H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mohja Kahf. *E-Mails from Scheherazad.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003. 102 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2620-6; $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8130-2621-3.

Reviewed by Nathalie Handal (Independent Poet)
Published on H-Gender-MidEast (June, 2005)

Hi, Babe: Mohja Kahf's E-mails from Scheherazad

Mohja Kahf poems perform. They come out of the page and force you to pay attention to them. Every poem, every line tells a story. A story that tells another story. In the first stanza of the title poem, she writes, "Hi, babe. It's Scheherazad/I tell stories for a living" (p. 13) and that is what this collection of richly colloquial and narrative poems does.

Kahf takes us on multiple external and internal journeys beginning with her migration from Syria to the United States and the emotional turbulence of leaving one world, one home, culture, language for another. She writes, "I left Syria many years ago, as a child,/ and I don't remember Syria/ but Syria remembers me:/ I am sure of it (p. 11). But Syria comes to her, reminds her in her dreams, imagination, words, that in fact, she remembers Syria as much as Syria remembers the intimacies of her details, of her emotions. That the past is in her, and that consciously or subconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, the desire to reconnect with that past will emerge, that she will inherit her parents longing to return: "When they arrive in the new country,/ voyagers carry it on their shoulders, the dusting of the sky they left behind/ It said: We will meet again in Damascus,/ in Aleppo. We will meet again./ It was Syria in her scarves./ We never knew it/ Now it is on our shoulders too" (p. 1).

Kahf recounts the story of her parents' immigration, what their world looked like, smelled like and how they experienced cultural difference arriving in their new country, the United States, she writes: "my mom and dad leaving/ Damascus, the streets they knew,/ the familiar shape of food, the daily/ boiling and cooling of fresh milk,/ the measurement of time by mosque sounds./Here they are crossing the world, hoisting up all they know like a sail,/ landing in Utah. March, 1971./ They know nothing/ about America: how to grocery/ shop or open a bank account,/ how the milk comes, thin/ glass bottles chinking tin" (p. 8).

She explores the profound imprint departure and migration has on her, and her fundamental need to hold on to familiar things in order to continue the journey. She tells us that, the "Ottoman liras" her father gave her and her brother, and the "mincemeat pies" her mother "wrapped in a woolen bundle/ were everything [she] and [her brother]/ had from home." And "they had to last/ a lifetime" (p. 4).

Separation is something people from her world were familiar with, partings brought by migration or war. They understood the complexity of survival, knew the strength it took, the pain endured, when those they loved went away to battle: "The wool of my heart is threadbare after the years and wars/ And I keep in a bundle the names of my lost boys/ Survive, we told them, and sent them unthinkably away" (p. 3).

This was the way of one world. It was difficult to negotiate the passing through into another world, the passing from here to passing there. The power of the following passages demonstrate the ability a child has to embrace crossings, to be open to the unfamiliar and even become intimate with its strangeness. Children often find a way to exist in both worlds and find a way for both worlds to exist together. That is what Mohja and her brother did with where they came from (Syria) and where they now come from the (Unites States): "My brother and I crossed through a field./ It's golden music wasn't ours. We listened/ to its cornflowers choirs and tried/ to feel like Hoosiers. Aunts and uncles/ fed us Syrian pastries/ and parents promised Arabian gold./ We sang anthems/ of their remembered landscapes on request/ for visitors and foreign guest/ At school, we pledged allegiance,/ trying not to feel like traitors." They ran, "to leap the gulch between two worlds, each/ with its claim. Impossible for us/ to choose one over the other,/ and the passing there/ makes all the difference" (pp. 18-19).

However, entering a different world also means confronting numerous challenges. Kahf tells us of the hardship of being other in Unitesd States, the misrepresenta-

tions and anti-Muslim sentiments, the verbal threats, the discrimination she endured but informs us that she has found a way to eradicate stereotypes, found her power in words and her words have become a way to fight back. In "Hijab Scene #7," she writes: "No, I'm not bald under the scarf/No, I'm not from that country/where women cant drive cars/No, I would not like to defect/Im already American/But thank you for offering/What else do you need to know/relevant to my buying insurance,/opening a bank account,/reserving a seat on a flight?/Yes, I speak English/Yes, I carry explosives/Theyre called words/And if you don't get up/Off your assumptions,/Theyre going to blow you away" (p. 39).

Arab American identity and culture is the coming together of east and west, two principally opposing worlds, and that is complicated enough to bring together. But we must also consider that in each country there exist various norms, values, and ways. Kahf experienced different cultural variables in the United States, as she went from one otherness to the next, being Muslim of Syrian origin raised in the small farming town of Plainfield Indiana to living in the northeast and now is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Arkansas. The poet through the richness of her experiences and work, informs her readers of the diversity of the Arab American community.

She delivers in the following lines the contradictions and beauty of her multiplicity: "We are the spreaders of prayers rugs/ in highways gas stations at dawn/ We wear veils and denim,/ prayer caps and Cub caps/ as over the prairie to the halal pizzeria." And "'Allabu akbar' alternates with 'doo-wop, she-boom, she boom"' (p. 40).

