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“Sex and the Umma”: Sex and Religion Lived in Mohja Kahf’s Columns

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Though it is necessary to point out that most Arab-Americans are not Muslims, Mohja Kahf openly proclaims that she is a Muslim Arab-American writer. In her column section “Sex and the Umma” of the progressive webpages *Muslim Wakeup!* she draws a different picture of sex and religion than one would expect from a religious writer. This paper examines the ways in which personal identity as well as alternative collective myths are created via writing. Kahf challenges old religious traditions by highlighting the needs of modern people, celebrates female sexual desires and subverts male dominance by using traditional religious literary forms for expressing female worldviews. According to William von Humboldt’s theory of language as a continuous process of creation, Kahf through her writing creates new ways of life suitable for modern Muslims.

The prevailing topic of Arab-American literature is a search for identity, which is common in most ethnic writers. Religion and gender represent parts of identity composition, and these are the central issues employed in Mohja Kahf’s work. Kahf, a Syrian-American who is a writer and a professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas, is also a practising Muslim, and via her literary work she shows a lively, contemporary picture of a lived religion. The section Kahf is responsible for in the *Muslim Wakeup!* online magazine is called “Sex and the Umma,”¹ subtitled “column on sex and Islam.”

Her columns aim at a wide, mostly Muslim, readership. Though often concerned with women, Kahf’s columns speak to men as well, and offer new, fresh directions in their gender roles. Her short witty stories challenge old Muslim stereotypes such as wedding day practices, denying women sexual desires or advocating male dominance. The column “Exquisite Parts” tells the story of the sexual life of a married couple, and presents a diary the man has kept since their first married night. It reveals him to be hopelessly ignorant at the beginning, not only of sex, but also of female anatomy. The only thing he does know is that they should have

sex the first night. However, because they got married according to Islamic tradition, which means that they spent minimal time together before the wedding, his wife refuses to have sex with somebody she barely knows and suggests that they get to know each other better beforehand. So the only thing he really gets the first night is a common prayer and a kiss. The scene with the prayer is quite significant:

Get this: she says we can pray together. I got married to pray? But it is nice to be side by side with her in the double sink bathroom washing our faces, making ablutions. When I spread the prayer rug she scoots up by my right side and gets into prayer position. “What are you doing?” I say. “You are supposed to pray behind me.” “Uh-uh,” she says. “My daddy lets us pray next to him when it’s just family.” “Well that’s not how you’re supposed to –” I begin, but then I think, what am I saying, closer to me is where I want her. Let’s do it her way. So we make *isha*, and it’s nice, her right beside me where I can feel her breathing and hear her whispering her *subhana*’s.²

Kahf puts religion side by side with physical attraction or sex in general. However, Islam is not just a religion, it is a way of life. There has never been a divide between the sacral and the profane; all practical everyday activities have their religious purpose and vice versa. Thus, when the married couple of the story examine each other’s shaved prickly and itchy private parts, they admit they were made to shave by their relatives, because it is *sunna*.³ And they say: “‘Let’s not do that again.’ [...] ‘The shaving thing.’ [...] ‘I bet if the point is cleanliness, you can just keep it really clean’”. Kahf touches the problem of following *sunna* in modern society. The initial reason for shaving was cleanliness, as the custom originated in seventh century Arabia where nomads then spent their lives in the desert with little opportunity to wash; therefore keeping their sweating body parts hairless had logical practical reasons. It was also one of the recommendations of the prophet Muhammad that was recorded. In the course of time the recommendation acquired the label of religious tradition, and it is followed even today. However, like many other recommendations, it is not necessary anymore. Yet, though some practices have become unnecessary and limiting today, the families / communities / *Umma* keep forcing them on their members. A certain stagnant motto saying “the *Umma* have been through it, you also must go through it” echoes an almost *kafkaian* vicious circle “where father concentrates in himself all the forces he himself subjugates to, and incites his son to subjugate to them too” (Deleuze and Guattari 2001: 22). Kahf breaks through this vicious circle of imposed religious rites that have lost their purposes. Through her stories, she encourages the readers – her fellow-believers – to construct their own thought and to follow tradition in modern ways.

Another widely held prejudice is that Muslim women are not expected to have sexual desires or fantasies. Kahf lets her heroines examine sex magazines to enliven their married lives and search for their sexual rights in the Quran, as the column entitled “Lustrous Companions” describes. Kahf opens this story by quoting “The Merciful” – the chapter of the Quran:

(They will be) on couches inlaid
Reclining on them, facing each other
Round about them (serving), eternal boys
With goblets, beakers and cups (filled)
from clear-flowing fountains
[...]
And Companions with beautiful,
big and lustrous eyes [...] (quoted in “Lustrous Companions”)

Some women friends are examining the line concerning boy servants in paradise during their religious class in the mosque: “Do women get to have sex in paradise too?’ [...] The sheik starts visibly. ‘Any woman who wants such a thing is not likely to make it to paradise,’ he says drily”. Through the story, Kahf makes the women assume that they do have equal sexual rights on earth as well as in heaven, and that they can admire male beauty here on earth. The story finishes with the women smoking a water pipe in a bar and being served by handsome waiters while fantasizing about men they would like to have for lovers in heaven (with Edward Said among them), a scene copying the Quranic image. Nevertheless, Kahf does not preach any kind of free love: she remains faithful to the basic moral codes of her faith. Her heroines masturbate, fantasize and experiment in sex, some of them are lesbians, but they do not get involved in any extra-marital sexual relationships.

