

MUSLIMAH CREATIVITY, PIETY, AND SOLIDARITY IN MOHJA KAHF'S *HAGAR POEMS*

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Kahf's poetry collection, *Hagar Poems* (2016), discovers Muslim women or Muslimah leadership by exploring Muslimah leaders, such as Hagar (Hajar), Khadija, and Aisha to undermine reductionist views of Muslim women both in Orientalism and Anglo-American feminism. In doing so, Kahf uses the strategies of juxtaposition, humor, and irreverence by connecting Muslimah ancient leaders to her contemporary speakers who are crisscrossing Islamic traditions and American popular culture. By engaging with postcolonial and gender studies with the frameworks of leadership and Islamic studies, this paper investigates how Kahf's women juxtapose ancient folkloric tales and American popular cultures, both to establish their multiple identities and leadership and to illuminate contemporary resonances of ancient Muslimah leaders in the eyes of subsequent generations. Indeed, the patterns of Muslimah leadership in Kahf's poems are represented as engaging with the ideas of creativity, piety, and solidarity; and these patterns work to question the exclusion of Muslimah leadership in both gender and orientalist debates. Thus, Kahf's *Hagar Poems* explores the representation of Muslim women from Islamic history who serve as role models, having displayed heroic characteristics through their leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Arguably, Islam and Muslim women tend to be perceived in reductionist views, such as backward, passive, and uneducated in orientalist debates. In the US, orientalist attitude intersects with US racial blindness as Abdulhadi et al. (2011) argue, "These imperatives constitute the positioning of an imagined Arab or Muslim enemy as inherently foreign and outside the boundaries of U.S nationness" (p. xxiii). This is in line with the proclaims that even though Edward Said's *Orientalism* was published almost five decades ago, "Islam and Muslim have often been understood in limited and prejudiced ways in traditional Anglo-American debates" (p. 1). Significantly, Abuelezam and Fontenot (2017) approve, "People of Arab origin have experienced increasing discrimination in the past 20 years in the United States" (p. 396); even though there are approximately 3.7 million people of Arab living in the US who have rooted culturally in 22 Arab countries (Arab American Institute, 2021). Additionally, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Anglo-Americans tend to characterize all Muslim women are from Arabs regardless many Muslim women are from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Middle East. Moreover, not all Middle Eastern countries are Arabs, such as Israel, Turkey, and Iran. Abdelrazek (2007) claims that American society "tends to lump all women from Muslim countries into the Arab categories ... to view all Arabs as Muslims and to consider all Muslims as practicing a particular, rigid kind of Islam" (p. 7). This falsification likely works to eliminate Muslim women from the ideas of creativity and modernity. Indeed, Anglo-Americans tend to see Islam as "monolithic and Arab women, whether Muslim or not, as passive victims of their religion and/or culture" (p. 7).

To weaken these orientalist positions, many Muslim women writers express loudly through their powerful lyrics as their precursor, the Queen of Scheherazade has encouraged them for centuries. One of them is Mohja Kahf, a recognized US-Muslim women writer who wrote some writings both in the genres of poems and novels. Mattawa (2008) argues in her works, that Kahf claims that "imperialist Westerners and their moral equivalents, the anti-imperialist Muslim chauvinists, cease using the Muslim female body as a pretense for political violence, which has nothing to do with the liberating of protecting women" (1591). US-Muslim women do need that liberty, as they are self-determining and have participated as "students, teachers, political activists, feminists and community members in addition to their negotiations of sexuality, marriage, religion, and racism" (LaRose, 2014, p. 240). Muslim women have journeyed around the world to found their Muslim feminism as Suliza et al. (2013) argues that Kahf's speakers "traverse the globe to exhibit examples of feminine resistance, struggle, endurance, and survival" (p. 98). To weaken this orientalist perception of Muslim women, this

paper suggests various Muslim women leaders who have actively contributed in an equal way within their families and public life in Kahf's poetry collection, *Hagar Poems* (2016).

