, thereby breaking a monolithic orientalist representation of the East/West binary. After all, America has become the home for Khadra as a practicing Muslim, and Kahf likens her missionary parents ironically to early Anglo missionary settlers (16) indicating the similarity in their goals and lack of claim to the 'land' by either Hoosier/Midwest Protestant or Dawha missionaries. The spectrum of possible Muslim subjectivities represented includes her 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).

Further, the growth narrative allows Kahf to debunk the 'victim' stereotype and show Khadra's agency and the complex interactions between the U.S. and the dawha community cultures that frame Khadra's decisions about how to practice Islam. While her family's religious views influence her earlier perceptions, so do her experiences of U.S. sexism and racism. For example, as a teenager Khadra chooses to practice a zealous 'revolutionary' form of Islam as a means of self-defense and of grounding her own in-between identity, while adult Khadra experiences the difficulties of multiple worldviews colliding in her person, and she sees the need to become first a semi-secular and then a self-defined practicing Muslim feminist of sorts. The 'end' of her spiritual journey turns her inward for a spiritual life away from rigid rituals and mosques (327), but she neither assimilates into a mainstream U.S. culture, which is exemplified in her own in-between standing as a Muslim woman on the dating market in the U.S.: "I'm too religious for the secular men, and too lax for the religious ones" (354).

In terms of consciously deconstructing her authorial position, Kahf writes her own struggles to represent and yet being trapped in the expectations of being the native informant on an U.S. ethnic literary market into the novel's frame itself. The framing meta-story to the coming-of-age narrative is Khadra's return to Indiana as an adult. She works for a liberal East Coast magazine as a photographer and is sent back to write a report about Muslim communities for them. Her editor is thrilled she is a former member of the dawha community and he represents liberal American ignorance in the sense that he wants a story on "Behind the veil! Wow! A keyhole view of the hidden, inside world of Muslims" (48). Khadra only reluctantly accepts the job when he guarantees her full artistic liberty to show and represent whatever she

chooses, only to find herself pressured by her former dawha community leaders not to write about and display, for example, that the performance of a girl group, or simply the presence of female bodies, caused an uproar and cancellation of the dawha conference concert Khadra is there to cover (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 resist the pressure from both sides of the binary and she decides to report anything and everything, as complete a picture as possible.

Her choice to show the whole picture expresses trust in her American audiences to read critically past Islamophobia and it allows her to immerse herself in her own positive approach to Islam as an integral part of her Arab and American subjectivity. Thus, she practices in literature and her form of strategic auto-orientalism what Leti Volpp (*Difference*: 97) has laid out in legal terms as a strategy to talk about existing problems in Muslim communities within feeding into orientalist discourses: She suggests doing thick description with a microanalytic focus of the particular situation or person at hand. Kahf’s literary practice mirrors Volpp’s legal strategy to ‘normalize and particularize complex norms of ‘cultural identity’ (102) exactly because her strategic auto-orientalism multiplies and particularizes all the different possibilities of Muslim’s religious subjectivities, which might also be part of an explanation of how to practice a sociological/political intervention via art without being reductive. However, while Kahf’s focus on multiplicity clearly extends to ethnicities and religious practices, the question of how she addresses gender and sexuality within an auto-orientalist framework remains a challenging one. Given the nature of sexuality as a relation imbued with meaning via a context and mutual legibility, orientalism as a discourse has so thoroughly gendered and sexualized Muslim women that is difficult to effectively rearticulate and relink, for example, the associations of the veil with repressed sexuality. I will look in the following analysis at how Kahf takes up representations of the veil and of Muslim women’s sexuality to ask if her inversion from the veil as symbol of oppression of Muslim women’s sexuality to a symbol of expression for Muslim women’s self determined and mature sexuality can really escape an orientalist feminized/binary logic?

### **3.2.1 Selling the veil.... differently?**

The most ‘obvious’/visual element of citation and attempted subversion in Kahf’s novel is the discourse around the veil. Abdulhadi et.al: (xxxvi) refer to the exhaustion inherent to and danger



in perpetuating the veil debates as a central issue of Muslim womanhood in the sense that mainstream U.S. feminists are mainly concerned with the veil, the harem and female circumcision as symbols of Islam's backwardness. As we have seen in the reactions to Nafisi's memoir, these gestures are more concerned with reinforcing a perception of Western women being so much better off and freer, reducing Muslim women to foils for themselves, than any real concern for Muslim women's well being. In addition, Jamarkani (153f) and others have argued that the excessive Western attention to the veil and its equation with oppressiveness forces Muslim women to invest their energy in battling these stereotypes at the cost of more important struggles Arab American women face. Thus, the veil debates actually help to silence and make Arab American women's varied concerns invisible. Further, the 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 (Von Braun :39). Al Hassan, Leila Ahmed, Dora Ahmad and others have traced the long history of changing cultural meanings of the hijab<sup>4</sup>, but for my project here suffice it to say that the veil is far from being a static symbol, rather "both wearing the veil and discarding it in different situations should be seen as symbolizing political struggle and women's political agency"(Al Hassan: 525).

Given the above cited context and Kahf's project to dismantle Western stereotypes about Muslim women, it seems Kahf considered it necessary for the sake of educating her Western audience to fully engage in the veil debates, despite the inherent pitfalls of directly addressing and thus re-deploying orientalist discourses and concerns. In the following analysis I trace how Kahf's strategies have the potential to succeed in revoking Western perceptions of the veil as simply oppressive and at the same time create a platform for Muslim women readers to approach the complexities of the meaning of veiling in the U.S. context. But the question remains: what is the essentialist auto-orientalist dimension in Kahf's citing such well-established images as a

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<sup>4</sup>The two main lines of argumentation for or against veiling as a cultural or Islamic practice are based on a Quranic verse about how either a veil separated the prophet and his wives from overbearing (male) guests to preserve their privacy or the same verse is also interpreted as God explicitly veiling the prophet's wives only. Regardless of its ambiguous theological origins, the veil has taken on a charged political meaning in the colonial 20<sup>th</sup> Century post/colonial context and veiling has often come to be considered an act of resistance or nationalist support and to be liberatory in a patriarchal context, in addition to being an expression of female modesty and religious commitment. (Ahmad: 109)

veiled woman on her cover and in her title, even if she aims to subvert perceptions of Muslim women's non-agency?

Kahf states (in Abdulhadi: 120) that “the veil—inexplicably to most of those women who wear it—has become a visual icon of Islamic sexism. You can almost always spot a Pity Committee book by its cover: the image of a woman with face half hidden by a veil is nearly de rigueur.” Why then did Kahf and/or her publisher decide, admittedly in a subversive modification, to also market her novel with a veiled woman on the cover? For the sake of comparison, it is informative to briefly return here to the Nafisi controversy around the cover image of *Reading Lolita in Teheran*. Part of Dabashi's critique was that the cover image portrays two – fully veiled - girls avidly reading local election results. However, the publishers cropped the image, so that all the reader sees are two Muslim women consuming, presumably clandestinely, an unidentified object with lowered gazes. The cover invites us to fill in the object of their gaze as empowering Western literature, supposedly Nafisi's memoir itself, instead of portraying the two women's agency of being engaged in local politics (Ahmad: 120). Nafisi apologized for the cropping, which according to her happened without her knowledge, but in either case this example demonstrates the power of the publisher and marketing in homogenizing representations of Muslim womanhood. However, given this anecdote and Kahf's above critique, what was the rationale of her publisher's choice? Even if Kahf herself as an author was probably not involved in the decisions about the cover design, she did title her novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf*, which in the end matches the visual depiction on the cover.

The following comparison of frequent features on ‘oppressed women narratives’ covers (Image 1), Nafisi's cover, and Kahf's cover clearly demonstrates an intent to subvert images of veiled women through citation on Kahf's part, but can this auto-orientalist strategy, even if strategic, escape the market logics of neoliberal multiculturalism that sells ‘diversity’ to US customers via veiled women on covers? In direct comparison, Kahf's cover subverts every single feature of Nafisi's cover in particular and of most of the other ‘oppressed women genre’ covers in general. At the same time the direct reference to the same orientalist tropes is so clear that I wonder if their marketing value in a neoliberal multicultural book market is all that different, since putting a veiled woman on a cover forms part of the access strategy to the U.S. literary market for Muslim women's writing. In my opening quote about reading *the girl in the tangerine scarf* at the airport, the couple addressed me because they were curious about what

kind of book I was reading that had a veiled woman on its cover. Even though this is only anecdotal, it points to superficial effects of the cover design that might work similarly in attracting a Western readers attention as an ‘oppressed narrative’ cover might do. By the same token, the careful reader Kahf hopes to address would also be able to decode the subversion, fluidity and empowerment coded in the way the cover woman wears her veil in the cover image. The portrayed woman is an adult, not a child. She looks directly and assertively at the reader, leaving no doubt about addressee and agency, her veil is brightly tangerine, loosely clad and she clearly wears it out of choice. The cover uses the veil here too to denote ‘I am a woman and I am Muslim’, but instead of adding the hegemonic layer of ‘oppressiveness’ over the cover, her confrontational and self determined air communicates power and defiance of orientalist expectations. Compared to the ‘free-floating’ Muslim women on many other covers, usually kept in dark colors, mostly looking askance, without details other than orientalist ornaments in the background, the tangerine cover woman is clearly located in a Western context by visibly wearing jeans and being photographed in a public, outside space in front of a wall. To further support this notion, her overall choice of clothes, combining a bright hijab with jeans and a sweater, expresses hybridity and a potentially new mode of Arab American dress.

