

Re-inscribing Shahrazad: The Quest of Arab-American Women in Mohja Kahf's Poetry

Safaa A. Alahmad

English Department, College of Education-Jubail,
University of Dammam, Dammam
Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The *One Thousand and One Nights* (1885) was introduced collaterally with Britain's nineteenth-century colonial endeavor and Orientalist practices relating to it. Pertinent to the Empire's goal was to interpret *The Nights* as an indication of Arab women's passivity and lack of agency to justify Britain's imperial project in the area. As the background of this narrative was fetishized and exoticised, so was *Shahrazad*, the heroine and narrator, whose intellectual and narrative powers were reduced to sheer sexual prowess. This disparagement of *Shahrazad*'s agency and subjectivity has instilled the early seeds of the dominant stereotypes of either a silent willing victim or a sensual seductress that have, for decades, beleaguered representations of Muslim/Arab women and, by extension, Muslim-American women. In her poetry collection *E-mails From Scheherazad*, the Arab-American poet Mohja Kahf revives the figure of *Shahrazad* to disrupt this Orientalist discourse through rewriting a twenty-first century *Shahrazadian* narrative to foreground her voice to represent herself, and to halt the representations of Muslim-American women in the service of the United States' imperial project in the Middle East. Informed by the works of Edward Said and feminists such as Meyda Yegenoglu, Suzan Gauch and Rana Kabbani, the paper depicts how the poet attempts to undermine the hegemonic digressive representations of Arab/Muslim woman rooted in nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse. Moreover, it also illustrates how the poet resists such Orientalist translation of her culture by reviving the figure of *Shahrazad* as a space of cultural interchange that opens a window on another culture in Arab-American diaspora.

Keywords: Arab-American women poets, Arab/Muslim women identity, cultural translation, diaspora, Muslim feminism