This paper emphasizes how Kahf's poems contribute to greater discussions about feminism by rendering Muslimah speakers appealing to their foremother leaders, such as Hajar (Hagar), Khadija, and Aisha. These speakers shadow their foremothers' role models as mothers, leaders, and prototypes of women's authorization because they accomplish both domestic and public lives in a well-adjusted way. In doing so, we detailedly examine three poems: "The Water of Hajar" (p. 3), "Aisha: The *Islamic Inquirer* exclusive" (81), and "Breaking: Aisha Claims to Be Post-Feminism" (p. 82) rendering Kahf's poems, which delves with the history of two important Muslimah leaders: Hajar and Aisha, in both Islamic conviction and *Hagar Poems* in the following sections.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the investigation, we also appeal to US-Muslim feminist theorists with the framework of postcolonial theorists to examine how Kahf's *Hagar Poems* discover the picture of Muslim women leaders from Islamic history who have authorized Muslim women through their essential characters as leaders, businesswomen, innovators and are symbolic of women's creativity and leadership. Many scholars such as Abdul-Jabbar (2014), Shomali (2018), and Friedman (2020), have discussed Kahf's poems by concentrating on US-Muslim involvement, cultural diversity, and US imperialism. Abdul-Jabbar contends that "the general perception is to view [Kahf's] poems as a feminist vehicle resisting the representation of Arab American women as oppressed stereotypes (p. 242). Shomali also claims that Kahf uses Scheherazade "to mediate a history of tension between the Arab world and its colonizers while at the same time reckoning with the new tensions Arab Americans face as subjects of US Empire" (p. 65). Friedman discourses that throughout E-Mails, Kahf "develops the persona of the poet-as translator, as a cultural mediator between people who remain strangers to each other" (p. 269). Thus, these scholars have inspected Kahf's poems by converging on Muslim woman feminists, US imperialism, and the cultural negotiator. However, none of them focuses on how Kahf's women illuminate Muslim women's leadership, which has the designs attractive with ideas of creativity, piety, and solidarity; thus resisting the marginalization of Muslim women leaders in both gender and orientalist debates.

Historically, the stories of these Muslim women leaders can be related to US Muslim women who have agonized over the idea of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism. Alsultany (2012) in *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* notes that in

U.S. movies and TV dramas such as *The Practice* (1997), *Boston Public* (2005), and *Law and Order* (1990), Muslims are portrayed in more sympathetic ways. However, even these representations of Muslims might effort in the facility of hegemonic structures of race and racial difference. As Alsultany puts it, “sympathetic images of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 give the impression that racism is not tolerated in the United States, despite the slew of policies that have targeted and disproportionately affected Arabs and Muslims” (2012, p. 15). The concerned images of Muslims in US media seem to skin Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism, which has functioned insidiously in Anglo-American society. To contest these distortions of Muslims in US media, it is vital to discourse how Muslim women leaders live both in olden and modern contexts as Kahf’s speakers show in the following section, after Research Method, dealing with the story of Hajar, the first Muslim woman pious leader and innovator of Zamzam Well.

METHOD

This research uses close textual analysis in examining the literary text. The primary text used in this research is Mohja Kahf’s poetry collection, *Hagar Poems*, published by the University of Arkansas Press in 2016. The secondary texts for this research include all articles discussing Kahf’s poetry collections, including Mohja Kahf’s *E-Mails from Scheherazade* (2003) as the scholars’ discussion is still related to this research focusing on Gender and Muslim women’s experiences living in the US. These secondary texts are engaged with theoretical perspectives, especially postcolonial and gender studies with the frameworks of Islamic and leadership studies. In examining the corpus, we read the primary texts several times by focusing on issues on Muslim women and leadership, especially the iconic Muslim women leaders, such as Siti Hajar and Aisha. In so doing, we engage with theories in Postcolonial studies and Gender studies to contribute to larger debates around Gender studies and Orientalism. We also use comparative studies by comparing the contemporary Kahf’s speakers in the poems with Islamic history, especially the history of Muslim women foremothers: Hajar, Khadija, and Aisha from the Islamic perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Hajar: Creative, Independent, and Pious Muslim Woman Leader