Therefore, Kahf creates a new Muslim identity in her writing, helping other Muslims create their identities, or perhaps reshape existing ones. Her texts are provocative, which makes the readers either question their current views or it makes them angry or both. Her columns were one of the main reasons why the *Muslim Wakeup!* website was hacked into in December 2004. The orthodox hackers demanded that “no more perverts [are] allowed to speak about Islam like Mohja Kahf and her warm fluid fantasies”.

Apart from depicting religion in connection with sex, Kahf also subverts established concepts, or perhaps rather offers alternative ones. In the column “Lost Pages from Sahih al-Bukhari’s Chapter on Menstruation”, she follows the traditional format of hadith collections.⁴ Kahf starts this column by quoting from the Quran chapter called “The Cow”: “They ask thee concerning menses. Say: They are a hurt. So withdraw from women in menses and do not go near to them until they purify. When they purify, go to them as God has commanded you. Verily God loveth the returners and the purifiers”. What follows is Kahf’s sura, her own version of the holy chapter:

On the authority of Rizvana Bano, narrated by her niece Tameqa Jackson, that her great-grandmother who was a Companion of the Woman Who Loved Her Period, Bibi Moina the Truthteller (MGEH – may God empower her), said:

Behold, my period comes. I start feeling soft and melted and sexy a night or two before, and want to be held tenderly and [...] made love to mightily [...] And that is how I know it is coming, and it feels like an old [...] friend whose face I love. For behold, I love my period. (She said this latter three times.)

In the chapter Kahf introduces characters like “The Mother of the Believers in the Wholesomeness of Women’s Bodies Equally as with Men’s and not in Instilling Shame for Being a Woman”, “LaDawna al-Chicagoweeya”, “Rabia al-Milwaukeeeya”, “the man Who Loved her But Held Her at Bay”, or groups like “the People Who Rejected Women for What They Are”. Through presenting disputes over menstruation, purity and related forbidden and allowed activities, Kahf inserts also political overtones into the chapter on this female physiological process: refusing a comment by a famous religious interpreter that women cannot think clearly during menses, she says: “Our cycles do not cause incompetence in the work world; it’s the other way around: The rigid work world needs to become more fluid, better geared toward human cycles, male and female, before it destroys the Earth and its Rivers.” And the speaker denounces the chauvinist interpreter: “May God reincarnate him as a tampon for spreading such half-truths and disrespecting women’s bodies and minds!” Using Humboldt’s concept of language as a continuous process of creation (Hroch 2003: 25), and transposing it to Kahf’s writing, we see that Kahf creates a new mode of life for Muslims in the diaspora by putting fresh language on old forms. By following exactly the same formal

rules for a religious text as the official religious texts do, Kahf turns the rigid truths upside down. She ridicules them with their own arms but not in order to abolish valuable religious principles. Rather, she does so to open her readers' eyes and to bring in alternative collective myths. By myth I mean a concept that is lived rather than memorized and explained. Her myths, be it the postponed wedding night of "Exquisite Parts", freely expressed sexual desires of "Lustrous Companions", the vindication of menses in "The Lost Chapter" or the writing process itself, are not the only valid versions but they form possible ways of life. In her essay "Poetry Is My Home Address" Kahf says:

I can't give my children grand master truths that I no longer believe in, other people's insistence that this is how the world is. The only thing I know to do is give them my honest voice [...] Writing is the way I know how to be in the world, although there are other equally worthy ways to communicate and to create beauty and truth.

Kahf recognizes one of the reasons why her "minority community is so defensive about its sexism [...] [It is their way of] defence because they face racism and stereotyping from the majority community" (Kahf, "Poetry"). It is fear that the criticism in the work of their own fellows will serve malevolent purposes of the other party. However, the need of self-criticism is more and more pressing in Arab-American literature, and Kahf incorporates and advocates it. She calls for overcoming the fear of other parties by having an open mind about one's own culture as well as about different communities and ideas. To use Stephen Greenblatt's words, "one's culture [is] more securely one's own by virtue of a refusal of possession" (Greenblatt 1992: 25). For the Muslim writer Mohja Kahf, this is her literary jihad.⁵

Endnotes

The explanations of the following terms are based on Horyna and Pavlincová (2003).

¹ *Umma* – a key Islamic concept, meaning the Muslim "community" or ideal state.

² *Isha* – the fifth and last of the five daily prayers. *Subhana* – glorifying, thanks.

³ *Sunna* – the prophetic tradition, one of the basic sources of Islamic law (*shari'a*).

⁴ *Hadith* – the record of an utterance, action or indirect approval of an act by the prophet Muhammad. The oral transmission was canonised by the rulers of the first Muslim generations. The hadith consists of the story itself (*matn*) and the chain of transmitters of the hadith (*isnad*). Hadith collections supplement the Quran as a source of the Islamic religious law. There are six official collections, among them the one gathered by al-Bukhari (810 – 870).

⁵ *Jihad* – literally, "striving" or "struggle," although it is often used in the theopolitical context of a "holy war." It must be either defensive or to right a wrongdoing. It is said that the "lesser jihad" is the external war with an aggressor, while the "greater jihad" is the internal war with oneself, i.e., to be a better Muslim.

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