Again, without being able to determine if Kahf had a say in the choice of cover image, the cooperation of marketing and reception in co-creating the meaning and effect of auto-orientalism leaves me wondering if, considering the powerful visual referent of the sexy Muslim woman trapped under an oppressive culture/religion/veil, the subversive depiction of a veiled, assertive U.S. Muslim woman necessarily undermines certain static orientalist tropes about Muslim women as sensual and erotized objects. Further, in content Kahf’s own mission is to redefine veiling as a sexy, self-chosen and empowering practice, which is an important message but in my view still dangerously tied in reference to the binary of oppressed woman/odalisque harem girl. Thus, the way this aspect of Kahf’s auto-orientalism is read is highly dependent on her readers, and it might be a slippery slope to communicate the veil as a ‘sexy’ practice, even if Kahf defines ‘sexy’ here very differently than a Western audience would. I believe Kahf’s celebration of the “Muslim modesty dance” on U.S. college campus between members of the Muslim Student Organizations as a form of ‘halal flirtation’ genuine to Muslim culture and in stark opposition to U.S. dating culture, may help to illustrate my concern here. Despite this obvious contrast and the didactic impulse to educate Western readers about different possible

forms of eroticism based on covering up and modesty instead of showing skin and direct flirtation, Kahf still chooses to maintain sexiness as a defining attribute of womanhood and she also seems to reference here orientalist notions of the veil and its sexiness purely by essentialist inversion and not strategic subversion:

The more attractive a ‘brother’ found a ‘sister’, the more sternly he kept his gaze lowered (...) Having a gaze lowered before you said, You are a Woman with capital W. What a thrill (...) and in the next round, she may lower her hemline even more, and tighten her headscarf, and make her hijab stricter –lo, she has found someone worth being the queen of modesty for. And how that thrilled the young brothers, for it meant they were not little boys anymore but Men. Watch out then. Danger, sexy danger, Muslim flirtation-via-modesty-games danger, was in the air (183).

Is this inversion of sexiness from unveiling to tightening the veil enough to undermine orientalist associations of Islam with lasciviousness and being a feminized/weak culture? I have no clear answer to this question, but want to offer it as a caveat that the veil has been so sexualized in the old orientalist desire to see through and behind the veil to a Muslim women’s sexuality ‘oppressed and waiting to explode’, that it seems at least risky to me for Kahf’s overall project to center her novel on the veil as a Muslim sex symbol, even in such an ironic take as above.

Going beyond the visual elements of the cover, Kahf consciously chose to include and highlight the hijab as very different from a Western perception, but also as notably different from a Muslim traditionalist view. For her, a veil is colorful and empowering, a form of fashion and self expression and symbol of womanhood and pride rather than a proper expression of faith. Despite the unpredictable factor of audience response in co-creating either an essentialist or a strategic auto-orientalist reference to her cover, I argue Kahf’s literary representations of the multiplicity of meanings, feelings and practices attached to the ‘veil’ fulfills the basic criteria for a strategic auto-orientalism in the sense that she vigorously works throughout the novel to maintain the veil as a minimalizable difference for her Muslim heritage and present subjectivity, and at the same time she renders it as fluid and context specific. The difference Kahf stresses here is modesty, modesty as an Islamic, sexy and empowering practice all at once and read through this lense, even the above example seems more strategic than a simple inversion. Modesty can be expressed through veils, but also through many other ways and behaviors by both men and women. In this sense, representation of veiling as sexy may go beyond an inversion, because Kahf subverts Western understandings of eroticism instead of fixing meanings of veils. This interpretation is supported by the other ways and functions she expresses

through her representations of veiling. She tries to depict the myriad of specific and different ways to practice Islam and Arab Americanness, for example through the many different types and ways of wearing or not wearing a hijab in Khadra's daily life.

In Khadra's childhood memories, her first references to the veil builds on relatives, like her aunt Kadija who multidirectionally links being unveiled to slavery's auction blocks and she represents the attitude that veiling is protecting and empowering women in a dangerous, patriarchal world (the specifically U.S. included): "Covering up is a strong thing" (25). This connection of domestic racial and orientalist concerns clearly functions as a strategic and subversive citation on Kahf's part. Further, the child perspective via Khadra's memories allows Kahf to include a wide variety of opinions about practices of veiling without judging and rationalizing them immediately. Another example here would be that Khadra 'innocently' weaves in the Christian cultural heritage of veiling via a lunatic man who stalks her mother. He thought she was Mary, because she wore a blue jilbab (100). Once Khadra herself reaches puberty, she is thrilled to finally have her period and be invested with the hijab as a higher order and symbol of womanhood. Kahf is careful to sever any association of the hijab with oppressing women and their sexuality by inverting the hijab as a positive symbol and practice in all circumstances: "Even though it went off and on at the door several times a day, hung on a hook marking the threshold between inner and outer worlds, hijab soon grew as natural to her as a second skin, without which if she ventured into the outside world she felt naked" (112). She frames the hijab as a facilitator to cross the threshold between the marked division of domestic and public spaces in Muslim cultures, but never as an impediment to freedom of movement. On the contrary, she pokes fun at the standard American/Western reaction of 'isn't it hot?' by stressing how 'normal' this non-Western mode of dress feels to her. These consciously placed challenges to Western stereotypes mostly address her non-Muslim American audience, while her overall narration of a Muslim girl's own experience and changing attitudes toward wearing the hijab also seem to address and invite fellow Muslim women with different views on veiling, both sternly traditional and secular anti-veiling, into a dialogue.

Kahf uses the coming-of-age trajectory to represent different uses and contexts of veiling that in some cases support, and in others challenge views of what veiling should be both among Western and Muslim readers. In Khadra's super religious phase during puberty she chooses a stern, black headscarf, to the surprise of her parents and the community around her (149). But

Khadra never experiences any form of hijab as an impediment until she gets married and is confronted with expected gender roles and forms of behavior her husband associates with wearing a hijab. I will return to issues of gender inequality in the next chapter, but strategically and narratively Kahf places gender injustice in human interaction, but not in a piece of cloth or choice of dress. In the later parts of the novel, Kahf frames veiling as an issue of style and fashion, trying to alter the terms of conversation about hijabs to beauty standards and class issues. For example, she contrasts the chic taste of her rich sister-in-law for silk hijabs with her parents low means, which triggered their father tailoring all their polyester hijabs for them by hand (256).

After Khadra's abortion, divorce, and fall from grace as a model Muslim woman, she travels to Syria to discover her own self and an empowering form of Islam that supports her right to individual agency as a woman beyond the traditional gender norms of being a mother and wife as the only acceptable, or at least only desirable, options for Muslim women. In this moment, she has an epiphany with regards to the meaning and possible alternative practices of veiling, when her veil accidentally slips off her shoulders in an embrace of warm sunlight and a close, male friend:

She opened her eyes, and she knew deep in the place of *yaqin* that this was all right, ablessing on her shoulder. *Alhamduh, alhamdulillah*. The sunlight on her head was a gift from God. (...) Here was an exposure, her soul an unmarked sheet shadowing into distinct shapes under the fluids. Fresh film. Her self, developing. (...) maybe she knew about *kashf*, the unveiling of light. How veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary; how both light and dark are connected moments in the development of the soul in its darkroom (309).

She transcends the binary of veiling/unveiling by realizing that each is a mode depending on the given moment and that the Islamic requirement of modesty can also manifest itself in her behavior without wearing a hijab (312). Khadra still considers her hijab as valuable support and an easier way to practice modesty, but she also experiments by her own choice with going uncovered. Upon her return to the States her body tells her that a loose veil is still her preferred mode of dress (373), but she chooses to wear colorful and fashionable hijabs, some also with more conservative cuts, always depending on her mood and on where she goes. Even when concerned liberal friends advise her to take off the hijab in a rising hostile anti-Muslim climate in the U.S., Khadra maintains the veil is her connector to her culture and armor against losing her Muslim identity, it is an "outer sign of inner quality she wants be reminded of" (425).

In the novel's status as the first one to address Islam as part of America as a central plot element, Kahf's representational choices validate all forms of veiling, conservative, loosely cut and going uncovered as equally viable options Muslim women actively choose from. However, based on her personal belief that the veil is a cultural connector to her own heritage and a possibility of religious expression, but not a necessity or religious mandate for being a Muslim woman (Kahf in Legacy: 14), she neither endorses a Western orientalist nor a traditional Islamic perspective. Kahf chooses to wear a veil, but also to always show a bit of hair and on hot days she might not wear it at all, which taken together defies orientalist and Islamic traditionalist interpretations of the veil. She writes this hybrid practice into her novel and its connection to the above mentioned view of veiling as a circular, holistic and always shifting practice points towards more than just a strategic auto-orientalist re-appropriation of distorted notions about veiling. I believe this is an example how such an auto-orientalist strategy may become truly subversive and literally re-write spaces for Arab American subjectivities that are based on a circularity of being that deconstructs East/West binaries. The personal choices and the fluidity of veiling Kahf includes in her novel might re-signify not only certain kinds of veiling as a particularly American Muslim, but it if we read the 'veil' as a stand in for ethnic affiliation in the above quote it reads as how being Eastern/Western is part of the same cycle, how both are necessary for Khadra's self to fully develop. Thus, I believe also the example of her auto-orientalist appropriation of the 'veiled woman cover' works in the entirety of the novel strategically and not as an essentialist inversion, because any reader, critical or unaware, that proceeds into the novel itself is inevitably confronted with the multiplicity and the positive value of practices of Islam for Muslim women. Kahf still uses 'veiling' as a shorthand to signify these multiple practices, which again builds on and uses a Western familiarity with veiling as the 'main' issue in an orientalist view. However, even while she probably pays more tribute to the issue of veiling than would be necessary in a non-orientalist framework, she thoroughly subverts the perception of the veil as 'oppressive' and uses its multiple functions and meanings as a door opener for equally multiple and varied subject positions for Muslim women.