Kahf’s poetry discusses at least thirteen poems about Hajar by quoting from the Qur’an at the beginning of most of the poems. In “The Water of Hajar” (Kahf, 2016, p. 3), from the collection *Hagar Poems*, Kahf’s speaker, Hajar, focuses on the water representing her

independence to grow (raise) her son and to establish her authorship both as the innovator of the Well of Zamzam and as a leader of Muslim women. In the poem, Hajar is represented as active and embraces both domestic and public spheres without excluding one role (mother) over another (leader). Indeed, Hajar who lives in the seventh century understands how to pursue her right as a woman who can be both a leader (innovator) and a mother. Kahf's poem explores this idea as the speaker describes:

After the searing light
After abandonment
After the blow
that brings the head to the ground
and breaks the teeth
After the unrelenting vision
After the God who requires blood and obedience,
how do you find water? (Kahf, 2016, ll. 1–8)

In the first stanza, Hajar is depicted as an independent and pious leader who never gives up in the search for the water of "God" or Allah who "requires blood and obedience". In the story, Hajar's bleeding is described when she is in search of the water, especially when traveling between the two mountains, Safa and Marwa, in searching for Allah's ways represented by the water. Significantly, Kahf also refers to "Arafah," which is a mountain where Muslims stand and pray during the second day of *hajj* or pilgrimage after having circled the Ka'ba, the location to which all Muslims direct themselves in prayer, seven times on the first day of the *hajj*. By associating Hajar with the mountain of Arafah, the speaker illuminates how Hajar, which means stone, is strong like a mountain, and the rock is attached to her name. This is why Hajar never gives up on searching for water representing Allah's guidance and directions for her generations and communities as she whispers to herself: "How do you find water?" (line 8), which can be read as: "How can I feed my son and my generation as I am here alone in this foreign desert". Indeed, Hajar who is the second wife of Ibrahim is left alone in the desert after her husband is influenced by his first wife, Sarah, who asks Ibrahim to expel Hajar from their household. Although Hajar is in this difficult situation: "After the searing light" (line 1), she remains resilient to continue her life alone without a husband but with Allah's protection. Indeed, no matter how difficult her environments are: "After the blow" (line 3) and "after brings the head to the ground" (line 4), Hajar keeps searching for the "water" representing life for her Muslim communities who have goals in life to worship Allah, which is also known as *Khalifah*. Indeed *Khalifah* is a leader who obeys the Quran and hadith or the Prophet's words and deeds as Hajar's role as the first *Khalifah* for Muslim communities.

In this poem, “The Water of Hajar” (p. 3), Kahf uses anaphora – repeating the same word “after” at the beginning of each line – a technique that works to emphasize how resilient Hajar is; no matter how hot the sun, how strong the wind, and how lonely she is, she still searches for the water. The water represents the flowing identity of the Muslim communities. This poem appeals to the reader to be strong and brave through the internalized thoughts of a Muslim foremother, who struggles to establish her minor identity in a hard foreign land. Her resilience is further emphasized by the way Kahf depicts Hajar repeating various actions, such as running between “thorn and rocks” (line 17), and “wiping of the forehead” (line 11) to maintain her goal of finding “water”, which represents “the God who requires blood and obedience”. In this sense, Hajar inspires Muslim women to rely on Allah after working hard, which is known as *tawakkal*— the reliance on God or trusting in Allah's plan. This idea can be seen through the way the poet depicts Hajar as bringing her “head to the ground” (line 4) representing “sujud”, which is one of the activities in *salat* (prayer). After both praying and working hard, Hajar finally found the Well of Zamzam and established the location as a sacred place for the Muslim community. Hajar uses and takes ownership of the water until one day a group of tribes comes to her, and Hajar exchanges the water for food and other materials. Here, Hajar inspires Muslims how to be optimistic and creative leaders in turning her difficulties by creating the Well of Zamzam as a central place in Mecca as it is the main source of life at the time. Indeed, Hajar’s legacy of the Well of Zamzam still exists in the current time that Mecca is a central place for the Muslim community to perform the pilgrimage, which is the fifth pillar of Islam after *shahadatain* (new Muslim oath), *shalat* (praying), *zakat* (almsgiving), and *shaum* (fasting).

