HERSTORY & FEMALE IDENTITY: POSTMODERN FEMINIST REVISION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN ISLAMIC NARRATIVE IN MOHJA KAHF’S *HAGAR POEMS*¹

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Abstract

Contending with the re-reading and re-writing of history that has always excluded women from its grand narratives, postmodern feminist writers have always sought to revise canonical texts from a gynocentric perspective. Through their revisionary fiction, they aimed at challenging the subordinate, marginal and invisible position of the women characters in these texts. In place of the alleged objectivity of these accounts, postmodern feminist revisionist writers transform these ancient tales while employing female insight to re-narrate the story of humanity, yet through women’s perspective. Thus, they create new texts to challenge the fundamental gender stereotypes, namely the binary images generated by the ‘collective male fantasy’ of women as divine/demonic. This reclamation additionally shatters the imposed silence upon women, while granting these female characters the voice and agency they were denied. This paper demonstrates Mohja Kahf’s re-writing of the female characters, Hajar, Balqis and Zuleikha in her poetry collection *Hagar Poems* (2016). Kahf re-visions the Islamic narrative by recollecting these women’s stories from a postmodern feminist revisionist perspective. Such re-appropriation of these female figures unsettles the traditional linear Islamic history that conventionally focuses on male characters and recreates these eminent women in new archetypal forms. In effect, this paper draws upon the critical theories of postmodernist revisionism, using Adrienne Rich’s seminal concept of ‘Re-vision’ and Alicia Ostriker’s feminist revisionist mythmaking theory, along with postmodern feminist historiography and in particular Linda Hutcheon’s theory of historiographic metafiction, in addition to Islamic feminism. Hence, the paper displays how Kahf recasts these notable women to create a dialogue between the past and the present. Her revisionary feminist re-narration renders a possible divergence to the patriarchal symbolic and problematizes the androcentric basis of history. Finally, the paper demonstrates how Kahf’s poetry reinforces modern Muslim women’s agency and enriches their subjectivity.

Keywords: Postmodern Feminist Historiography, Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking, Arab American Poetry, Islamic Feminism, Mohja Kahf

INTRODUCTION

In her poetry collection, *Hagar Poems* (2016), Arab American Feminist Muslim writer Mohja Kahf deals with some of the most iconic women characters along the history and through the three main Abrahamic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Inspired by the notable female figures in the Qur’an, Hajar, Balqis and Zuleikha among others, Kahf re-reads and re-envisions Islamic history by recollecting these eminent

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women’s stories from a postmodern Islamic feminist revisionist perspective. The aim of this paper is thus multifold. While relying on potent characters from her historical Islamic cultural background and mythology, the paper examines how Kahf draws upon the Islamic narrative to formulate and enrich her Arab American Muslim subjectivity, vis-a-vis the dominant Western, i.e., Greco-Roman myths or Judeo-Christian narratives. The paper shows how Kahf employs the three women as strong and independent idols and inspiring role models for young Arab American Muslim immigrant women. First, Kahf focuses on Hajar’s experience, i.e., ordeal, struggle, and survival to empowers herself as well as other Arab American Muslim (immigrant) women. Accordingly, Kahf identifies with her ancestor’s persona’s estrangement to provide a symbolical archetype for Arab American Muslim immigrants who create new Muslim communities in the United States, while fighting and surviving against all the prevalent oppressive Islamophobic policies and culture in the U.S. Second, by re-narrating the three women’s accounts, the paper analyzes how Kahf’s poetry positions them in the center of the narrative contrary to the earlier omnipresent and/or androcentric accounts while disputing their status of obscurity and/or oblivion. Through giving them voice and agency, the paper explores how the poet contests the dual axis of the Western orientalist view of Islam as repressive of women and the conventional patriarchal Islamic exegesis. Finally, this paper demonstrates how the writer is keen on celebrating Islamic history that highlights female experience and expression. Such revision depicts how the poet highlights these women’s agency and substantial role in making history.

**Postmodernism, Feminist Historiography and Feminist Revisionary Mythmaking**

Postmodernism advocated the release of historical narratives from its overwhelming totalizing and repressive ideologies and called for creating multiple histories. It aimed at opening historicity to bearing plural meanings and interpretations rather than forcing and imposing a unilateral version that suppresses numerous voices and demolishes countless hidden stories. Influenced by Lyotard’s rejection of and disillusionment with the traditional master narratives, postmodernism contested the view of history as an orthodox grand narrative (Waugh 177). Coupled with the rise of postmodernism, new historicism and second wave feminism, Feminist historians and critics starting from the 1960s, and most remarkably in the 70s and 80s have disputed the grand narrative of history that has centered around the narratives of great men. As Virginia Woolf expressed it, women in history, ‘have been all but absent from history’ (36). Joan Scott in *Gender and the Politics*
of History (1988) and Gerda Lerner in The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History (1979) have thus questioned the “exclusive universality of the (Anglo-Saxon) male subject” as well as the central roles that male subjects have traditionally occupied in standard well-known historical narratives (Elam 36). Therefore, postmodern feminist writers and critics started to undertake a process of re-evaluation and reinterpretation of women’s place and agency in history.

Postmodern women writers attempted to recover history from its male dominated version and patriarchal monolithic narration. As Linda Nicholson shows in Feminism/Postmodernism (1990), postmodernism with its revision of history inspired female critics and writers to contest the established neutrality and rationality of grand narratives which only support normative masculine ideals (qtd. in Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 209). Instead of viewing historical narratives as a “directly accessible unitary past,” feminist historiographers and revisionist women writers substituted it with the concept of histories, as ongoing series of constructed narratives (Cox and Reynolds 4). They intended to ‘demythicize’ and ‘demystify’ such biased historical accounts from its hegemonic patriarchal ideology to allow the dissemination of other narratives rather than the experiences of men (Himmelfarb 75). According to Scott, ‘herstory’ includes writing a narrative of the experiences that women had, either alongside or totally outside the traditional frameworks of historical contexts (“Women in History” 147). Scott indicates that women must be the focus of the enquiring process into history, the subjects of their stories, and own the narrative by becoming its agents (“Women in History” 145). This inclusion entails stressing the value and historical significance of women’s actions, which have been ignored and devalued and highlighting the female agency in the making of history (Scott 147). That is to say, ‘Herstory’ is a means to defy the notion of history as neither “the story of man’s heroism” nor the premise of exclusive masculine agency, where traits of rationalism, self-determination and self-presentation are affirmed only for men (Scott, Feminism and History 3). As a result, ‘herstory’ stands as “a corrective to the phallocentric themes of most historical accounts” as well as portraying women as implicit in history making as much as men (Scott, Feminism and History 3). To reiterate, postmodern women writers actively claimed and remembered the lost past and the nameless and ostracized woman figure in history after decades of being marginalized, voiceless and absent to foreground ‘herstory’ with the primary focus on female experiences.

In the same manner, Linda Hutcheon, in The Politics of Postmodernism (1989) and A Poetics of Postmodernism (1988), strongly advocated the possibility of the multiple
narratives of history by deconstructing the concept of the master narratives of history and propagating the postmodern view of history as a plural concept through the narrativization of past events. Unveiling the parallelism between literature and historiography, the critic perceives both paradigms as “discourses, human constructs”, which are based on signifying systems and that is why they are both subjected to constant variations and change which transform their nature along time (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 93). Historiographic metafiction thus lays claim to historical events and personages to re-conceptualize and rework the forms as well as the contents of the past to embrace a plurality of truths, while defying the claims of the canonical narratives’ objectivity (*Poetics* 5). This engagement, questioning and subversion of conventional historical narratives were indeed optimal for prompting feminist possibilities that present an imagined historical narrative, lending new insights into the original official version of history, creating a fresh dialogue with the past that led to engendering different renewed interpretations. In accordance with this view, Kahf’s poetry exhibits Hutcheon’s theory of metafictional historiography. In historiographic metafiction, history loses “its privileged status as the purveyor of truth”, which confirms its nature as constructional, perspectival, and uncertain rather than naturally given and objectively monolithic (Hutcheon, *Politics* 10).