In sum, I argue the specific situation of a Muslim woman writer in a post 9/11 U.S. context requires a combination of positive inversion and a more subtle approach of subversion to escape the orientalist co-optation and to be able to critique negative, patriarchal and oppressive Muslim practices as well. Given the excessive attention Western audiences pay to Taliban

mandated burkas and Iranian state-mandated veils, it seems a Herculean task for a Muslim feminist writer to critique these problematic practices when Western audiences perceive any such statement as corroborating the ‘true’, cruel nature of Islam. Kahf’s intention is to highlight the sheer surprise and annoyance by the majority of Muslim women who choose to wear a veil that anyone could perceive this form of dress as oppressive, but as always, the processes of meaning making as either essentialist or strategically auto-orientalist depend on the audience as well. While an unaware reader might be bothered by Kahf’s seeming neglect of any critique of mandated practices of veiling and a celebration of the pure joys of veiling, a critical reader would most likely pick up that her emphasis on veiling as a cultural practice and a possible but not the only form of religious expression is a clear disagreement with the view that veiling is the form of religious expression for Muslim women. This point may be subtle for her Western audiences and thus escapes an orientalist appropriation, but very strong and probably direct and obvious for her Muslim audiences. It directly critiques interpretations of veiling as a religious mandate for Muslim women without using the buzzwords ‘burka/Taliban/Iran’, but at the same time it validates all kinds of self-chosen forms of veiling/non-veiling as possible expressions of Muslim heritage and identity. Thus, in addition to particularizing and contextualizing, this form of strategic choice of what to reference directly and indirectly is another way to write about Islam and women and escape orientalist binaries. Kahf clearly demonstrates in her literary choices of representations of Muslim womanhood that it is possible to critique gender injustice without perpetuating and recycling the Muslim-woman-as-victim trope of Nafisi’s and other memoirs, which in the end only serve to elevate the Western reader instead of being truly concerned with Muslim women’s struggles.

### **3.2.2 Muslim women’s genders and sexualities**

While orientalist discourse markedly feminizes the ‘Orient’ in its totality to legitimize a colonial power hierarchy in analogy to the Western value binary of gender that associates the masculine as superior and the feminine as inferior and weak, Mernissi (20f) points out that in Islamic tradition the binary between the feminine and masculine is seen as a divine principle in both their difference, but also in terms of their equality. For her, realities of gender injustice in Muslim communities are often due to narrow interpretations of shari’a law as unchanging and divine, as opposed to more liberal interpretations that consider the law as human made, that is, created after



the quranic revelations was over, and thus adaptable and contestable. Kahf navigates both the binary and strangely overlapping anxiety of orientalism and Islamic fundamentalism with ‘women’ and their sexuality by returning to the Holy Scriptures and the manifold example of powerful Muslim women and companions of the prophet, such as Khadija, Aisha or Fatima. She contrasts these empowering interpretations of Islam with male ignorance or reluctance to recognize these implications of the original sources (35). At the same time, Kahf is also very invested in representing the positive Islamic attitude to female sexuality and sexuality in general within matrimony, which connects to Amina Wadud’s analysis of a divine right for female pleasure in her feminist analysis of the Quran in *Quran and Women*. Similarly to the citation of the veil debates, her focus on Muslim women’s sexuality straddles the line between an essentialist and a strategic, fluid auto-orientalism depending on her readership. Can Kahf’s inversion from Islam as an oppressive force to a liberating force of female sexuality deconstruct the orientalist notions of Islam’s feminized inferiority?

In my view, her strategy places pleasure and sexuality as a central strain of her argument for a positive representation of Muslim womanhood, but this is a tricky point to ‘sell’ in the minefield of different discourses trying to regulate and use sexuality for specific purposes. Kahf’s focus on very active, pleasure focused sexuality as part of her view of Muslim womanhood is in danger of being caught on the opposite end, but still on the same pole as the orientalist view of hidden, ‘voluptuous’ Muslim women’s sexuality that needs to be ‘unveiled’. Further, traditional Muslims also view sex outside wedlock as *haram*, forbidden, and sex within marriage is closely tied to reproductive purposes and female gender roles as being mothers first and foremost. Kahf counters such binaries of good/bad sex and Harem stereotypes rather tentatively and again indirectly. She includes extra-martial sex on the margins of her narrative—Khadra’s best friend Hanifa becomes pregnant as a teenager, but the life choices of the main character Khadra place sex within marriage only. Toward the end of the narrative adult Khadra meets Hanifa, whom she had shunned as a teenager and who has now become a successful Indy race car driver, the ultimate rebellion against Muslim and U.S. gender norms. Another example of indirect subversions of Muslim’s expectations of proper marriages can be found in the example of Khadra’s her younger brother, who in the end wants to take up an interracial and interreligious marriage. In that sense Kahf represents other gender/sexuality practices, but she is always careful not to endorse a Western/liberal approach to flirtation, dating, and casual sex.

In sum, while the indirect references to Kahf's take on veiling took a very clear stand and positioned her in a wide field of Muslim views on the issue, Kahf's approach to sexuality is less clear cut and perhaps with good reason. This desire to uncover Muslim women's sexuality was a driving force behind centuries of orientalist discourse, which poses a significant challenge to any attempt of subversion by representing Muslim women as sexually active and powerful beings. One way Kahf approaches this tension is that she locates her main character's development firmly in Muslim moral standards of dating culture and at the same time on very empowered and fulfilling sexual experiences within her marriage. This dual approach attempts to deconstruct victim stereotypes of Muslim women by representing them as self determined and active sexual beings, while grounding her identity in her Muslim heritage that values marriage as the only legitimate form to manage sexuality. It seems Kahf resolves the sheer impossibility to represent and change the dense references surrounding Muslim women's sexuality by maintaining a binary of good/marital and bad/other sex in her main characters choices, while she at least acknowledges the presence of other forms of sexuality in minor characters. This double move works strategically on both sides of the Pity/Defense binary too: Her valuation of marriage helps her to maintain a traditional Muslim identity, while stressing the positive dimensions of Muslim women's sexuality undermines Western stereotypes. It seems Kahf chooses her battles in this field and her main concerns she seems to hope to communicate to her audience is the way racialization and sexualization work together to render Muslim women's bodies vulnerable in the U.S. specifically.

Within this context that usually requires authors to address the intersection of gender oppression and sexual exploitation, it is notable that Kahf chooses to decidedly divorce sexuality from gender issues. She locates injustice and oppression squarely within in rigid Islamic and US gender definitions, while vulnerability and oppression of Muslim women's sexuality originates mostly from the U.S. right wing/fundamentalist culture. In other words, the main focus of the novel is on societal restrictions on Muslim women within various layers of communities, but the greater physical danger they face is a racist U.S. society. In another clearly counter-orientalist and counter-hegemonic move, Kahf writes the destiny of Khadra's friend Zuhura (94f) as the counterpoint and foundation of the main characters development. Zuhura is a young, bright Muslim woman activist, and despite pressure from the Muslim community she continues to study after her marriage until she is found murdered and raped by the local KKK clansmen one day.

This case allows Kahf to criticize both the hypocrisy of some members of the local Muslim community who believe Zuhura's independent behavior 'invited' such an attack, but also the ignorant and much more brutal reaction of local press and law enforcement. They 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. Thus, Kahf makes it very clear that despite discrimination against women from parts of the Muslim community, the far greater, even life threatening danger for Muslim women comes from U.S. cultural tradition based on racial exclusions and sexist degradation, and that even the U.S. mainstream culture is so inflected with racist stereotypes that the misrepresentations of Muslim womanhood literally leads to murderers going free and innocent Muslim men being deported.

Against the life threatening intersection of U.S. racism and sexism, Khadra's family and community offered a safe haven, but with a clear expectation of a Muslim woman's life trajectory and gender roles. Kahf attempts the balancing act of rendering the possibilities for Muslim women's aspirations open and allow for a desire to develop and nurture the self without falling into an U.S. rhetoric about individualism or devaluing her religious identity and traditions, as we have seen in Nafisi's memoir. In the novel, the parents support Khadra's quest for Islamic studies unconditionally, but once she ventures beyond her immediate conservative community, not all other religious leaders are as unbiased towards women's participation in religious competitions. Khadra is shocked when she is banned from a Quran recital competition because of her gender and despite being the best student in the religious study group. The imam furnishes the usual excuse to keep women out of public offices in that he would charge her for wanting fame instead of being content with reciting for god's reward. (199) Kahf includes various very critical episodes that highlight double standards, but she also always points out that these double standards appear in contradiction to Islamic principles and not because of them.