Moreover, Feminists such as Walker (1995), Solnit (2017), also Reimer and Sahagian (2013) consider that the idea of motherhood is worth analyzing in complex ways to help break the silences that hide the personal struggles of women. Walker highlights the importance of personal testimonies as “they build empathy and compassion” (p. xxxvii), which reveal how different women have diverse choices, such as how a working life and motherhood are intertwined, or how, for some, it reveals the stark choice between being a mother or being a professional woman. Walker thus considers a more nuanced approach in contradistinction from some feminist discourse, which has challenged women's roles in the domestic sphere. Walker argues that by using the contradiction in our lives, “we lay the groundwork for feminist theory that neither vilifies nor deifies, but that accepts and respects difference” (p. xxxvii). Indeed, Kahf’s speaker, Hajar, also struggles to raise her son as her husband abandons her in the desert. Although Hajar barely lives alone in the desert, she keeps running and searching for the water

representing the future for her generations. Indeed, Hajar questions her husband's decision to exclude her from his household which leads to injustice for her son. In “The Water of Hajar” (Kahf, 2016, p. 3), water functions as a means for Hajar to gain “power” – to protest injustice, as she states:

Where on this earth
is the water of Hajar
the water that came
up from the ground,
from the ground of Hajar. (Kahf, 2016, ll. 16–20)

Indeed, Hajar objects to her displacement in the desert, and the water represents injustice for Hajar and Ismail. By naming the ground Hajar, Hajar establishes her authority over the well, which represents her independence and her possession of both her son and the land, without the man who dominantly extends his name after his son. However, the water, a precious commodity in the desert, which makes Hajar powerful, receives only a little attention in a small section of the poem: It “has no content/ it is the cupping of the face”. Indeed, Kahf’s woman uses the well both to create her own story, which is told from generation to generation and to destabilize her husband's supremacy, which underestimates her capabilities to be a leader within and beyond her community. Solnit (2017) further expands upon this point as she argues that to challenge violence against women, women need to make their voices heard by being self-determined, participatory, engaging with consent or dissent, and being able to interpret and narrate their own stories, including their stories as mothers (p. 19). Indeed, Hajar creates her own stories, which can be seen throughout Kahf’s thirteen poems about Hajar who survives because of her resilience in searching for Allah’s ways by building the well of Zamzam, which is “given / freely, freely/ by the God of Hajar”. In this sense, Hajar has a lead character who gains her full power by worshipping Allah who has supported her in establishing her marginal families and communities represented by the moving water and the well of Zamzam.

Indeed, Goleman (2018) explains the characteristics of the most effective leaders who: “are alike in one crucial way: they all have a high degree of what has come to be known as *emotional intelligence*” (p. 40), which has five main features: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. However, Hajar is depicted as a woman of color with the most important power as she is a black slave woman who has the privilege and major role in establishing a Muslim identity supported by her God. Arguably, by having this privilege, Islam has accommodated marginal groups and people of color who have strong skins or bodies and creative minds to live alone in a hot-dangerous dessert to build up their new homes for their communities in hard-foreign lands as experienced by Hajar, the innovator of Zamzam Well. In

addition, Hajar is independent, determined, and pious, the characteristics, which are different from what Goleman explains through his concepts of leadership (2018). Indeed, Hajar has successfully become both a leader and mother who raised her son, Isa, until he became the most important prophet in Islamic history after the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), regardless of being abandoned alone in the desert. Thus, Kahf's poems on Siti Hajar highlight the characteristics of Muslim women leaders as resilient and independent in leading both their families and their communities. These characteristics can be seen through the way, Hajar often repeats the word "freely," to assert her major role as a leader to achieve freedom both for herself as a slave representing marginal individuality and for her society as Muslims representing bordering groups.