Imploring women writers to rethink and rewrite history, Cixous analogously urged them to revise and retell all the narratives that they inherited from the patriarchal symbolic order. Through this revisionary process by female writers, demystification and reclaiming occurs, which would consequently result in retelling all the stories in an invigorating manner, as the critic states “all the stories will be retold differently, and then the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies; another thinking as yet not thinkable will transform the functioning of society” (“Sorties” 289). Realizing the negative effects of being subdued by male-centered narratives, Adrienne Rich in her seminal article “When we dead awaken: Writing as re-vision” (1972) called upon women writers to adopt ‘re-vision’ whom she defines as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—-is for us more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival—-it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (18). As Rich emphasizes, retelling the traditional patriarchal accounts of canonical narratives is pivotal to disentangle the entrenched discourses on women from the dominant male ideology of female subordination as well as limit the social structures’ patriarchal mode. Hence, it would help
to reformulate women’s identities from a female viewpoint, rather than a male’s androcentric perspective.

In her monumental article, “Thieves of Language” (1982), Ostriker equally envisions re-visionist writing as a linguistic medium to redress stereotypical images of women. In this way, revisionist women writers can attain a new self-definition by stealing “the language of the Father” and deconstructing prior myths and narratives that imprison women within descriptions of binary oppositions that do not authentically express their experiences (“Thieves” 72). As Daly (1990) suggests, revising the mythic and historical symbols embedded in the dominant cultural discourses could significantly open up depths of reality closed to women (Gyn/Ecology 44). By asking new questions about old texts, revisionist women writers uncover the hidden sexism and implied meanings inherent in such ancient texts, which only helped in fostering patriarchal traditions and propagating certain archetypes that affected the collective unconscious. Such revision resists sexism in canonical literature and increases awareness of the sexual politics of language and style that are employed in such accounts, in order to create new texts that disrupt the old ones.

Similarly, Islamic feminist scholars, as Miriam Cooke illustrates in Women Claim Islam (2001), “challenge conventional histories and canonical texts that either omit mention of women or stigmatize their prominence as an aberration” (62). These scholars conceive the individual and the communal as inextricably intertwined especially when they start seeking the past, interpreting scripture and looking into history to forge a just future (Cooke 62). Consequently, Islamic feminist writers read into the gaps of historiography and participate in rectifying the distortions of hermeneutics for retrieving women’s agency and activism. In effect, Islamic feminist writers are “constructing a counter-memory that situates them between the grandmothers they are honoring and the daughters they are serving” (Cooke 64-65). As Asma Barlas explains, to acquire a meaningful encounter with God, women should actively cultivate their intellectual capacities in analytical reading of God’s verses (255-256). Therefore, Muslim feminist writers seek to develop a spirit of critical inquiry into rereading women’s stories in the Qur’an.

Kahf’s poetry consistently consolidates what these scholars call for in terms of reimagining and revivifying women’s significance, and specifically women in the Islamic historical tradition. As Ostriker highlights, Western Greco-Roman classical myths and biblical narratives inform ‘high culture’ which are handed down either through the religious or the educational authority (Stealing 213). That is why, Kahf usually onsets her poems
with holy verses. Such inclusion denotes Kahf’s use of Qur’an as a religious and historical canonical text that founded the stories of these women across the ages. However, in her poems, Kahf follows Hutcheon’s notion of metafictional historiography and attempts to reconstruct these accounts and expand the women’s roles in them. Kahf’s poetry thus fits Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction that echoes history in its resonance of the past texts and contexts along with its figures, yet in a fictional way (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 3).

Kahf chose distinguished Qur’anic narratives as symbolic of ‘high culture’ or a historical grand narrative. The poet thus disputes such normative patriarchal historical narratives that transformed these women into peripheral characters and identifies them as speaking subjects rather than silent submitters (Kahf, “Braiding the stories” 159). That is why, Kahf’s poetry seeks to displace the totalizing and repressive narratives and she imaginatively articulates different stories, i.e., multiple histories that are more personal and subjective. Such revision would contribute to transforming the ways of reading and re-interpreting Islamic history. Her poetry disrupts the normative patriarchal historical narratives and brings about a real change in women’s cultural status, by redefining their historical roots and thereby creating potent female archives for the future generations. Kahf’s poems can be considered as a work that does not “simply supplement what is lacking in the sacred texts, in a celebratory tone, but enters into dialogue, in a subversive way” with the Qur’an and its prevailing patriarchal interpretations (Bertrand 8). By re-narrating and reconfiguring these significant ancient women’s stories that are central to Islamic historical discourse, Kahf resists the dominant patriarchal accounts, affirms these women’s agency, fights against women’s alterity and exclusion and hence promotes reconstructing contemporary Muslim women’s identities. The poet employs parody as a radical suspension of the act of historiography as a means of subversion, not to “destroy the past” but to both enshrine and question it (*Politics* 6). Thus, historiographic metafiction allows Kahf’s poetry to exhibit an assertion and a denial of the past, with the revision of its reductive patriarchal representations of women.
Hajar-the Founding Mother: Reinventing Her Legacy

Despite having never been explicitly named in the Qur’an, Hajar is indeed one of Islam’s pillars, a fundamental character in history and a pivotal archetype for modern women, representing many ideals of faith, agency and strength. The classic story of the Abrahamic family of Prophet Ibrahim, Sara, Hajar, Ismael and Isaac has various versions among Judaism, i.e. Genesis/Old Testament, New Testament (Bible) and Islam, i.e. Qur’an/Hadith. Though the main plot coincides between the different versions, some discrepancies still persist in particular aspects in regard to Hajar’s origins, her abuse and escape, the reason why she was sent away into the forsaken desert with her baby child

3 As Riffat Hassan explains, Hajar’s name was never mentioned explicitly in the Qur’an even though the name of her husband prophet Ibrahim is one of the most recurrent names in the Quran as he was stated 30 times. Also, her son Ismael was cited several times in the Qur’an (152,155). However, Muslims only know about Hajar’s name through Ibrahim’s prayer in the Quran; Q 14:37 in Surah Ibrahim; added to Prophet Muhammed’s Hadith (Hassan 152,155). See Riffat Hassan’s article “Islamic Hagar and Her Family” (2006).

4 Hajar’s name is transliterated with “j”, not “g” since there is no “g” sound in Arabic. Also, Hajar’s name with a ‘j’ could denote her symbolic migration from Egypt to Mecca as part of her Divine mission (hijra), as well as her inclination to dissociate from all evil doings/sins (haijara) as other scholars argued (Abugideiri 85). However, in this paper, Hajar will be used as the right Arabic-sounding transliteration along with her connotation as an immigrant.

5 The story begins with Prophet Ibrahim, who is promised by God to be blessed by land, progeny and inheritance. Due to Sara’s barren condition, the old couple were deprived of begetting any children. Sara then decides to endow her husband with a new wife, and chooses her own slave/maid, the Egyptian Hajar. Hajar promptly gets pregnant and delivers baby Ismael. Shortly, Sarah gets pregnant herself and bears Isaac. After some time, Prophet Ibrahim takes Hajar and Ismael into the desert in Mecca and leaves them there. Desperate that they would die out of thirst, Hajar starts looking for any sign of water for survival. She ran seven times between the two mountain tops of Safa and Marwa. After the 7th time, the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Hajar. The angle nudged the earth with his wings and underground well of fresh water explodes. Hajar and her son were rescued, and they started the nation of Arabs, whereas Isaac started the genealogy of Jews.