Another such example is the story of Khadra's marriage and divorce. Khadra goes to college, but once her parents have to move out of town it is impossible for her as an unmarried woman to live by herself and she marries the next best candidate because she wants to stay and be independent. Kahf uses Khadra's college phase and marriage to introduce notions about Muslim forms of eroticism and flirtation, and she stresses that in marriage Muslim (heterosexual) couples have an equal right to sexual pleasure. The blissful beginning of their married life and

the mutual, slow discovery of sexual pleasure contradict Western assumptions about Muslim men's one sided sexual exploitation of women, but Kahf also slowly introduces the double edged sword of Khadra enjoying the 'prime' status of being a married women – which in turn implies an inferior status for unmarried, divorced or differently sexually orientated Muslim women. Soon Khadra herself realizes a marriage built on social constraints cannot live on good sex alone, which again indicates Kahf's strategy of contradicting any notion that Muslim women are sexually exploited while criticizing the restrictions popular gender roles may place on Muslim women. Khadra's husband narrows her freedom because of his popular notions of gender and Muslim womanhood and because he does not know enough about Islam. He restricts her from biking with her hijab in public, simply because of his impression how this would make him look in the Muslim community and not because of any religious reason. Further, he is soon disappointed by Khadra's independent ways that go beyond his expectations of a Syrian women being sexually active (224), yet also a 'Muslim woman' and thus modern and devout. This not only hints at intra Muslim varying gender stereotypes based on nationalities, but also at the fact that the root of gender oppression Khadra experiences is thus rather ignorance of religion than observance to it: "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). The plot thickens when Khadra gets pregnant. Her family expects her to sacrifice her goals in life to become a mother. However, Islamic law allows abortion (225), even if many present Muslim communities tend to morally disagree and expect women to be mothers 'naturally'. Khadra chooses to disagree, not because she is "Westernized", but because her parents raised her to think for herself and she knows her rights as a Muslim woman.

Khadra's transition from repeating to defining her own position in what it means to be a Muslim woman, both in terms of her gender and sexuality, is facilitated by her aunt Teta—a modern day Scheherazade figure located in Syria. I believe Kahf purposefully locates Teta as a source of female empowerment and a role model of an independent and strong Muslim woman in Syria and not the U.S., which not only draws the reader's attention to the manifold precedents of Muslim feminists in the Middle East, but also thematizes the more recent rise of conservative Islamic interpretations in opposition to earlier liberal interpretations in the mid century Middle East. In Syria, Khadra experiences a transformation via her grandmother's storytelling and while

the political climate is repressive, the personal connections and stories re-root her in an empowering female and Islamic heritage. This strategic literary choice uproots the orientalist binary that links femininity with weakness and inferiority and locates, unlike Nafisi, freedom for women not exclusively in the “West”. Teta herself represents the first wave of female work force in Syria, and she teaches Khadra that despite her fears of becoming ‘Americanized’ achieving self determination is a different route: “Who can live without a self? Ego is not the same as ego-monster.” (270) Kahf’s prose is very straight forward aesthetically, and only in the section about Syria and Teta Kahf introduces mystical elements, such as the Teta’s poet friend that guides Khadra’s self discovery, but he remains an ambiguous, potentially a spirit. In many ways, Teta as a Scheherazade figure prefigures in traces Kahf’s own poetry and the emails she is sending as an American Scheherazade, and I will return to the question of aesthetic choices in search of what it means to be a self defined Arab American woman beyond pre-defined roles in the next chapter. In the novel, I believe the role of Teta as a decidedly Muslim, independent, and sexually confident woman brings the separated strands of empowered sexuality and self chosen, expanded gender roles for Muslim women together without dismantling the essentialist male/female Islamic gender binary. So even if Kahf’s representation of Muslim women’s genders and sexualities is not as nuanced and multiple as the ethnic and religious panorama she draws, in the novel’s transnational dimension the character Khadra exports this empowered subject position to the US, turning into a Scheherazade/cultural mediator herself and Kahf’s visions for a holistic, fluid basis for Arab American women’s subjectivities opens the possibility for discursive interventions even beyond a ‘simply’ strategic undermining of stereotypes.

## Chapter 4

### 4.1 Emails from Scheherazade – Who replies?

While Kahf's novel was published in 2006 and evidences many characteristics of a strategically political and pedagogical intervention aimed at manifold and different audiences, Kahf's artistic expression started with her poetry and that medium seems to offer less constraints, but also a much more limited audience and popular impact. She published her first collection of poems as *Emails from Scheherazad* in 2003, and her poetry is invested in expressing both her personal experiences and political criticism. Individual poems explore more directly the tensions, clashes and moments of beauty that create and shape possible Arab American subjectivities. Her poetry allows her to be more playful and ironic, but also to express her anger and frustration over the U.S. Middle East politics, wars and bombings abroad and discrimination at home much more directly. A fair amount of her poems are confrontational in a pedagogical sense. Thus, also writing poetry she pushes feminist and postcolonial politics via art, but there are markedly fewer auto-orientalist references than in her novel. The appeal of her poetry collection is its mix and refusal to be marketable as neither 'angry Muslim women' nor as 'apolitical literature for beauty's sake', and perhaps this embodied multiplicity truly subverts her main auto-orientalist and strategic reference to Scheherazade into a genuinely Muslim American subject position. The last section of this chapter will look at the details Kahf writes into the possible being of an American Scheherazade, while the first part surveys the strategies Kahf employs in her overall poetry collection to better understand the nexus of literature, re-articulation, and ethnogenesis, of which strategic auto-orientalism is a part. In continuation of this question, the next chapter turns to audience responses to at least gauge possibilities and trends among her readers that could co-create these new spaces for Arab American subjectivity in practice.

After 9/11 there was an immediate and twofold uptake in the ethnicization/racialization of 'Arab/Muslim Americans' and the specific circumstances of these processes co-defined the representations and possibilities of Muslim women's subjectivities as well. In Kahf's poetic trajectory, themes such as war, migration, separation, diaspora and inter-human connections are expressed across all her poems, for example, through the constantly recurring tropes of dust (Syrian and Midwestern) and wool (in scarfs, threads, bundles, tying together and unraveling at the same time). The trope of material textures of scarf also recurs throughout her novel. In

Kahf's earlier poems, the hybrid in-between experience of the U.S. as a dominating and yet enabling place manifests itself, but without Scheherazade as a figure of nexus between differences. Her pre 9/11 poems more often express anger and frustration with a male sense of entitlement, as in "My Body is Not Your Battleground" (58f), and with Western ignorance and hypocrisy, as in "Jasmine Snowfall" (93f). In a women of color feminist framework, these early poems may not directly refer to the legacy of poets like Audre Lorde, but again the similarities are structural in Kahf's citation and appropriation of literary strategies from both U.S. women of color and Scheherazade/Muslim feminisms. Despite the hardships and discrimination Kahf expresses in her poems, she follows Lorde's tool/strategy in using her anger creatively, as a productive force for change that starts a dialogue and requires Anglo readers to face instead of dismiss her anger as a basis for honest exchanges, which is considerably different from remaining passively locked in hatred or despair over U.S. imperial politics.

In light of these formal/structural citations, it is interesting that in Kahf's post 9/11 poems her tone changes and she introduces the Scheherazade figure as a mediator. That is, the focus of her poems shifts, partially, away from overt anger and a direct confrontation with war/diaspora/discrimination to a tenuous, exhausting but also enabling position in the in-between. Kahf also continues to use irony, for example in her Hijab Scenes, to have her lyrical I and an Anglo addressee clash directly, but I argue that the central feature of her re-appropriation of Scheherazade in a strategically auto-orientalist gesture is the structural link of a transnational, empowered and yet torn subjectivity as in-between mediator in both the legacy of the *Nights Tales* and Gloria Anzaldúa's work. Kahf's poetic focus of the mediating role of a 'modern' Arab American Scheherazade seems to have emerged as a necessity in the aftermath of 9/11 in order to survive a wave of hateful stereotyping. In the tense U.S. atmosphere of perceived threat, strategic anger might not have been readable or as effective to navigate the contradictions surrounding American Muslim women, and Kahf embraces the mediating role as a transculturally literate Muslim women as a productive space for potential new subjectivities. This strategy links again more closely to Anzaldúa's later work in her essay "now let us shift", which suggests using the in-between as provisional home and base for transforming realities around her. While Nafisi used her diasporic position in the in-between for her personal gains selling a certain kind of assimilated Muslimness, Kahf's poetry aims to show the difficulties inherent in being in the in-between and to promote dialogue and understanding in a much more

comparative and thus potentially elusive framework for neoliberal co-optation, as I will show in my analysis of her Scheherazade poems below.

Before doing so, I want to briefly reference a poem directly addressing the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which marks explicitly Kahf's poetic and strategic turn from anger toward centering on cross-cultural communication: "We Will Continue Like Twin Towers" (83). She concludes the poem with a realization of the fragility of being and the mutual dependency cutting across any ethnic group/culture:

That our lives have always been as fragile, / as dependent on each other, and as beautiful  
/ as the flight of the woman and the man, / twin towers in my sight, / who jumped into the  
last air hand in hand.