Aisha: Brave, Bright, and Intelligent Leader

In this section, we focus on Kahf's two poems: "Aisha: The *Islamic Inquirer* Exclusive" (p. 81) and "Breaking: Aisha Claims to Be Post-Feminism" (p. 82). These poems reveal Aisha's leadership as a bright and brave leader as she memorizes the Quran, interprets hadith, and leads the Camel War in the seventh century. As argued previously, Kahf juxtaposes the ancient and the contemporary with humor and satire to show the continuity of Muslim women's leadership through the speakers of the poem who inhabit the contemporary moments. In doing so, in both poems, Kahf refers to American popular culture, such as tabloid newspapers *National Inquirer* and *Breaking the News*, which intersect with the legend of Aisha. Aisha, as a Muslim woman leader, marries at a very young age but is later defined by her miraculous power to lead the war, and her intelligent ability to narrate and memorize most of the hadith and the Quran. In this sense, the poet demonstrates how her women shadow their foremothers' marvelous traditions in being creative and innovative leaders.

In "Aisha: The *Islamic Inquirer* exclusive" (Kahf, 2016, p. 81), Kahf begins with an explanation for the title of the poem: "—an *Islamic Inquirer* exclusive". This title suggests how Aisha has become a role model for Muslim women through her passions and contributions as a critic and "inquirer" to question patriarchy. Male supremacy tends to define and interpret hadiths, the Prophet (PBUH)'s words and deeds, based on its own patriarchal goals, instead of what the Qur'an and the Prophet preach, which also includes women's needs and well-being. Kahf uses italics in the title to allude to the U.S. newspaper or magazine *National Inquirer* or the *Inquirer*, a sensationalist tabloid. The *National Inquirer* is most famous for its news and gossip exposing U.S. celebrities and public figures. This poem adopts the confessional mode of a *National Inquirer* story by depicting the speaker, Aisha as a "celebrity" and leader who is

interviewed by “the press” to reveal her extraordinary story as the youngest and the smartest wife of the Prophet (PBUH) as she recites hadith and the Qur’an. The speaker, Aisha, states:

I was a child star
My parents signed a contract
It’s hard to be the poster girl
for a new endeavor—
you, the public, the press,
you gossip like to turn on a girl, don’t you
you want your girls perfect
like little porcelain gods. (Kahf, 2016, ll. 1–8)

The humor can be seen through the way Aisha is depicted as a celebrity, which is revealed through the use of terms such as “star,” “signed a contract,” “poster girl,” “endeavor,” “gossip,” and “perfect.” In Islamic history, Aisha became the “star” when she was nine years old by becoming engaged to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Her father, Abu Bakr, who was one of the Prophet’s best friends and the first caliph (leader), wanted Aisha to be a pious leader who would continue his friendship and leadership, and thus he asked her to marry the Prophet (PBUH). Relating this to the poem, Kahf depicts Aisha as one of the “little porcelain gods,” which represents Aisha as both fragile and bright as the youngest and most intellectual wife who can memorize the Qur’an and hadith. However, after marrying the Prophet (PBUH), Aisha becomes a brave and intelligent leader who helps the Prophet (PBUH) to memorize the Quran and provides Muslim communities with narrating hadiths, especially after the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has passed away.

Similarly, in “Breaking: Aisha Claims to Be Post-Feminism” (Kahf, 2016, p. 82), Kahf uses the playfulness of the past (the old tale of Aisha) and the present story of Kahf’s quotidian speaker. We can see from the title of the poem: grammatically, it should be “Breaking: Aisha Claims to Be Post-Feminist”, but it is not. Arguably, Kahf has chosen this odd title to reduce tensions between the idea of the individual (feminist) and the collective (feminism). In this poem, Aisha who is depicted as “post-feminism” respects her foremothers who tend to have both roles in domesticity and public life, including Khadija, the Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) first wife, who is a mother of six children and a CEO of her own company. Significantly, Aisha has no children but has the intelligence to memorize and interpret the Qur’an and hadiths. In this sense, this poem suggests how Muslim women are free to choose either as a leader or as a mother, or even both of them. In this sense, this poem reveals that Muslim women appreciate both ideas of individualism and collectivism, which can be seen through the way the modern generations respect and follow their foremothers’ role models as mothers, leaders, and innovators. Indeed, all these roles have been practiced by Muslim women since Islam emerged

in the Seventeenth century, and thus gender awareness has also developed in Islam a long time ago, even long before the US declared its independence in the seventeenth century.