6 In some Genesis accounts of the story of Abraham’s family, Hajar is described as an Egyptian princess, not a slave, who was given as a gift to serve Sara as her handmaiden since Sara was of wealth, beauty and grand family origins. In addition, despite giving birth to Abraham’s first son, some biblical narratives describe that Hajar remains a slave who is to be abused until she flees into the wilderness, where she is rescued and directly addressed by God/the archangel Gabriel, who promised her great fortune and told her about begetting Ismael, a great leader and prophet in the future. Then, she was commanded to return to her hostile servitude in Abraham’s home, before once again being driven into exile (Abugideiri 85). A major difference in the storylines lies in the real reason why Hajar and her son were sent away into the desert. According to the Testament’s story, Sara persuades Ibrahim to expel Hajar and her son, because of her jealousy after bearing Isaac, fearing the competition in the succession of progeny. However, as per Hadith in Islamic tradition, God ordered Ibrahim to take Hajar and Ismael to (Mecca) now, where they would later build Ka’ba and transform the desert into a habitable community, i.e. establishing the Arab Muslim lineage and culture. Also, in the Genesis story, Hajar sits away from Ishmael and prays not to see his death after their water is consumed. God opens her eyes and she sees a well. While in the Islamic narrative, Hajar actively ran seven times looking for water. On one hand, the Genesis account portrays Hajar as passive and helpless, whereas the Islamic depiction of Hajar’s effort denotes her agency.
Ismael and finally her role and agency in finding the water of Zamzam⁷. As Amina Wadud illustrates, women and religion studies in the 1990s started an academic scholarly trend that focused on women’s shared aspects of history and ideology among the Abrahamic religions that perceived women as daughters of Sara and Hajar (Inside the Gender Jihad 121). This reconceptualization helped in successfully forging relationships between women, replacing the patriarchal view of women in the Abrahamic tradition (Wadud, Inside the Gender Jihad 121). The Hajar/Sara trajectory has been abundantly discussed in the postmodern Western feminist revisionary Jeudo-Christian and womanist biblical literature⁸ vis-à-vis the dominant literature that focused on the figure of Ibrahim. As Phyllis Trible and Letty Russel further demonstrate in their Hagar, Sara, and Their Children (2006), Hajar and Sara’s characters have been recurrently reviewed by feminist critics and theologians across all Abrahamic religions (1). Feminist critics and theologians of different faiths have extensively retold, redefined, analyzed and commented on their narrative.

In the Judeo-Christian traditional narratives, Hajar’s story is always read as a story of exploitation, betrayal and abandonment. Despite her status as an eminent matriarch of monotheism, Hibba Abugideiri in her “Hagar: A Historical Model for ‘Gender Jihad’” pinpoints the scarcity of modern revisionary Islamic feminist scholarly reinterpretation of Hajar’s narrative⁹ that only started to expand recently (81). Even though the Hajar/Sara paradigm has been numerous adapted in English literature, the research concerning the use of Hajar’s story by an (Arab) Muslim author in fictional/poetic works originally written in English yields no clear results. Hence, Kahf’s poetic collection, Hagar Poems (2016) is of prime significance as she engages with the former Jeudo-Christian feminist revisionary

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⁷ Zamzam is the Arabic name for the well of fresh water that Hajar found with the help of Archangel Gabriel. It has a special symbolic meaning to Muslims, as it saved both Hajar and her baby Ismael from thirst and death in the desert. To this day, Muslims drink from its running waters and it holds such a spiritual and religious meaning to them. They also believe in its healing prospects.


accounts, by rewriting her narrative guided by her Arab American Muslim feminist ethnicity, religion and perspective. Kahf’s poetry perceives Hajar’s archetype as an iconic sacred woman whose strength and faith entrusted her to be the Muslim matriarch and a prototype of inspirational leadership, strength and hope, owing to her unwavering belief and persistence.

In a series of twenty-nine poems, which establishes the first section of Kahf’s *Hagar Poems*, the poet remembers, rewrites and reconstructs Hajar’s story, where she honors the latter as her foremother, commemorates her myth and symbolic significance in Islamic culture. The poems celebrate Hajar’s agency in finding the water, the miracle that ensued as well as her courage and faith which resulted in surviving the predicament of being stranded alone in the desert. Using dramatic monologues with Hajar as the speaker, the poems also tackle the relationship between Hajar and Sara, while transposing them into an American millennial setting. The poet highlights Hajar’s merit in Islamic history as the founder of the Islamic civilization which is little known to many non-Muslim Americans as Islamic feminist scholar Riffat Hassan (2006) states in her “Islamic Hagar and Her Family” (149). While establishing her pivotal role in forming Muslim women’s individual and communal lives in the past, the poet nonetheless reflects on what Hassan recognizes as her close relevance to Muslim women’s lives at present (149). By honoring Hajar’s role in the foundation of Mecca, Kahf’s poems denounce how patriarchy erased “the tradition of historicizing women as active, full participants in the making of culture”, as Barlas explains (257). In the meantime, Juliane Hammer observes that it is common for Muslim women and scholars to draw from the story of Hajar, who is considered the mother of Islam, as an example of the persistence, perseverance, and strength of Muslim women (95). By retrieving Hajar’s story and her role in populating Mecca, converting it into a hustling town that turned into the development of new world civilization, the poet indeed stresses the latter’s agency in Islamic history that was brought about by her determination, bravery, and self-sacrifice.

As feminist historians demanded the necessity of establishing the history of women as a field of inquiry, Kahf engages with Islamic history and places Hajar’s persona at its center and thus revises Hajar’s character and role in Islamic history as an interactive

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subject but not as a topic as Gerda Lerner delineates (7). Moreover, Ostriker contends that the technique of reversal and defiance is one of the effective tropes of feminist revisionist mythmaking (“Thieves” 74). In these poems, Hajar is evidently featured as the main subject in her dramatic monologues where Kahf is bent on naming her explicitly. Thus, the poet brings Hajar as a woman and a mother to the center.

In the poem “The First Thing” (4-5), the poet empowers Hajar to claim the miracle of Safa and Marwa as well as Zamzam Water, symbolic of the rite of Sa’y 11 which later became known to be one of the fundamental stages of performing Haj or Umra rituals in Islam in her own voice and words. The poet writes, “I am Hagar the immigrant / There came to me the revelation of the water” (4). Amina Wadud on one hand maintains that all references to female characters in the Qur’an use an important “cultural idiosyncrasy that demonstrates respect for women”12 (Qur’an and woman 32). On the other hand, Kahf’s Hajar rejects what Mary Daly terms in Beyond God the Father (1973) as the seized power of naming, where “women have had the power of naming stolen from us” (8). Despite Abugideiri’s argument that Hajar’s nearly absent name in Islamic texts does not make her significance disputable for Muslims and in Islam (81), Kahf seizes the speech to “make female speech prevail” (Ostriker, Stealing 211). Thus, the poet transforms Hajar’s state of being the invisible silent woman into granting her the opportunity to seize speech and have access to authoritative expression (Ostriker “Thieves” 69). Kahf in fact allows her ancient historical poetic persona to deliver a powerful statement about herself and reinvents her worth and agency for modern Muslim female generations. As the poet further illustrates, “the first thing the founder does is look for water” (5). Upon sharing the water of Zamzam with the tribe of Jurhum13, the thriving town of Mecca was created, which in turn proves her status as the founding matriarch of monotheism and of Islam hereafter (Hassan 154).

11 Sa’y is a fundamental ritual in the Islamic rituals of the pilgrimage (Haj) and could be performed in the Omra; another trip to the holy house of God (Kaaba) in Mecca, Saudia Arabia. In it, they emulate Hajar’s straddling between the two mounts of Safa and Marwa located in Mecca, while she was searching for water for herself and her son. They have to follow her footsteps, seven times as she did in the past.

12 Except for Mary, the mother of Jesus, they are never called by name. Most are wives and the Qur’an refers to them using a possessive construction (the idafah) containing one of the Arabic words for wife (Wadud, Qur’an and Woman 32).