Kahf journeys inward, and in between the lines of her poems are mystical breaths. Her searching and self-transformation is continuous, she "finishes with one layer and finds another." In her writings, she embraces her many selves and invites us in. And at one point, Kahf and Scheherazad find each other in each other's words, stories, in the different rooms inside of themselves. They become each other. And they let go of each other while staying together. She writes in this powerful passage: "And every door you open is a false door/And suddenly you find yourself in a room/within a room within a room within a room/and suddenly you find yourself forced to meet them,/the demons she unleashes,/the terrors that come from/within you and within her/And suddenly Scheherazad is nowhere to be found/but the stories she unlocked go on and on?/ this is the power of the telling of a story?"/And suddenly you find yourself" (p. 44). She finds. And as she lands "in a field where [she] wrestles with Iblis/whose form changes into [her] lover/ into Death, into knowledge,/into God, whose face changes into Scheherazad?"/And suddenly [she] find [herself]" (p. 45).

As she transcends the borders inside of her, one cannot but feel the intensity and immensity of the world inside and around her. These poems manifest beauty and inspire us to search for more.

The poet does not stop there, and we expect nothing less. She does not let us forget love, eroticism, and Arab men. In her daring, somewhat humorous (as she reminds us of certain stereotypes), but mostly passionate and striking poem, "I Can Scent an Arab Man a Mile Away," she consents that even if Arab men may be "mustachio'd, macho, patriarchal,/sexist, egotistical, parochial they're mine, my sleek and swarthy, hairy-chested,/ curly-headed lovers of the Prophet/ and lovers of the Virgin,/ sons of the city street and village boys,/ wandered tribal and global./ I know them by the rims around their eyes/ by the sheen upon their skin/ by the growling ghayns/ and gnawing dds and hoarse hungry khs/ My men, familiar/ as the road home,/ the threshold of love../ (God, they look so sexy in those checkered scarves)" (pp. 29-30).

One of the most arresting poems in the collection is, "The Woman Dear to Herself," as it combines, homeland, the spiritual, the erotic, female power and love in a harmoniously powerful play of words. She writes: "The woman dear to herself lives in the heart/ alive to the everywhere presence of divinity/ the woman dear to herself does not lose herself/ in the presence of a man/ woman, or child. In love she remains whole. She knows the geography of her body/ and how to give good directions home" (pp. 55-56).

But death, pain, injustice is never to far from her mind. She calls for writers, repeat their names as a prayer and a protest, "Nizar, Badr, Nazek/ Samih, Buland, Abdulwahhab, Jabra/ Adonis/ Etel/ Ghada" (p. 94). She asks them to "write." Calls out again, "Walt/ Emily, Adrienne" (p. 94) and asks them, "how do you come to America?" (p. 94). And then hits us with a agonizing reality, declares: "If you've never smelled clover or cardamom,/would you know the difference/between the well of a village and a wound in the breast?/between a Free Trade Zone and a genocidal siege?/between the Fijeh Spring waters/and the effect for generations to come/of radioactive Gulf War weapons/on children born in Iraq?" (p. 95).

We hear the cries inside of her as she writes against the horrors and injustices committed, she screams: "By the limping of the people in Iraq/By the sound of fran-

tic running in Qana, in Kosovo/By the men and boys of Hama massacred/By the swollen bodies in a river in Rwanda/and Afghani women and the writers of Algiers,/I am a disbeliever" (p. 75).

But she encourages us to become believers of the human heart. Remind us that we "only get one journey," (p. 98) so we must make sure to choose with dignity. In the poem "My Body Is Not Your Battleground," she criticizes nations and rulers, more specifically the U.S. government, whose arrogance seem limitless as they use God's name to conquer, kill, to justify the unjustifiable. But we also stop, and realize that all of Kahf's poems are love poems–we find joy and pain, trust and distrust, beauty and horror, pleasure and repugnance, peace and conflict, we find the world and the self. She writes: "My body is not your battleground/ My breasts do not want to lead revolutions/nor to become prisoners of war/My breasts seek amnesty; release them … My body is not your battleground/How dare you put your hand/where I have not given you permission/Has God, then, given you permission to put your hand there?/ Withdraw from the eastern fronts and the western/Withdraw these armaments and this siege/so that I may prepare the earth/for the new age of lilac and clover,/so that I may celebrate this spring/the pageant of beauty with my sweet love" (p. 58-59).

Her words transform us, take us to elation–of the body, soul, of the heart. Inevitably we ask ourselves, does Kahf dream of return. Does she return? Did she ever leave? And then we hear her say: "We may have left Algeria a hundred years ago/ or fled the ruins of Babylon yesterday,/ but we never left the rockbruised body/ unheeded at the foot of the mountain/ We carried it with us. We carry it with us. That is the meaning of the bruise on your hear" (p. 74). And then she whispers: "To find the slave/ for this wound you carry/ without knowing its name,/ you must return to the house / where you were born." And then she sings to us: "The walkway opens: This is America./ Who will be waiting?/ Who will be descending?" (p. 38).

Kahf becomes love. Everything becomes love and she takes us back to these lyrical lines: "Have you ever opened the book of the river?/ The longest exile is exile of the heart/ the only passage for return is love" (p. 88).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Nathalie Handal. Review of Kahf, Mohja, *E-Mails from Scheherazad.* H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10594

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.