Thus, Kahf's poems highlight Aisha's leadership characteristics as she develops her intelligence and creativity by understanding women's needs hidden by patriarchal society for centuries. To undermine this male supremacy, in this poem, Kahf transposes the narrative into the modern format of 24-hour rolling news cycles, "The Breaking News". In doing this, Kahf highlights Aisha's creative role by depicting her as the first Muslim feminist leader who was a major source of information for the Muslim community regarding all aspects of life, including politics, religion, culture, and the arts. The speaker explains these important roles:

I narrated hadith
because I shared a life
with the Prophet of God
and had a good memory (Kahf, 2016, ll. 3–6).

Indeed, Aisha is depicted as narrating *hadiths*, which requires advanced comprehension of the Qur'an and strong recollections of the Prophet's daily activities and sayings. In this sense, Aisha inspires Muslim women to become figure of authority in her community, a scholar, and an intelligent leader.

As highlighted, Kahf playfully combines American popular culture with Islamic history by suggesting that the story of Aisha's engagement to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), aged just nine, bears a striking resemblance to the kinds of sensationalist and lurid tales recounted in tabloids such as the *National Inquirer* and the *Breaking News*. Indeed, Kahf uses humor and satire, imagining Muslim woman leaders in the Prophet's era being discussed in the tabloid press and on TV. In this sense, Kahf's poems highlight Muslim women leaders, who deserve to be exposed in US media to question US belonging and Anglo-American debates, which tend to exclude Muslim women from the ideas of modernity and leadership. Indeed, by interchanging Aisha's situation in different periods, Kahf shows how Aisha in contemporary times allows comparisons of hers with Hajar's and Khadija's sensational lives, where both are being judged and measured by a public gaze. Here, Hajar and the original Aisha are judged by the society of their time, while the Aisha of the poem is judged in magazines, and on the TV. Additionally, both Hajar and Aisha, are represented as second wives and mothers who are often criticized yet who, as leaders, are valued by society. In this sense, this poem illuminates Muslim women leaders who are confident and have the brainpower how to deal with various rumors and people's accusations. In this poem, the speaker, Aisha, is also speaking to "you" representing various societies, including both within and beyond her communities. In doing so,

the poet depicts her speaker achieving “endeavours” as a leader and becoming a poster girl representing how Aisha is portrayed in fine art prints, as she is well known for her inspiration in narrating the Qur’an. To show the continuity of Muslim woman leaders acting as role models for breaking the norm set by the dominant culture and the patriarchal system, Aisha is depicted leading the Camel War, which is covered and aired in *The Breaking News*. By frequently presenting in the news, Aisha encourages Muslim women to exist in public life and use the media to counter its (mis)representations of the Muslim world. Hence, this poem not only questions the exclusions of Muslim women in U.S. media but also illuminates Muslim women's leadership with their brave hearts and bright minds as living as the minor leaders but with the major roles; including bridging between different conflicts and various communities.

Another example of the negotiating skills of Muslim woman leaders can be seen in the way the poet depicts her speaker as representing Muslim woman leaders at a UN conference. The speaker writes:

She went to that UN conference,
came back wanting all of us Medina chicas
to form an NGO (Kahf, 2016, ll. 18–20).

Indeed, the ancient tale of Aisha is intertwined with the contemporary by linking her with the United Nations (UN) conference and her desire to form a non-governmental organization (NGO) representing Muslim women's feminism, which tends to allude to the Quran and their ancestor leaders. This combination can be seen as a strategy for Kahf to assert the continuity of Muslim women's activism and leadership and that of their quotidian activities. In doing so, Kahf juxtaposes Muslim women with important forms of global activism, such as participating in a UN conference, and the work of an NGO (Non-governmental Organization), and here Muslim woman leaders are shown to have built their networks and commonality internationally. This negotiation can also be seen in the way the speaker, Aisha, uses microphones whenever she has interviews to show how Muslim woman leaders have to speak loudly to reclaim their minor voices and develop their communities:

Why are you people always interviewing me?
You know what [takes mike clip off]
I've had it with this scene
[walks out] (Kahf, 2016, ll. 29–32).