13 Jurhum is the name of the Arabic tribe, that was passing through Mecca now and once they found traces of water from Zamzam well, asked for Hajar’s permission to share the water with her and settle in the area. Hajar granted them the use of the water well, on the condition that it remains in her family’s possession. They also taught Ismael the Arabic Language and he married one of their daughters. (Hassan 153)
Thus, Hajar’s finding the necessary water for survival was the essential reason for the evolution and blossoming of her people and society and later Islamic civilization.

Moreover, the poet’s use of the word “immigrant” features not only Hajar’s immigration to the new barren land of Mecca but also establishes a link of identification between the poet and her Muslim matriarchal ancestor. This association between both generations inscribes some of Hajar’s positive characteristics of strength, stamina and leadership that would pass on to her granddaughter(s) as part of her inherited legacy and influence. As Hassan further shows, Hijrah/immigration is a blessed notion in Islam. Hajar’s place in the wilderness, without the protection of any family or familiar protégée, makes her faith in God and in herself tested (155). Her embrace of the challenges of hijrah; by leaving her birthplace, her origins and familiar milieu to fulfill God’s destiny and will makes her gain merit in God’s favour (Hassan 155). Thus, she was rescued and revered as the founding mother of Islam and of all Muslims.

Consequently, Kahf indeed identifies and resonates with both of Hajar’s loneliness yet courage in parallel to Arab American Muslim immigrants’ journey and struggle in their new homelands. The poet aims to inspire Muslim women by their ancestor grandmother Hajar who was lonely in her struggles, yet faced these difficulties with fearlessness and resolution on survival. That is to say, Kahf’s resurrection and reinvention of Hajar’s symbolic character enacts her Muslim identity and roots, in the figure of a strong pious Matriarchal leader Hajar.

The poet also exposes the difficulties she had to endure because of this divine mission that she was chosen for, including the loneliness, the physical hurt and emotional stress. As the poet expresses:

I walked across a razor-sharp horizon,
slates of earth, sediment
of ancient seas
to stand alone at this frontier:
where the shape of the cup of morning is strange
and dome of sky, mat of earth have shifted (5)

Kahf’s poetry provides Hajar with an opportunity for self-representation as well as the power of speech, instead of showing her as a passive or secondary character who could be perceived as only endowed by a miracle from God for the sake of her prophet boy Ismael and her prophet husband Ibrahim. It nonetheless affirms the role of Hajar the matriarch,
displacing patriarchy and deconstructing the male hegemony of Ibrahim’s character as the founding father of monotheism. Kahf’s re-imagination of Hajar sets an example of women’s autonomy and agency. As Hassan remarks, Hajar refuses to give up, thus she keeps running and looking and praying for help (155). This underscores her commitment and dedication to fight for both her life and her child’s, exerting all her last drop of strength and perseverance (Hassan 155). Facing her predicament bravely, while maintaining piety, active hope and belief in God’s rescue and mercy only confirms her determination. As Wadud furthermore explains, Hajar’s faith represents practical efforts and a spiritual relationship with the divine (Inside the Gender Jihad 142). Thus, her endurance and resolution resonate with the ideal of both the submitting and the active hope and faith of being a Muslim (Stowasser 49). In consequence, Hajar is indeed a model of faith, reason and resourcefulness for all Muslims to follow and learn from her historical account (Stowasser 49). This is reflected through the ways the poet gives her the voice to narrate her story, underlines her defiance and persistence, as well as highlights her strength, stamina and courage.

Moreover, the poet affirms Hajar as a great matriarch, saying: “I am Hajar, mother of a people” (5). These words, uttered with such enthusiasm and vigor echo Hajar’s sense of pride along with her sense of responsibility for being the leading Muslim matriarch. The poet proclaims Hajar as the main reason for starting a whole nation of Muslims thereafter, by saying:

where God does not have a house yet
and the times for prayer have not been appointed,
where the only water is buried deep
under hard ground and I must find it
or my child will die, my people
remain unborn. (5)

Hajar is not only seen as Ismael’s mother or Ibrahim’s slave wife, yet she is the mother of all Arabs and all Muslims. She rose from the lowest position of a dark-skinned servant slave girl into being in one of the holiest and most revered positions in Islamic tradition14, being a mother and a predecessor for Prophet Muhammed, whom all Muslims venerate

\[14\] In Muslim societies, “mother” is the most highly revered member of the family because, following one of the most popular traditions of Islam, where Muslims believe that the mothers’ place is in Heaven; in reference to their belief that “Paradise lies under the feet of the mother”, for the sacrifices and effort they undertake for their children (Hassan 154).
and respect. Hassan indicates that Hajar is also perceived as “the pioneer woman,” a leader who is the reason for the establishment of a new civilization (154). Similarly, Hatoon Alfassi perceives Hajar as the true Calipha on Earth who undertook God’s purpose of populating the land and developing it into a prosperous community (26:55). The above lines also pertain to the notion of feminist mythographers who maintain that matriarchy preceded patriarchy and that matriarchy is the origin of myths as Daly her *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) argues (218). Additionally, the poet changes the perspective by shifting the center from a dominantly male to a predominantly female voice and persona. The Judeo-Christian discourse emphasizes Hajar’s passivity, and the patriarchal discourse strengthens Hajar’s features in position to men’s characteristics of power and reason, contrary to women as essentially vulnerable, emotional and inert (Weil 154). However, the poet presents Hajar as reasonable, resourceful and a protective nurturing mother-figure, whom the poet looks up to as a remarkably influencing role model. By writing history for all Muslims, Hajar deconstructs the established power relationships between male and female and reconstitutes the female-male dyad in terms of power and agency.

Kahf’s usage of the first-person pronoun (I) repeatedly as well as pronouncing Hajar’s name in a confident and defiant manner signifies the poet’s resolution that Hajar’s name and narrative is not to be subdued after her name was obscured in Qur’anic verses. The poet here insists on naming Hajar, as well as stressing the female character’s independence and ownership of the miracle and taking the credit to herself so that her name, agency and significance cannot be missed by anyone who is unfamiliar with her story. Such re-writing aligns with one of the most common feminist revisionist mythmaking strategies, as Diane Purkiss (1992) conveys, where women characters are given a voice and persona, after having always been portrayed as “silent, objectified or inaudible in previous narrations of the story” (445). The poet subverts the universality of the Abrahamic story as ‘History’ as a given and thus explores the implicated characters along with different relationships of power (Lerner 8). Through recasting her miracle and underscoring her agency in history making, the poet then focuses on Hajar’s fable as ‘herstory,’ rather than just being dismissed as anecdotal. By rewriting Hajar and Ibrahim’s historical story for all Muslims, Kahf’s Hajar deconstructs the established power relationships between male and female and reconstitutes the female-male dyad in terms of power and agency.

The poet adds that Hajar’s miracle came after her tenacious effort in finding such water, declaring:
I am Hajar, mother
of a people
I stand here
straddling the end and the beginning
Each rock cuts into the heel like God
Each step is blood, is risk:
Is prayer (5)

Despite the unfamiliarity of the setting of the desert and the imagery of loneliness which enhances the physical and emotional affliction that Hajar undergoes, it in effect highlights her own resilient character and unwavering resolution along with her piety and courage. It puts her as an antagonist to Ibrahim and compares her to God’s other messengers who all had to endure hardships for the sake of delivering God’s words or establishing monotheistic nations. As Abugideiri (2002) points out, Hajar was a God-appointed messenger, whose migration to Mecca along with her trials puts her on equal footing with God’s other messengers (85). Barbara Stowasser similarly suggests that “Hajar had to endure the distress and danger that have typically marked the careers of God’s chosen historical agents” (44). Hajar’s suffering is analogous to any great hero’s suffering, linking her to the status of male prophets, who had to endure many impediments to deserve God’s grace and the high status they are viewed in. Kahf reimagines Hajar’s persona in order to “enlarge, contest and reanimate the tradition itself” (Howe and Aguiar 9). In place of the conquering heroes, the poem exhibits a woman and a mother figure, who is a symbol of courage and persistence and, defies lots of physical and psychological hardships but gets out victorious at the end.