Kahf centers her poem on the human connection of U.S. and Arab people in suffering as a cause for continuing hand in hand, which undercuts both long held stereotypes and the reaction of immediate and wholesale anger at the Muslim community. Rather, it offers an alternative relinking/rearticulating of signs and their meanings in a more heterogeneous women of color framework of forming alliances and cooperating because of and through instead of despite differences.

Thus, poetry and Kahf's overall formal multiplicity in the many different channels she uses to communicate may help to overcome empty empathy in her audiences and to destabilize epistemological certainty of Anglo Americans as being the norm. She does not combine prose/poetry in a formally explicit hybrid gesture, as Anzaldúa did in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, but in content Kahf reaches out to various members across and within the diverse array of U.S. ethnic groups all affected one way or another by the terrorist attacks and the changed political climate in the U.S. thereafter. Formally, Kahf opposes poems dealing with eastward nostalgic and westward gazes in different poems that are, however, strategically placed within the entirety of her collection. Imaginary memories of Syria, like "She sees curlicued stories hanging in the air like dust" (17) and other imaginary orientalist places filled with baths/belly dances/kohl/musque (34f) that take up auto-orientalist references are set opposite to poems of her childhood memories rooted firmly in the Midwest, New Jersey and other parts of the U.S.:

'I remember raspberry bushes way at the back, and rusted wire, once a fence, defunct  
now and trampled under / by generations of children who belonged to this Indiana  
landscape' (18).



Thus, even though her earlier poems either focus on the East or West, Kahf already employs the strategy of performing Majaj's demand of a simultaneous east/westward gaze as a marker of Arab American literature in her formal juxtaposition. That is, she literally and spatially juxtaposes eastward and westward gazes in separate poems following each other on the next page, while in her later poems Kahf merges these gazes into one subject position as an empowered, bi-cultural, and mediating American Scheherazade. This suggests in form and content a similar trajectory of self defined ethnogenesis as in Anzladua's path to the mestiza consciousness. Only by seeing contradictions and inequality in ethnic reference frames can an individual set out to deconstruct these internalized oppressive hierarchies and then reconstruct them her self, a transformation that can reach and trigger change beyond the individual in a wider community via writing and publishing.

In sum, how does this mix of autobiographic and of imagined auto-orientalist references differ from Nafisi's contribution to a neoliberal multicultural discourse of what constitutes 'good American Muslims'? Kahf does not fulfill her classic duties as native informant, rather, she informs her U.S. audiences about their government's political and military interventions in the Middle East and she confronts her Anglo audiences with hypocrisy she experiences at home. Nevertheless, intervening and rearticulating Arab Americanness can only be successful if it also engages in mainstream discourse of Americanness too, which is the key difference between Nafisi's essentialist and Kahf's strategic auto-orientalism. Kahf addresses her American audience in its multiplicity through shared experiences of racism and sexism across ethnic groups, but she also stresses the human connection and similarities between people of any religion and background everywhere to understand and thus transcend cultural differences. Kahf invests considerable energy into addressing veiling and other mainstream concerns also in her poetry, which demonstrates again her conviction to educate the dominant groups too and also the need for strategic auto-orientalism to be read by a majority audience to be subversive in the first place. Further, again opposite to Nafisi, Kahf's poetry also addresses sexism and discrimination within Muslim communities, but to a lesser percentage than U.S. discrimination. This balancing act probably strives to counter balance the excessive weight mainstream attention places on a few highly visible oppressive Islamicist practices that do not correspond to Muslim majority views without ignoring patriarchal oppression in smaller and less 'spectacular' but still problematic degrees that exists everywhere, also in Muslim communities. In the end, it is only

the in-between position of an American Scheherazade that allows Kahf to escape the double bind of contributing with criticism on either side to prejudice on the respective other. Kahf always places her self and her home in the U.S., while she maintains cultural and identity ties to Syria. This double move locates and creates a possibility for Arab American women's subjectivity in the in-between – a subjectivity that can be American, feminist, mother, scholar, muse, poet and much more without abandoning her Muslim/Arab heritage.

Finally, even though I cannot go into detail here within this project, I want to point to Abdurraqip's analysis of Kahf's poetry, who states that her poetry's success does not only open up spaces for negotiating Arab Americanness with mainstream audiences/discourses, but also artistically innovates 'ethnic' writing. Abdurraqip goes so far as to state that "In the end, Kahf is able to successfully challenge the traditional trajectory of Muslim immigrant writing. She does this by moving outside of both the stereotypical form and content of Muslim immigrant writing" (68). Kahf's multiplicity in her poetry challenges the homogenous norms of immigrant/ethnic literature, and by writing 'emails' she refuses to be marked as 'backward' Other. Rather, she places her writing firmly in a present and American context and invites cross-cultural communication at a same level across all ethnicities within the U.S. We see a slight subversion in genre and form already in her novel, which still partially overlaps with the Bildungsroman genre and a traditional growth narrative, however to a different end than becoming a neoliberal multicultural and assimilated 'good' Muslim U.S. citizen. In her poetry volume, Abdurraqi takes its trajectory of identity negotiations as evidence for Kahf's authorial success in forcing readers to read differently, to read for and through bodies and see how literature and reading practices shape our perceptions of how bodies and subsequently how modes of dress are interpreted. As an example, Abdurraqib (56f) argues that wearing the hijab is coded so clearly as a non-American practice that Muslim women's literary representations need to create and adapt new genre conventions that challenge stable and exclusionary notions of Americanness. She credits Kahf for having developed a new immigrant literary trajectory "that includes veiling as a particular expression of Muslim Americanness, rather than foreignness". (63) In a more formal analysis, it would be very interesting to further pursue the question in how far Kahf employs veiling as a literary practice, but in terms of citing and subverting the veil discourse in a strategic auto-orientalist gesture Kahf's success might achieve an intervention in U.S. majority discourses by representing Muslim women's subjectivities not always already reduced to the veil anymore.

Instead of suggesting ‘assimilation’, Kahf’s poetry sets out to change the standard of Americanness itself.

Irony is a central feature of this discursive intervention, which materializes in a series of poems Kahf has titled the ‘Hijab Scenes’. They depict all kinds of reactions, positive and negative, veiled women have to deal with in their daily lives in the U.S. Hijab Scene #3 (25), for example, depicts how being veiled results in being ignored and not taken seriously as an individual in her school community, so that it seems to the veiled woman being ignored by another mother that “the positronic force field of the hijab jammed all her cosmic coordinates”. Or scene #7 (39) depicts the experience that wearing a veil is perceived as a license to ask Muslim women anything, solicit personal information in the most inappropriate circumstances to determine whether the woman is ‘dangerous’ or not, which Kahf mocks as “‘Yes, I Speak English / Yes, I carry explosives, they are called words’”. However, wearing a hijab in encounters with other people of color may produce very different, positive effects of building immediate impromptu alliances and communities that White/Christian majority people have no access to. Scene #5 (31) depicts encounters with black men who turn into an “army of chivalry (...) Drop the scarf, and (if you’re light) you suddenly pass (lonely) for white.” Albeit building on a highly gendered metaphor of enjoying the advantages of male chivalry as an expression of community solidarity, this poem takes a sharp punch by inverting white skin into a marker of exclusion and the hijab into a symbol of inclusion.

#### **4.2 What does an American Scheherazade look like?**

At the center of Kahf’s later poetry is the appropriation of the Scheherazade figure as a modern muse/role model of a transnational, hybrid and powerful Muslim woman. This form of strategic auto-orientalism promises to be very effective because the trope of the figure is so popular and overdetermined in Western literature that all her Western audiences will recognize the reference, and yet due to its orientalist distortion it is an extremely rich figure to re-appropriate and change. In this case a return to Scheherazade’s roots in present adaptation can facilitate a very different subject positions for Arab women living in diaspora, negotiating multiple cultural and ethnic reference frames, and I argue Kahf achieves this adaptation as a representation of possible Muslim womanhood that escapes a nationalist and neoliberal logic of multiculturalism. Kahf’s Scheherazade figure writes emails to her U.S. audiences of every kind and she performs a form

of specifically Arab American in-between-ness rooted at the same time in the early Muslim feminist example of Scheherazade and in an U.S. women of color tradition.