Indeed, Aisha is struggling to negotiate her identity as a US-Muslim woman who has to challenge the patriarchal system both within Muslim communities and outside them. Kahf also uses the framework of the interview to highlight how Muslim woman leaders determine and can declare their voices and desires to be appreciated equally by patriarchal communities. This

poem continues utilizing colloquial figures of speech. For example, the speaker states: “If you want to call that feminist, / knock yourself out”. Indeed, this phrase implies that the speaker does not care about sophisticated terms, including those used by Anglo-American feminists spoken at white major conferences, as she mainly cares about “fairness” and “social justice” for all mankind including women of colour: “Me, I just believe” that everyone has a right to live equally regardless of gender, class, and race. Indeed, by depicting Aisha as a feminist, instead of a feminist, the poem resolves the tension between the individual and the collective. In doing so, the poet depicts Aisha as respecting her foremother leaders by continuing their collective role models both as leaders and activists to support that “everyone is a human being”. This sense of human being includes a Muslim woman leader who “deserves to be treated like one”, although their collective identity is Muslim women, their rights as an individual can be anyone, including a mother or a leader. In this sense, this poem provides a solution to conflicts between the idea of individualism with collectivism by highlighting how Kahf’s speakers are respected by their modern generations who are free to choose to become a mother or a leader; or an Arab/Muslim or American, and even both as being legalized by her foremothers. This is why Kahf needs to allude to the Muslim woman leaders to participate in larger debates around feminism, especially to resolve tensions between the idea of the individual and the collective, which have been long debates since the 1920s, when the first generations of Anglo-American feminists emerged. Thus, this poem connects the past-lived experiences of Muslim women leaders with the present life of their generations to emphasize the continuity of Muslim women’s collective role models in domesticity and public. This is a strategy for the poet to undermine the Orientalist mindset, which tends to see Muslim women in reductionist views, by illuminating Muslim women leaders who have empowered their generations for centuries. However, these stories of Muslim woman leaders are seemingly hidden in both gender and postcolonial studies, and thus this paper works to fill in the gap of Muslim women leaders who develop their leadership with their main characteristics as creativity, piety, and solidarity as shown through the stories of Hajar, Khadija, and Aisha.

CONCLUSION

Kahf’s Muslim women have explored their roles as leaders who are creative, pious, and collective. These female leaders rebel against male oppression that limits women’s opportunities. By depicting her female speakers as brave, bright, and pious leaders, Kahf’s speakers illuminate their perseverance and determination in preserving their beliefs and confronting the tyranny of men and the supremacy of orientalist thinking. Indeed, this paper

has discussed how Kahf alludes to the stories of Muslim woman leaders in her poetry collection, and *Hagar Poems* (2016), showing how her speakers respect their foremothers as leaders and mothers, but also as templates for women's empowerment and leadership. Kahf uses the strategy of juxtaposition between ancient and modern to create a tone of humor and irreverence. Humor and irreverence work to gently critique – rather than brutally dismantle and destroy – oppressive patriarchal and orientalist discourses. In *Hagar Poems*, Kahf quotes sacred texts to highlight the role models of Muslim woman leaders, such as Hajar and Aisha. These women have become well known because their stories and their leadership are included in the Qur'an, hadiths, and Islamic history. By alluding to these Muslim woman leaders, Kahf's poetry collections both remind readers of marginal histories and open up a more complex way through which the societal role of Muslim woman leaders can be read. Significantly, these texts show how Kahf as a US-Muslim poet makes use of the juxtaposition of the ancient and the contemporary through humor and irreverence; this is the technique, that has been passed by previous generations of Muslim writers and poets ever since Islam emerged in the early seventh century.

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