The revision of Hajar resonates Ostriker’s notion that the revised heroine is not merely an object anymore, who is only seen from the outside, but rather a “quintessential woman-as-subject”, who gets engaged in the action and takes responsibility for her deeds (“Thieves” 79). Such qualities of evident determination and stamina clearly subvert the stereotypical patriarchal qualities attributed to being a weak, subordinate, or passive female. Besides the adversities embedded in such a journey as well as the frightening isolation, Hajar, the speaking poetic persona on the other hand embraces her solitude as part of the expedition she has to undertake to redeem and rediscover herself. Hajar undertakes such a journey by herself and finds spirituality and glory. This poem represents the essence of revisionary fiction that “deconstructs a prior myth and constructs a new
one” (“Thieves” 72). As Zajko and Leonard emphasize, Kahf’s description of Hajar gives voice to a fundamental character whose actions are central to other people, but whose inner consciousness is rarely explored (2). Such revision insists on including, affirming and underscoring Hajar’s miraculous journey, impact and legacy.

Kahf certainly echoes Hajar’s authoritative voice and asserts her divine appointment, agency and leadership in Islamic heritage and collective consciousness. The poet reinvents the ancient figure of Hajar to afford her the due archetypal power among contemporary Muslim women and highlights the historical continuity between Hajar the immigrant Matriarch and contemporary women. As Abugideiri declares, Muslim women should depend on their heritage along with their faith, i.e., Islamic subjectivity in order to correct the wrongs of patriarchal social structures to achieve social reform; guided by their ancestor mother Hajar who forcefully established female agency and defied orthodoxy (83). Along these lines, Kahf resurrects the symbolic figure of Hajar as her narrative is vivid with moral lessons and real experiences that could be of great benefit and close relevance to contemporary Muslim women (Abugideiri 82). Kahf’s reinvention of Hajar generates a “historically potent model of reform” for modern Muslim women (Abugideiri 83). Equally, through the re-establishment of Hajar’s positive Islamic archetype, the poet reclaims Islam as a positive force, in contrast to its orientalist depiction as a source of oppression or a motive for rebellion (Waldmeir 220). Hence, the poet introduces Hajar, as a powerful devout woman to contest the stereotypical western hegemonic singular images of oppressed and helpless Muslim women (Waldmeir 221). So, Hajar in this poem is a great symbol for life-bearing matriarchs, founders of cultures and civilizations as well as an autonomous woman who feels both proud and accountable for her people, and thus, earns her irreplaceable role in Muslims’ lives.

Reincarnating the Matriarchal Ancestral Spirit: Establishing Ties with Modern Muslim Women

Extending the metaphor of Hajar as a guiding Guru and a healing spiritual model, Kahf reaffirms Hajar’s potent symbolic powers in her short one-stanza poem namely, “Lifting the Hajar Heel” (38). The poet expresses that Hajar as an icon of matriarchy, endurance and survival is incarnated in every living woman’s soul, giving her the due support and guidance, only if the contemporary woman was attentive to her innate instincts and is willing to start listening to her intuition. The poet maintains that:

Dying for water,
Hajar went racing
back and forth in the valley,
when what she needed most
was under the heel of her foot.
All it took was an angel’s nudge.
Little self, panting in the world,
take a hint, lift your heel.
Find your own long-buried Zamzam spring. ... (38)

Using the metaphor of Zamzam spring as the underlying and inherent miraculous power present in every woman repressed by the dominance of patriarchy, Kahf addresses all contemporary women along with herself to find their inner miracles and hidden powers. Using the imperative form “Find your own” added to stressing the fact that it is a “long-buried” miracle such as “Zamzam spring”, the poet almost orders her female readers in specific to start looking deep within their souls to uncover their marvels, to unearth the buried ‘feminine imaginary’, as Irigaray contends, which would then yield into discovering different possibilities (qtd. in Whitford 164). The poet thus instigates modern Muslim women to explore the Islamic tradition and history as a source for their identity (Waldmeir 225). Hence, Muslim women should take the example of their ancestor Hajar as a symbolic figure, who got actively engaged in constructing such subjectivity, one that is mainly based on spiritual belief and devout piety along with active self-reliance and autonomy.

The poet, therefore, urges all her women audience/readers to unleash their repressed powers and voices, and get inspired by their great grandmothers, like Hajar, and overthrow the shackles of patriarchy and ethnic confines to fight the long centuries of inhibition that women have suffered in pursuit of their true subjectivity. According to the poet, women should rather be bent on unraveling their feminine internal divine subconcious, which is the true essence of their power and grandeur, since such influence of the Female Divine results in inspiration, self-discovery and original subjectivity (Keating 484). Kahf’s subversive memory and re-imagination of Hajar emphasizes her close association with the Divine, acting as a source of divine spirituality. Hence, Kahf portrays Hajar as a symbol and an enactor of the hope and possibility of reconciliation and defiance of any injustice. As asserted in Hassan’s words, all women, whether Muslims or women in general ought to remember the story of Hajar, stressing that:

[Her story] is important not only for Muslim daughters of Hagar but for all
women who are oppressed by systems of thought or structures based on ideas of gender, class, or racial inequality. Like her, women must have the faith and courage to venture out of the security of the known into the insecurity of the unknown and to carve out, with their own hands, a new world from which the injustices and inequities that separate men from women, class from class, and race from race, have been eliminated. (164)

Using a simple colloquial modern style, the poet directly addresses her great ancestor, Hajar in a dramatic dialogue in the final poem of the volume’s first section, namely “Hajar Thorn” (44-45). In the poem, the poet implores Hajar to visit her in her American home country, Arkansas, USA. Thus, the poet says:

Visit me anytime, sit on my porch
I will make you strong dark tea
I will take you to Hot Springs, Arkansas
to see the mineral wells (44)

The speaking persona in the poem imagines Hajar as a visiting guest, who she imagines to be part of her family, a kind of a great grandmother who might travel to see her immigrant granddaughter, and the granddaughter in turn who promises to show her around her hometown. She lists all the things they could do together, and she assures her that she will be hospitable to her by offering her strong tea as the host’s favorite drink and entertaining her by taking her to do some sightseeing at the famous Arkansas Hot Springs, and the mineral wells. Recalling these specific Arkansas Hot Springs is quite emblematic, as the American Springs is one of the oldest federal reserves in the United States, whose age extends to ancient history, and was celebrated among the Native American tribes for their belief in its medicinal properties for which they took it as a legend.

Evoking such a monumental hot spring in notably establishes an analogy between Hajar, who is famous for her own Zamzam spring and the poet’s current home and time. Hence, it emphasizes such an ancestral link and an unbreakable bond between the two characters, despite having different locations, as in the Middle East and the West/America, or even disparate time zones, one before history (BC) and the other is contemporary age. This analogy indeed affirms the extended impact and influence between the two women. As Ostriker delineates, Kahf beseeches modern Muslim immigrant American women to reconstitute their lost families, that is Islamic roots, to amend their spiritual ties with their matriarchal ancestors, to rediscover them as “spiritual mothers and daughters for each
other in time of need,” since rediscovering these lost ancient Mothers, sisters and daughters aids in recovering “the original” women that they are (“Thieves” 74). That is to say, the closer these modern Muslim American women get to their Hajar’s of the past, the more grounded and supported that they would feel since they would not feel estranged or uprooted. On the contrary, they would feel like they belong to a genealogy that extends over thousands of years, while claiming potent and powerful women archetypes as ancient Hajar as their own matriarchal ancestor.