The lyrical I of Kahf's poems is not always clearly identified as a Scheherazade figure, but in many cases personifications of poetry and/or communication clearly point to the abstract field of cross-cultural communication as an umbrella term for the many positions an American Scheherazade may occupy. For example, the poem "Fayetteville as in Fate" (6f) places Arab immigrant trajectories squarely in the myth of the 'American way', laying claim to the never fulfilled promise of rendering the U.S. as a nation of 'equal' immigrants, while the traces of the genocide of native people and multiple national settler colonials all merge palimpsestically in 'Fay'tteville's' environment. On an individual level, though, Kahf sees this multiplicity and power imbalances as a call for agency to look beyond superficial cultural differences to shared humanity, that despite the 'fate' of all these people and all their differences living together, it is in their hands if they choose to communicate:

the open hand with the dirt in the creases makes a map both can read . (...)  
But who will coax them close enough to know this?/ Darlings, 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:  
*May their children e-mail one another and not bomb one another*  
*May they download each other's mother's bread recipes*  
*May they sell yams and yogurts to each other at a conscionable profit*  
*May they learn each other's tongue and put words into each other's mouth*  
*Say Amen/ Say آمين / Say it, say it*

Even though Scheherazade is not identified here by name as the poem's voice, the self-conscious appropriation and self-designation as a poet, highly revered in Muslim cultures, reveals her presence and inscribes her mediating voice originating from the inescapable Arab American in-betweenness as a central feature of Scheherazadian subjectivity. It may not be a comfortable position, and even while an American Scheherazade as a poet may seem powerless compared to bombs and general unwillingness to see others as human beyond cultural differences, her poetic prayers via emails and story telling actively promote and call for intercultural understanding. In Kahf's poetry, as in her novel, she always stresses femininity as part of a Muslim women's identity, and even if she aims to open up many different meanings and practices of womanhood, her work also remains within a traditional Muslim perception of binary gender difference. For example, in the poem above the Arab American woman poet expresses her artistic gift in

language, emotion and desire collapsing kiss/love/write into an act of multiple and yet traditionally gendered forms of communication. Part of Kahf's strategy is then to cherish and relish in markers of femininity as part of her empowerment, which consistently contradicts the 'Muslim woman as victim' trope even while she maintains binary gender boundaries as part of her Muslim heritage. However, these boundaries and other possible differences are rather like bridges to be crossed, an invitation to communicate and access the richness and potential of human connection, building an alternative women of color framework because she voids the Western/Muslim traditionalist binary that connotes femininity as inferior and by extension the orientalist value of Muslim/feminist/weak culture. So while Scheherazade gives seemingly mundane intercultural advice, as to learn each other's language and cook each other's food, the humanization and particularization of Arab Americanness explodes the orientalist reference frame and especially the 'recipe reference' directly links this poem to the first Arab American feminist anthology *Food for our grandmothers*.

The theme of cultural multiplicity and the dangers of misunderstandings accompany her Scheherazade figure in many other poems too. Some use humor and irony as in her poem *Lateefa*: "An Afro-Caribbean Muslim woman / eating paprika-tossed Hungarian potato / salad at the wedding of a Pakistani-American to a West Indian man / Be happy Columbus: At last, at least/ the two Indies. In Jersey, Jersey City" (21). Despite this light hearted and humorous re-writing of Americanness, the poem ends with a cruel reminder that the local police officer kicks the wedding party out of the park because he does not recognize the wedding as such without a Christian priest present. On the other hand, one of her most famous poems *My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears* (26f) directly addresses the tensions and dangers inherent in failed communication and cultural non-understanding on both sides. Beneath a more subtle layer of humor she addresses the reality and danger of an impermeable Arab/American divide. The only means to diffuse the situation is the mediating role of the lyrical I as transcultural Scheherazade. She is able to see and communicate through the superficial misunderstanding between her grandmother, having to wash her feet for prayer during shopping, and petrified 'Middle Western' ladies observing the scene – the irony being that in the end all these women cherish cleanliness and good manners above all, they just do not understand that about each other:

They fluster about and flutter their hands and I can see / a clash of civilizations brewing in the Sears bathroom (...) My grandmother knows one culture – the right one, / as do these matrons of the Middle West. (...) Standing between the door and the mirror, I can see at multiple angles, my grandmother and the other shoppers, all of them decent and goodhearted women, diligent in cleanliness, grooming and decorum (...) I smile at the midwestern women / as if my grandmother had just said something lovely about them / and shrug at my grandmother as if they had just apologized through me / No one is fooled, but I / hold the door open for everyone / and we all emerge on the sales floor / and lose ourselves in the great common ground / of houseware on markdown (26f).

While Anzaldúa's subjectivity as a nepantlera works on keeping bridges between differences passable for others through active mediation from the in-between, so does the American Scheherazade keep the door open for both Arab and mainstream Americans to walk through, embracing her position in the Middle West/East. The in-between can be a position of power for American Muslim women, if they speak both languages, understand both cultural codes and yet the dangers of mutual ignorance are constant and very palpable. Ironically, the only solution and common ground to literally disperse the standoff between her grandmother and the ladies on is being a consumer subject. However, I believe Kahf does not offer here the consumer subject as the solution in terms of Muslim women's assimilation to US consumerist values, on the contrary, the shop floor offers the minimal consensus to diffuse a situation and highlights the gendered connection of women via house ware across cultures, but in itself this is an empty connection if neither party involved were to work towards cultural understanding of the other.

Thus, an American Scheherazade may share a certain advantage through an in-between epistemological standpoint, but so does a native informer like Nafisi in a majority orientalist context. What makes an American Scheherazade participate in an alternative women-of-color framework as opposed to Nafisi's auto-orientalist essentialism? On the one hand, Scheherazade gains her epistemological advantage as poet and storyteller via learning from other women and concerning women alliances "it is from you I fashion poetry" (51). On the other, Kahf's American Scheherazade constantly moves back and forth between cultures to undermine stereotypes on all sides, and she takes another part of her 'power' from Islamic traditions of poetry and storytelling embodied by Scheherazade in the original tales. In her 'updated' poetic version, Kahf spins the tale further to the divorce of the prince and Scheherazade "We split up amicably. I taught him to heal / His violent streak through stories, after all, / And he helped me uncover my true call" (43). Her poetic Scheherazade would rather be a scholar than a wife and

the prince would rather have a family, which legitimates Muslim women's quest for self chosen forms of life without devaluing traditional family constellations either. Further and most importantly, it contradicts orientalist appropriations of Scheherazade that were part and parcel of limiting Western artistic representations of Muslim women.

In her poem "So You Think You Know Scheherazad" (45) Kahf addresses the potentially disturbing consequences for Western readers unaccustomed to reckon with "the demons under your bed / They were always there / She locks you in with them" when encountering an empowered Scheherazade uncovering the orientalist foundations of Western self perception, often happening at the expense of Muslim women. In the end, the process of ethnogenesis offered in Kahf's poetry challenges both Muslim and Western readers to

the power of the telling of a story - /And suddenly you find yourself / (...) landing in a field where you wrestle with Iblis, / whose form changes into your lover,/ into Death, into knowledge, into God,/ whose face changes into Scheherazad- / And suddenly you find yourself (45).

Nevertheless, Kahf's poems also acknowledge and center on the difficulties to find 'one' self in a diasporic situation, and also here the transnational currency of Scheherazade firmly rooted in an Eastern tradition and fluent in Western culture helps her to find herself in not just one woman, culture or religion, but like a migrating bird through time and space she links her self to figures as varied as Eve after Eden, Zainab, Malinche, the woman from the Oregon Trail, Harriet, Hagar, Nefertiti, Queen of Shaba, Zuleika, Mary, Dido, Cleopatra, Kadija, Aisha and many more (85). Kahf's post 9/11 representational politics may be born out of desperation against a threatening, homogeneous majority discourse about Muslim women, but at the same time she rises from the ashes to take up her work as a cultural mediator who offers new perspectives to Muslim and other American women – the question remains, though, are her emails read and who replies?

### **4.3 Audience responses**

Despite the difficulty of assessing the potential impact of Kahf's writing in a wider discursive shift about the representations of Muslim womanhood in a post 9/11 U.S. context, I present here a brief survey of the Amazon reviews about Kahf's poetry and novel. I do not consider these to be absolute statements or evidence of any objective kind, but I am interested in looking for cracks in sign chains and new points of articulation in the individual reader responses to Kahf's heterogeneous representation of American Muslim womanhood. I am interested in gauging if

Kahf may attract the kind of careful reader she is hoping for and if reader responses to her work differ significantly from the reactions to Nafisi's memoir. *Reading Lolita* was widely read in book clubs and discussed in forums online, so even though Kahf's work is successful it has not been part of structured book club or forum discussions to the same extent. To find a relatively broad, mainstream American audience reaction in her case, I have turned to reader reviews on Amazon.com that offer a fairly national and cross sectional panorama of audience responses.

At first glance, it stands out that her poetry collection only received 3 reviews and her novel roughly 30. This seems to corroborate Kahf's pedagogical choice to write a novel to reach a broad audience and center her strategic auto-orientalism more in her prose than her poetry. The poetry reviews (Web A) are consistently positive, which is probably due to the genre itself that requires more committed readers in the first place, but the reviews themselves also reflect a shared concern for a reevaluation of womanhood in general and Muslim womanhood in particular. Web A.1 even refers to parts of Kahf's poetry as "an ode to women and womanhood, and made me lift my head a little higher when I left the bookstore (this book under my arm)". Or, Web A3 would recommend the collection "to all readers, and to women readers in particular". Such an assertion closely resembles the reactions to Nafisi's memoir as empowering for 'women' and could be also a potentially orientalist, empty reading that obscures differences behind a homogenizing view of gender or trivialize her struggles. It is difficult for me to tell from these brief, anonymous reviews if the readers are actually willing to read beyond a superficial gender connection as a primary reference frame, but there are a few indications that their reader responses may function as the replies of more careful readers; or at least, Kahf's own focus on multiplicity in content and form and her understanding that meaning making and subversion can only happen in conjunction with her audience are encapsulated in her choice to title her poetry "Emails" from Scheherazade. Emails as a 'genre' invite replies, spontaneous and quick communication, similar to online reader responses. Despite this ease in medium of communication, Kahf's careful reader would take her criticism as pertinent to both U.S. and Muslim cultures. Replies might work as part of a discursive shift in the mainstream if they transcend easy, imperial feminist identification of 'Anglo Protestant women' with 'Muslim women' and go beyond 'walking in their shoes' to feel superior. Web A.1 shows such a deeper and self reflective engagement. She explicitly appreciates Kahf's critiques of everyday prejudice against Muslim women in the U.S. and judges the overall collection as "charming and ultimately



empowering” and as “better than prozac”. This indicates a deeper affective connection with the poems than just empty empathy, and a willingness to acknowledge a shared gender experience and empowerment, but also to see critical differences and specificities of anti-Arab racism and sexism.

Within these 3 reviews, of clearly highly interested American readers, it is interesting that her poetry is read as a general endorsement of ‘womanhood’ by the two – presumably – female reviewers, while Michael (Web A.2), probably a male reviewer, did not relate any personal or gendered dimension to the poems, but lauded her work in general terms as “particularly searing when reflecting on living in a post-9/11 world. Her compassionate but critical eye captures both the joy and tragedy of life.” All 3 reviewers responded, though, to Kahf’s political weight in addition to praising her aesthetics, passionate and witty writing and compared to the responses to Nafisi, there is a marked difference in the way veils/Muslim women and free subject positions are linked. Web A.1 does not even turn the veil into an issue/concern, while Web A.3 explicitly follows Kahf relinking of the veil to female empowerment and adornment: “Mohja Kahf’s language, her voices, her characters move seamlessly upon the page, stopping once in a while to adjust their scarves or flip us the intellectual bird.” In this sense, the small audience that picks up Kahf’s poetry also follows her re-articulation of empowered Muslim womanhood as part of the American multi-ethnic ‘subjectscape’.

The reviews of her novel were also overwhelmingly positive, and even though they share the celebratory tone with the reviews about Nafisi’s memoir in that the novel expands ‘your’, presumably Anglo/majority audience, world view and that everybody should read it, the levels and forms of identification differ. Before turning to the positive reviews, I want to briefly summarize the negative reviews of the novel. While Nafisi’s audience criticized her ‘unauthentic’ characters, a few of Kahf’s readers were irritated by the novel’s multiplicity, “photo album like style” and apparent “American bashing” (Web AB.17). So while readers characterized Nafisi’s characters as confused and weak without connecting their own confusion to external politics, Web AB.19 attacks Kahf personally for using her characters as “mouthpieces for their various opinions and experiences rather than real people” or as Web AB.21 put it “poorly constructed fiction as a thinly-disguised platform for the author’s personal views and experiences”. While Nafisi claimed to be an apolitical writer, Kahf’s work and her strategic auto-orientalism are explicitly political and run the danger of being rejected as ‘biased’. As

previously analyzed, Nafisi's work is highly political exactly in its pretense not to be and by focusing only on Iranian politics it is easier to perceive the characters as 'authentic' and not Nafisi's mouthpieces. Kahf's intervention into monolithic U.S. perceptions of Islam works with formal and content multiplicity and can be read both as a new aesthetic and as pedagogical. So such a critique for being political could both hint at the ineffective flipside of explicit politics in writing that prevents engagement with the overall text, but it also serves as indication in that Kahf's formal and content multiplicity actually challenges and upsets certain majority views.

Among the positive reviews, the endorsement of the book as a window into Muslim culture takes on a nuanced form more frequently than among Nafisi's reviewers. Web AB.6 goes so far as to say that now "I know that my life is fuller with a new found understanding of Muslim culture" drawing a humanistic connection between her own being and her "American brothers and sisters". This not only evidences a pluralistic and inclusive conception of Americanness, but also an emotional responses and personal identifications that go beyond the simple 'superiority/pity' binary, for example, also Web AB. 8 found itself "elated or crying by a twist or turn of the plot".

In search of careful readers, comments that state forms of self-critique or at least a new found level of awareness how non-Muslim Americans treat and respond to fellow Muslim citizens are crucial indicators for how Kahf's strategic auto-orientalism might work to change majority discourses about Muslim womanhood and its place within America. As opposed to the negative reactions cited above that considered Kahf's critiques as America bashing, Web AB.9 admits to feeling attacked at first. However, the person takes a self reflective step beyond this initial emotional standoff – an indication that Kahf's work as mediating Scheherazade can materialize if readers feel like "this book really offended me, until I realized I might deserve it. And that's not such a bad thing" (Web AB.9). Also Web AB.4 states explicitly that her identification with Khadra was "perspective-changing," and Web AB.3 comes to a sort of self-critical conclusion about his time in Saudi-Arabia were he did not have to assimilate, while American cultures expects assimilation and only allows space to integrate certain aspects of immigrants' heritages – a critique coming close to Melamed's analysis of neoliberal multiculturalism in Nafisi's marketing of essentialist auto-orientalist elements. One reader's response (Web AB.23 ) even went so far as to acknowledge her white privilege explicitly after reflecting on Kahf's novel. First, she states that the novel is "a prime example of the complexity

of gender in the 20th century universe, and it is one of the most profound political novels I have ever read”. However, she does not remain at this general level and connects her personal with Kahf’s political experiences. She acknowledges her position as a white reader and her complicity with hegemonic epistemic violence as ”often painful in the way that it is hard to be a white person and watch the movie "Rosewood" for example –(...) no one is free from the responsibility of political acts, but everyone is validated by the triumph of Khadra's ultimate humanity” (Web AB.23). Her example practices a structurally multidirectional reading in a comparative feminist framework - she recognizes the systemic complicity also white feminists need to acknowledge, without negating her individual agency for change. Also, she reads Kahf as relinking representations of Muslim women in their particularity with general humanity without focusing on and thus perpetuating orientalist stereotypes.

Cross-cultural and trans-ethnic emotional identifications also happened between Middle Westerners and Middle Easterners. Web Ab.11 said that “Maybe because I am from the Midwest too, there were parts of her journey that spoke directly to my heart and mind.” Or in the example of Web AB.10, a reader who self identifies as “a 60 year old white Christian southern male raised to teen years in a segregated society”, he sees himself via an interreligious analogy represented in Khadra’s spiritual journey from strict faith, to lost faith to regained and self defined faith. Even though such appropriations and universalizations obscure Khadra’s specific situation and a critique of orientalist/fundamentalist misrepresentations of Muslim women, the multidirectional and unpredictable connections audience draws may also be the stepping stone into drawing a general American audience into a discursive shift. As opposed to the above critiques that Kahf’s novel was political and thus ‘inauthentic’, the Indiana connection and description of ‘authentic’ Indiana people provided a platform of connection for Web AB.16. This reader explicitly individualizes his reaction, but emphasizes that the novel was “a great joy to me personally”. Locating Muslim culture as part of Midwestern culture seems to not only to practice a hybrid in-betweenness and multiplicity as American, but also to successfully reach out to a majority audience, while rewriting what counts and is seen as ‘authentic’ representations of both Hoosier and Dahwa cultures.

Beyond these majority views, I was especially interested in the two responses of self identified American Muslim readers. Web AB.17 appreciates that Kahf “magnifies and brings to life the reality of the "mosaic" of American Muslim life, the secular challenges faced by the

entire ummah which humbly reminds us we are all human and imperfect. (...) A book long overdue for the American muslim like myself. Excellent read.” This reader takes a general view and personal distance, but also seems to find himself represented. Web AB.18, however, reads the book on a very personal level and only endorses the experiences she can personally identify with in the first half of the book. She criticizes the second half as “preachy, clearly aimed at convincing the reader of the "rightness" of Khadra's denial of "conservative religion"”, which overlaps with the initial majority Anglo critique that Kahf’s novel is too political and Anti-American. In both cases, the readers seem to refuse to take a step back from the novel and reflect on it as more than a mimetic representation of a ‘reality’. On the other hand, this probably more conservative Muslim reader’s reaction indicates that Kahf’s strategic auto-orientalism not only works within and against orientalist discourse, but also within dominant Muslim discourses about veils, religion and womanhood. The reader reaction of dismissing her novel as inauthentic and too political, however, remains the same and not only directly relates to the question how to criticize oppression in other Muslim countries while escaping the orientalist victim stereotypes, but also to question how to be heard and effect change among different Muslim discourses. This reader, for example, explicitly reacts to Kahf’s approach to veiling as a cultural choice – as stated previously, for practicing Muslim women this statement is clearly and explicitly political, and this reader has a strong reaction to it, defending veiling as a religious mandate. Thus, this reader response indicates that ‘conservative’ American Muslims do not necessarily buy Kahf’s re-linking and new articulations of their faith, and that to create new spaces for in-between Muslim womanhood Kahf also need to intervene in ‘Muslim Defense Brigade’ discourses. Also from this reader’s perspective Kahf’s multiplicity in form is troubling, but rather because it can be read as endorsing an ‘American’ approach that “suddenly becomes convinced that all paths lead to God and that her goal should be to never offend anyone else by insisting on any moral standards.” In my analysis of how Kahf’s strategic auto-orientalism evades a neoliberal co-optation into a discourse of presumable free choice and individualism, I have argued that her multiplicity opens up spaces for all kinds of practices of Islam, also conservative ones. In sum, it is apparent that for Kahf’s strategic goals to materialize she needs careful readers on both sides of the East/West divide and that a personal, self reflection attitude is key to overcoming a self defensive gridlock reaction and trigger wider shifts in attitudes.