The poet next expresses the unique and unbreakable association that the two women share, saying:

It is your story
and I am complicit in it
...
Hajar, even if I fail again and again,
you have been my guide
through a merciless, burning day
My sister, my teacher, my friend,
whether near to me or estranged,
inextractable thorn in my flesh (45)

The poet manifestly revitalizes the ancient Hajar of the classic Islamic texts making her story relevant and relatable for (Muslim) women today as she helps in empowering modern women by allowing them to see in themselves reflections of a strong, surviving spiritual ancestor. Thus, Kahf’s poem calls upon Muslim women to remember their ancestral matriarchs, even if this knowledge was locked or held from them by factors of patriarchy or distortion of history. As Ostriker clarifies, modern women must reconstruct the past historical accounts of their ancestors to be able to know who they are and arrive at their inner truth “Each one is queen, mother, huntress” (“Thieves” 75). Furthermore, Kahf’s invocation of the ancient Hajar aligns with what Juanita Ruys identifies as ‘memoria’ in her article, “Playing Alterity” in Maitresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars (2004). Ruys describes that memoria is a manner of reconnecting to these historical characters, as she maintains that:

It may even be that our medieval subjects, themselves highly conscious of a continuum from the ancient world to their own time, might have been pleased to think that they would continue to partake in the imaginative
chain of memory, not only as remembering subjects in their own day, but as subjects remembered in ages to come. (230)

Memoria, then, serves as a means of facing the silence in documenting these ancient women figures and the determination to retrieve this concealed and forgettable bond between the different women generations.

Drawing on her depictions in the hadith and expanding her character in new and revelatory ways, the poet indeed gives a picture of Hajar as a symbol of strength, hope and reconciliation, a Hajar figure who is worth remembering and imitating. That is why, Kahf establishes the deep connection and relationship between herself and this great Matriarch. This affirms one of the fundamental functions of feminist revisionary mythmaking, that is increasing awareness through recognizing past myths and key historical female figures. As Ostriker states, “the recognition that the faces in mythology may be our own faces which we “must explore” to gain knowledge of myth’s inner meanings and our own … women’s mythological poems demonstrate increasing self-consciousness, increasing irony and increasing awareness” (Stealing 215). In that sense, Kahf’s strong rapport with such an eminent figure as Hajar is a way to gain knowledge into our own modern Muslim female psyches to achieve increased self-consciousness and spread cultural awareness of women’s contributions. As Hajar’s account still survives and in learning to recognize “the flickering light of the divine” in both herself and those around her, the poet finds the strength to bring healing to modern fractured women characters and as a result the sense of hope is readily apparent (Kahf 35).

The poet further stresses Hajar’s significance in order to question stereotypical orientalist as well as patriarchal assumptions about women, or Muslim women in particular, and their great roles in history. Kahf’s revisionary poetry reveals Ruys’ notions of ‘presentism’ and ‘pastism.’ While ‘presentism’ is concerned “with what the study of medieval people can reveal to us of ourselves and our own cultural imperatives,” ‘Pastism’ “reifies alterity, positing a fundamental gulf of understanding between ourselves and our medieval subjects” (212-213). That is to say, the poet engages with such an ancient mythological narrative and re-makes it anew in her poetry collection to foreground Hajar’s female voice and reflect her own ethnic feminist subjectivity. Through re-inscribing cultural Islamic archetypes, such as Hajar, Kahf aims to resist the normative patriarchal notions as well as subvert the orientalist cultural implications that silence Muslim women and inhibit their subjectivity.
That is to say, Kahf’s rewriting, re-visioning and reinterpreting of Hajar confirms the timelessness of her myth, suggesting the continuous relevance to contemporary (Muslim) women’s lives, besides her immense importance as an influential matriarch, making visible her agency and subjectivity. The poet enacts Helen Cixous’ call for the woman writer to write herself into history, to reinvent her story, so as to “forge for herself the antilogos weapon. To become at will the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system” (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 880). Her revision of Hajar’s ancient archetype in Islamic collective unconsciousness maintains Sandra Gilbert’s concept of the “revisionary imperative,” as an essential part of women’s literary tradition is a “crucial antidote” to cultural alienation and marginalization of women (50). The poet indeed reclaims her ancestral linkage with Hajar and rewrites the Islamic historical narrative.

As a result, Kahf’s Hajar can be described as Daly’s ‘Spinster,’ where as a matriarch, she is the one who “participates in the whirling movement of creation,” who “has chosen her Self, who defines herself by her choice,” on her own terms, neither in relation to children nor to men (Gyn/Ecology 3). As the poem “Hajar Triumphant” (39) reads:

Here I Am,
Eve out of Eden,
left with only the wahy* of water
and the task of helping another
human being, Ismaïl:
He who, without Hajar, is history (39)

Through her poems, Kahf’s appropriation of Hajar as a potent matriarch helps in attaining a re-imagination, a revision and a re-interpretation of her as a historical persona by rewriting her and her myth. Comparing Hajar to a female divinity, Kahf retrieves Hajar’s powers that have been repressed and silenced, as Jane Caputi demonstrates (426). Such a revision of Hajar’s eminent status promotes a change of consciousness, leading to redefining the world, humanity and women at large (426). She contests Hajar’s static portrayal, adding to her the necessary depth, and psychological complexity through the means of the poet’s shift of narration.

In this sense, Kahf refutes the ‘law of the father’, while aiming at destabilizing male hegemony over language and myths. She revises Hajar, while writing her with a ‘mother tongue,’ or with a female language, as Ostriker maintains (Stealing 211). The poet uses her poems to disrupt Hajar’s invisibility, impartiality, and marginalization. She works on
bringing her voice from muteness into articulation and expression, defying the patriarchal feminine qualities of timidity, passiveness or submission, and stressing her miracle and strength. As a feminist revisionary poet, Kahf attempts to displace orthodox patriarchal mythical structure and language to pursue a hidden buried female truth as Ostriker states (*Stealing* 50). Contrary to the typical patriarchal portrayal of ‘images of women,’ the poet here imparts a subjective image of Hajar as a real woman, while trying to reveal her inner psychological feelings, thoughts and ideas.

Kahf fundamentally celebrates Hajar’s motherhood as a biological attribute of superiority rather than inferiority as patriarchy would conversely deem. Hajar was not portrayed as merely a ‘womb’ as the phallocentric discourse pertains. Yet, her motherly senses drove her to first saving her little son Ismael, besides creating a great nation hereafter, marking her one of the historically significant matriarchs. Hence, Kahf’s revision subverts Hajar’s latent invisibility and marginalization and highlights her significance, subjectivity and agency. In other words, Kahf’s reappropriation of Hajar’s narrative undermines the patriarchal archetype of mothers as submissive objects, oppressed under men’s dominance, and showed her as an autonomous subject, with strong will and determination. Hajar is no longer a man’s ‘other,’ as a secondary inferior being but instead, she is given the freedom of speech and the value she deserves. Kahf vividly expresses this in her poem “Hajar Triumphant” (39) again as she says:

begins with hijrah, alienation,  
homo sapiens at ground zero,  
cast out in otherhood, motherhood,  
I and Thou in the desert,  
having no hard rod of law to lean on for holiness,  
but only this flow between our fingers (39)

Altogether, as Barlas proposes, Kahf’s re-reading and re-inscription of Hajar’s persona in contemporary American poetry is considered a “feminist reading that poses a challenge to dominant and androcentric modes of knowledge-construction,” (258). This re-appropriation opens up various liberatory possibilities of the Qur’an’s stories and women characters that are a crucial part of human history and the Muslims’ collective consciousness (Barlas 258). Kahf’s revised narrative of Hajar inserts her forcefully into history and cultural narratives while highlighting her womanhood and motherhood.