In between a conservative Muslim and an Anglo majority view there are also voices that situate Kahf's work primarily as art and as an important contribution to the U.S. multi-ethnic literary landscape. One reader among the 30 reviews drew an explicit connection between Kahf's writing and women of color feminist writing in particular. Coming to the end of my analysis, this example points to the possibility of reception, text, and authorial intention working together in an alternative women of color framework to produce new links and sign chains. While most of the positive responses ground their enthusiasm in the 'universal' value of the novel and a few others make specific interreligious and interethnic connections and comparisons, Web AB.12 is the only review that explicitly re-articulates Kahf's novel as part of an U.S. women of color framework by calling Kahf "Muslim-America's Cisneros". The reader recognizes Kahf's story as specifically Muslim-American, but she links it specifically to the wider discursive intervention other 'ethnic' American writers have been working towards for the last decades. Web AB.12 locates Kahf alongside Sandra Cisneros or Toni Morrison to enhance the literary and political importance of Kahf as an emerging Arab American woman writer, but in view of multidirectional and strategic citation to access visibility and subjecthood this review seems to express even more than that. It expresses a so far still minority discourse that has already shifted toward considering women of color writers and feminists as integral, and not marginal, parts of U.S. culture, history, and politics, which also points to the day when the classification of non-white/ethnic literature could become superfluous. Web AB.12 reading recommendation concludes that Muslim or non-Muslim "merely being human and being curious about people and the world around us (especially considering the political/religious/economic environment of today) is reason enough to read and enjoy this excellent debut novel."

## Conclusions

In this thesis I have analyzed the work of Mohja Kahf in search of a definition of strategic auto-orientalism as part of the response of Muslim American women writers to popular stereotypes and U.S. orientalist discourses. My hope has been to see possibilities for strategic and subversive interventions in monolithic representations of Muslim womanhood, as being either victims or escapees, by Muslim American women authors themselves. Drawing from Christina Civantos and Stuart Hall, I posit that forms of auto-orientalism facilitate access for minority writers to literary mainstream publishing, but that the effects of such citations vary depending on authorial intention, marketing, and audience reception. Further, post 9.11. Arab/Muslim American writing emerges from a political background of war abroad and surveillance at home in the U.S.; from a wholesale collapse of Muslim ethnic/racial identity affiliation into a terrorist affiliation; and from a renewed fervor of orientalist representations of Islam's inferiority via representing Muslim women only as oppressed victims of their cultures in popular literature. Aesthetically, literary expressions of U.S. orientalisms have a long pre 9/11 history, for example, in the surge of memoirs and other semi-fictional representations of oppressed Muslim womanhood. Dora Ahmad has called such memoirs as *Not without my daughter* or *Reading Lolita In Teheran* the 'oppressed victim narratives genre' and I analyze the controversy around Nafisi's publication as an example for how essentially auto-orientalist and native informant memoirs assert the superiority of Western 'freedom' at the expense of Muslim women's actual concerns and needs. Given this background, it is all the more urgent for Arab American women writers to intervene in these homogenous orientalist discourse in a struggle of writing themselves into history and counter the suffering of epistemic violence of being written about by the dominant culture. The post 9/11 decade has seen a surge in Arab American novels that squarely place Muslim cultures and identities within the U.S. and enjoy critical just as popular success, such as Mohja Kahf's novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* and her poetry collection *Emails from Scheherazad*. My analysis has examined in how far Kahf's strategic auto-orientalist citation is part of this success and potentially contributes to a discursive intervention for new spaces for Muslim womanhood that are neither caught up in Western orientalist nor Muslim nationalist perspective.

U.S. women of color writers and feminists have fought structurally similar fights and used the transformative power of writing themselves against the pervasive racist and sexist

hierarchies in hegemonic culture that leave imprints on women of color's selves. Writing, poetry and fiction may function as strategic narrations, and in my thesis I have extended this argument in the specific context of Arab American feminism to the writing in and against dominant orientalist discourses. While it may be difficult for Muslim American writers to write outside an orientalist reference frame, I am interested in the possibilities of subversive change from within. I argue that all auto-orientalist references are by definition citational, and authors like Nafisi may strive to capitalize from citing and selling back orientalist tropes. However, the link between expressions and meanings, which renders signs mutually legible within a dominant discourse, is not natural and open for change. Citation always relinks expressions and concepts, thus, a strategic use of differences based on re-articulation of formerly orientalist tropes with new, self defined meanings may help to achieve what Spivak considers the possible authorial intervention into sign systems/sign chains. Thus, in my reading and relinking of Kahf's multitactical approach in writing to U.S. women of color feminisms I argue her work functions multidirectionally in various levels: It connects transnationally and transtemporally with early Muslim feminisms, U.S. and Third World Feminisms and present Arab American feminisms. Kahf states explicitly that her formal multiplicity, she works scholarly, poetically, journalistically and literary, aims to fight against harmful stereotypes and against a reduction of Muslim womanhood to essentialist auto-orientalist victim memoirs or the celebratory immigrant narrative of coming to America and finding freedom. However, Kahf's strategic citations also create spaces for becoming self-defined Muslim American in her conscious, simultaneous eastward and westward gaze probably best exemplified in her appropriation of Scheherazade.

The figure of Scheherazade is tightly linked to Western orientalist discourses and her image is so overdetermined that a simple citation or reference to only her image may reinforce Western stereotypes on the one hand, and on the other, handicap Muslim women writers fighting gender inequality in Muslim majority countries, where feminist agency encapsulated in the original Scheherazade figure could be perceived as a Western intervention. I believe a successful strategic auto-orientalist citation of her figure needs to return to her voice beyond her image. Nafisi's auto-orientalist self styling as being a Scheherazade that tells her American audience about "Iranian women" cites and replicates orientalist, monolithic image of Muslim cultures as weak, feminized others. In a present neoliberal economy, she rewrites the binary of West/East onto good, assimilated Muslims versus backward, religious Muslims and places sources of

liberation only in the West. In this sense, Nafisi's memoir and life choices perform the function of native informant who affirms U.S. orientalist notions in exchange for access to publication, citizenship, and privilege. However, I have argued that in the process of meaning making between Nafisi, her publishers and her audience there is always a possibility for even essentialist auto-orientalism to either trigger interest in readers to go beyond stereotypes or to place Nafisi herself as an Other and not assimilated insider.

Instead of obscuring this epistemological instability of what it means to be American, Muslim or both, Kahf's auto-orientalist citations actively uses and represents the processes of subject formation in her work. She also chooses to prominently cite veils, Muslim women's struggles and discrimination, but she consistently breaks with monolithic and binary representations of East/West. The defining characteristic of strategic auto-orientalism in her work is that Kahf uses citations structurally, but at the same time she subverts any orientalist reference in content and form. Kahf refuses to tie blame for women's oppression to any culture, but she is very invested in fighting sexism, racism and discrimination that exists in American and Muslim societies. To escape the double bind that any critique of Muslim women's oppression feeds into orientalism and is read in the West as confirmation of Islam's inferiority, just as Muslim feminist interventions are silenced in Muslim majority communities and dismissed as 'Western interventions', Kahf uses her subversive auto-orientalism to communicate on two levels at the same time. From a Western perspective, her particularizing and multiplying of what it means to be Muslim, conservative, liberal, secular, feminist, American, or otherwise, deconstructs orientalist binaries very effectively. Instead of claiming to speak for 'Muslim women', her novel represents the multitude of practices and attitudes within American Muslim communities. Also, she locates her critiques of women's oppression in traditional Muslim perceptions of women's gender roles that are based on a lack of knowledge about Islam and not because of it, while the physical and immediate threat for American Muslim women emanates mostly from domestic racism and sexism.

Kahf's most clearly auto-orientalist and strategically subversive citation is her constant return to the veil. The growth narrative of the main character is represented via practicing all kinds of styles of veiling. However, instead of following the orientalist trajectory to 'liberate' her self by unveiling, Khadra concludes that veiling and unveiling are part of the same process and both are necessary. Not only does this view validate veiling as an empowering and context



specific practice, she also refuses to posit veiling as a religious necessity for women to express their faith. Strategically, this exemplifies Kahf's double communication, because from a Muslim perspective such a statement clearly criticizes any form of mandatory veiling, but without referencing Western buzz words such as burka or Iran that would immediately trigger orientalist stereotypes for her most of her American audience. Most importantly, by recasting the veil, in many different styles and fashions, as part of her Muslim American identity, Kahf also proposes a hybrid in-between subjectivity for Muslim American women that defies binaries via its holistic, circular, and process oriented approach to being. This refusal to fit into and internalize hegemonic expectations and representations, also manifests itself in Kahf's poetry and her appropriation of the Scheherazade figure as a mediator. While Kahf's earlier poetry follows a women of color feminist trajectory that uses her anger creatively, her post 9/11 poems consciously adopt an American Scheherazade subjectivity, located in the in-between. This function of the lyrical I as a cultural mediator resembles the nepanterla/in-between subject position the late Gloria Anzaldúa suggested as the only possible home for feminist activists in a neoliberal, globalised age. In other words, Kahf cites and changes both the orientalist and original images of Scheherazade into being a poet, an author and a Muslim American woman who is an agent in American culture, which structurally cites female empowerment from an Islamic, transnational and of U.S. women of color/Third world feminist tradition and opens discursive spaces for specifically Muslim and generally American subjectivities.

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