While asserting her ethnic identity, Kahf revives Hajar as an inspiring model for
herself and other Muslim women. She defied her loneliness, ostracism and discrimination and built a new nation, just like Arab American Muslim women. Hajar is indeed a model for Arab Muslim women immigrants, for they have to be determined and powerful and endure the hardships and struggles they face, while having the proper faith and belief that they will survive such hardships and ordeals, and come out triumphant just like Hajar. Despite her suffering, Hajar ended in wholesome survival, granted with water and mercy, while being recognized as the great mother of prophets and woman of miracles. Hajar had the courage and stamina, not to be defeated by the gruesome and intolerable conditions around her. She acted and worked on delivering herself and her son out of this test and achieved salvation and deliverance. Therefore, Hajar’s story is a physical and spiritual achievement and accomplishment.

**Balqis: The Subversive Queen**

As one of the examples of the enthralling women that were mentioned in the Qur’an, Kahf deals with the story of the queen Balqis, in “Balqis Makes Solomon Sign a Pre-Nup” (61-62). As Stowasser (1996) explains, Balqis, the renowned queen of Sheba has always been regarded as an enigma; a strong yet a foreign character, who resists paradigmatization (62). She was a fierce woman and a powerful sovereign who was not afraid of Solomon. After trying to persuade her to believe in the only God and quit paganism, Balqis entered political and religious negotiations with Solomon. She was also unaffected by his great reputation until she saw a palpable proof of his powers and miracle. Therefore, she defies the monolithic representation of women as fearful and timid. Wadud meanwhile illustrates that the Qur’anic story of Balqis evidently celebrates both her wise political views (Qur’an 40). Wadud applauds Balqis for her “worldly knowledge of peaceful politics and her spiritual knowledge of the unique message of Solomon” (Qur’an 41). Wadud also concludes that these traits made Balqis on an equal footing with Solomon and indicated her independent ability to govern her people wisely and be able to make sound political decisions, opposite to the norms of her people, who for instance advised her against going to Solomon (Qur’an 41). However, Stowasser observes that traditional Islamic exegesis and scholars did not reinforce Balqis’ model as a potent and wise female political sovereign which clearly defied the acceptable social paradigm of Muslim women (66). On the

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15 As Amina Wadud mentions in her Quran & Woman (1999), the “Balqis” story is narrated in the Qu’ran. She is the queen of Sheba, a sovereign ruler of her sun-worshipping pagan people. After hearing about this queen from his hoopoe, Balqis enters political and religious negotiations with God’s prophet Solomon who asks her to believe in the One and Only God. After realizing his powers of controlling nature and its forces, along with other abilities, Balqis submits to God and joins him in his cause.
contrary, some of them used her story as a cautionary tale against Muslims being ruled by women, lest this would cause them eternal damnation and loss of God’s favour\textsuperscript{16} (66). Nevertheless, in some of the uncommon but more liberal modern interpretations, like Sayed Qutb’s modern interpretation, Balqis was regarded as Solomon’s equal, and not his submissive since all people in God’s sight are equals since they are all believers (Stowasser 66). In this manner, Postmodern revisions of Balqis’ story prove to be of eminent significance as it aligns with the Qur’an’s initial representation of her as a strong leader. She is depicted as a queen who seeks advice from her people, yet is courageous enough to make her own decisions and act upon them even though they are contradictory to her people’s beliefs or men’s counsel. Certainly, this sets inspiring models for modern Muslim women.

Even though God has endowed prophet Solomon with mighty potentials and abilities, such as knowing how to communicate with human beings as well as animals such as birds, besides his treasures and wealth, Balqis still defies and challenges his authority and command. In this poem, Kahf re-figures Balqis talking to Solomon, her future husband in a defiant and self-assured manner, rejecting any act of submission as a result of their union in marriage, expressing her insistence to continue being a ruler for her people. That is to say, the poet puts her at the center of the narrative, as the speaking subject who imposes her terms onto the union between her and her future husband in their prospective relationship. The poem gives an overall impression of Balqis’ setting down her own conditions and terms of this marriage relationship, as indicated by the poem’s title, resonant of the notion of a modern prenup, where the couples sign off a contract of specific rules and regulations guiding their relationship. First, Balqis declines to abandon her throne, even to her lover, despite loving him, confirming that:

\begin{quote}
I love you,
but I won’t be signing off
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} As Stowasser argues, even though the Qur’an overtly stated that Balqis was the competent ruler of her country, conservative and fundamentalist scholars followed Ibn Kathir’s report on the Prophet comment on a woman ruler, as he says, “a people who entrust their command to a woman will not thrive” (65). Orthodox scholars took this statement as an indication of women’s inability of sovereignty and they applied it to Balqis’ story, whom they conceived her as being damned till she acceded to Solomon’s call of monotheism. These scholars include Abu Hanifa, Despite the fact that this hadith has been proven as weak and only said in link with Khosrooe’s daughter accession to the Persian throne, Stowasser maintains that “While this hadith remains an important scripturalist argument in the conservative Islamic stand against women’s rights to share in, let alone assume, political power.” (66)
my sovereignty.
I come to you
but keep my throne
for my Self’s
ascent alone (61)

Despite her love and acceptance of marriage to Solomon, Balqis as a ruling queen asserts that she refuses to give up her throne, her kingdom and her right to rule. Hence, she is not depicted as the weak wife who has succumbed to the control and domination of her husband. In contrast to what is commonly misinterpreted by the patriarchy in this specific Qur’anic narrative, Balqis is not defeated, conquered or subordinated by Solomon. Even though agreeing to believe in his God and follow him as God’s sent messenger, she nonetheless retains her prerogatives as a queen and her individuality as a loving wife out of her free will. She now acquires the position of speaking subjectivity as Molly Hite explains (9). The use of the subject pronoun (I) maintains the reversal of Balqis’ position of someone who is commonly perceived as a secondary character in her story. In this poem, she is rather the defining part of this relationship. Her opinion matters the most. She is no longer a subordinate, or an auxiliary.

In addition, the poet challenges the patriarchal religious restrictions imposed on modern women, who are made to believe that women should not be rulers. As Osmani, Farooq and Ahmad assert, even though the Qur’an uses no terms that imply such prohibition, some orthodox Islamic scholars such as Abu Hanifa, Imam al-Baqillani, Al-Mawardi, Imam al-Ghazali, Ibn al-‘Arabi al-Maliki, Ibn Kathir, believed that women were not entitled to hold leadership roles (57). Some modern conservative scholars followed these earlier fundamental scholars’ decree, amongst who are Al-Shawkani, Muhammad Rashid Rid, Mustafa Al-Siba‘i, Abul A‘la Mawdudi, Muhammad Hussain Fadhalla, Hasan al-Turabi al-Qaradawi, Abu Shiqqah, al-Bahansawi and Zaydan as they believe that women should not be the top leaders of a country (Osmani, Farooq and Ahmad 57-59). Here, Kahf pinpoints Balqis’ position as a ruling queen and voices her defiance of such a ban as well as the unfounded interpretation of her story. The poem enacts what Cooper and Short name “feminist intervention,” to restore and reinforce such historical women characters’ significance in history (3). Through employing such feminist intervention, the poet in effect challenges this stern fatwa, and depicts that women can very well be queens and ruling monarchs.
As Mariadele Boccardi suggests, the revision of historical women, such as Balqis and other female characters not only influences and reshapes how these women are depicted, but also aids in establishing active and agent women characters for the present generations (qtd. in Cooper and Short 7). Through this interplay and the co-existence of the two disparate historical moments, which are put together side by side, historiographic metafiction hence reveals crucial aspects about both the moment of production and the moment being reproduced. That is why, Kahf could also be criticizing the idea that today's Muslim women are still manipulated to think that they must give up their identity, their lives and careers in which they thrived after their marriage, in order to be subdued by their husbands. Kahf clearly criticizes the religious patriarchal thought that instigates women to abandon their success, work and titles to be content to be only wives, as inferiors to their husbands and partners. Using Balqis' defiant voice and insubordinate manner, the poet shows her insistence on preserving her status as a queen, a sovereign and a successful woman, to empower contemporary young Muslim women, stressing that they can be both loving wives and independent subjects and successful working women in their professional lives since the two roles are not mutually exclusive.

This bold and confident tone persists in Balqis' words. The queen actually discards the stereotypical propagated image of married couples being as one soul as all but impractical and unreasonable belief as she says:

Don't pull that mystic
oneness stuff—
that I love you
is enough (61-62)

Kahf reframes Balqis character as resisting to be defined and differentiated in reference to Solomon. She is by no means the incidental, the inessential or the other as opposed to Solomon, who is to conceived as the essential, the subject and the absolute, as Beauvoir contends (qtd. in Nicholson 14). Balqis, furthermore, continues to remind Solomon/the readers of how powerful she is as a woman of her own will, as a queen of herself, who can bestowed lavish gifts upon her lover, as she proudly shows off by saying, “I shower you / with peacock gifts” (62). Nonetheless, she declares that only she has the utter control over whether to give him her body. She maintains the dominant will to act, with her being the only authority to decide and who is in full control of her body, as she says, “my silken body /— mine to give” (62). Taking control of her body and sexuality is fundamental to
establishing her autonomy and freedom of choice.

Setting boundaries of her freedom and independence in a self-determined manner, Balqis additionally warns Solomon not to oversee her actions, send any followers to track her down, as this relationship should be built on mutual trust. She directly says that she refuses him to act as her guardian as she warns him saying:

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Don't ask the hoopoe  
how late I'll be—  
I cherish  
living free (62)
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That is to say, the poet implies that proper marriage is not an imprisonment for women. It is not an excuse for limiting women’s freedom or overpowering them. Balqis’ aggressive tone and confident voice delineate Ostriker’s notion of identifying active aggressive women with truth as a means of defiance to this long tradition which equated strong women with deception and virtuous women with gentle inactivity (“Thieves” 76).

By the end of the poem, Balqis asks Solomon that he must understand her status. She is a different woman, a queen and is thus never submissive. Saying that:

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Other wives  
surrendered more?  
You’ve not loved  
a queen before.  
All yields to you,  
...  
all but this ... (62)
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Kahf’s recreation of a powerful Balqis in this poem reclaims her as symbolic to the relationship between Muslim couples. Kahf’s disapproval of current gender relations makes her show Balqis renouncing them, in order to highlight, challenge and subvert the patriarchal practices that underpin them, in both the medieval and the contemporary times (Cooper and Short 9). In this view, the poet accordingly disrupts the prevalent androcentric and patriarchal power relations between genders that are stereotyped by traditional and fundamentalist Islamic exegesis. The poet here reimagines such a conversation between an extraordinary couple to condemn some of the patriarchal practices in Islamic marriages that coerce women to be obedient to their husbands and abandon their freedom. That is
why the poet criticizes Muslims’ perception of marriage as a kind of surrender of women’s identity to be put under the control of their counter partners. Through the reconstruction of Balqis and voicing her demands and presenting her mindset as a queen and a free woman, the poet establishes the equality of both partners, who would still maintain equal responsibilities and obligations towards each other as well as society. While believing that Islam, feminism and women’s significance in history and religion are not mutually exclusive, Kahf advocates Islamic feminism which promotes the view of Islam as defending feminist ideals. The poet entrusts Islamic feminism’s significant role of challenging the mistaken extremist patriarchal interpretations of Qur’an.

In this sense, the poet engages in what Susan Friedman in *Mappings* (1998) calls as the “deformation of phallocentric history” (202). Integrating women’s experiences while contending with the issue of gender as Friedman explicates, reforms the historical narrative as well as strengthens and enriches the newly reconstituted history of women (200). Consequently, in place of the conquered queen, Kahf reclaims Balqis as an empowered female figure to set her as a liberating archetype for an iconic queen in Islamic tradition, so as to embolden modern young Muslim women generations. As a result, Kahf’s poem as Friedman argues creates a counter narrative to resist and subvert the story about Balqis that is told by the dominant patriarchal culture which reinforces her alterity and passivity (230). In her poem, she counters the stories that exclude women, deprive them of their rights of equality and continue to rectify the wrongs done to our female ancestors and heritage and reconstruct the identities of the ancient queen figure and the new women generations alike (Friedman 230). Seeking to construct her story out of a feminist paradigm, the poet counters hegemonic histories through her story as told from a feminist perspective (Friedman 202). Furthermore, by setting her as the speaking agent of her story, who sets down her rules and conditions and re-narrates her own story, using such bold voice and strong commanding verbs and tone, Kahf’s poem defies the standard language that belonged to phallocentric logic and the language that previously portrayed her; which was encoded of male privilege (Ostriker, “Thieves” 69). The poet uses defiant and strong language to describe women’s experiences, defy language as the law of the father that insists on subjugating women as wives, and lets Balqis access authoritative expression, to seize speech (Ostriker 69). She properly expresses her desires and needs in her marriage relationship.

Kahf’s poem presents Balqis as the main speaking personae, rather than situating her as a silent woman in the story’s background. The poem gives her a voice, by which she
powerfully dictates Solomon what she looks for in their relationship, her boundaries and the terms and conditions which she can tolerate, endure, compromise with or totally reject and abstain from. Hence, re-appropriating Balqis’ story adds other new layers of meaning that invoke further comparisons of female experience and representation between the past and now (Cooper and Short 13). The inclusion of Balqis’ historical figure intervenes with the past and opens up an essential self-conscious dialogue between the ideas in the past vs. the present, that question gender politics in both ages. Equally, it fulfills what Hutcheon calls as metafictional historiography where both fiction and history are being “simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 5). Re-telling her narrative in Kahf’s poetry thus serves a dual purpose; one is deconstructing the subservient image of Balqis as a queen who surrendered to Solomon’s rule as commonly propagated in standard Islamic exegesis, and the second is re-defining the proper relationship between Muslim couples that should be based on mutual love, equality and respect for each other’s desires and needs, without subjugating the wife as an inferior or a subordinate figure to her male counterpart. By re-imagining conversations and adding dialogues to the revised canonical text, the poet develops these women characters’ subjectivity as dynamic women rather than monolithic and sets them as compelling examples for current Muslim generations, especially the young women.

Zuleikha: A Woman in Love

In comparison to all the faithful female figures depicted or spoken of in the Qur’anic tales, Stowasser comments that Zuleikha is considered the most complex character of them all (50). As Stowasser states, this Qur’anic tale acts as a strong metaphor and demonstrates the psychology of a female, who is fired by desire and love, mixed with repentance, honesty and fidelity (50). However, fundamentalist Islamic scholarly exegesis has focused on reading the story as indicative of women’s nature that is woven with aspects of cunning and slyness as the definitive traits of women. Instead of seeing the story as portraying the human nature in its fullness, with both its vice and goodness, women were thus categorized as the archetype of “sexually aggressive” and dangerous creatures who pose a threat to men by their sexual allure and depravity, which would result

17 Zuleikha is inferred from the Quranic Surah of Yossef. She was the woman who was married to Potifar, the pharaonic Egyptian army leader who bought Youssef as his slave after arriving in Egypt. After he came of age, she fell in love with him and attempted to seduce him. When he denied her seduction, she conspired against him and sent him to prison for 10 years.
in social chaos and instability (Stowasser 50). In this context, women and Zuleikha, were compared to Satan who entices believers away from the righteous path due to their immense attraction and irresistible charms. According to Selden, Widdowson and Brooker (2005), postmodern fiction writing is at once parodic and critical, complicit and subversive of grand narratives in specific, turning the grand narratives into plural histories (200). As a postmodernist feminist writer, Kahf thus employs satire and parody to take a critical stance towards the historical representation of Zuleikha’s character and her revisionary poetry raises questions about the “the ideological and discursive construction of the past” as well as the representation of the truth (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 200). The poet in “Zuleikha Ionic” (63-64) questions and problematizes Zuleikha’s story. She exhibits Zuleikha’s story as symbolic of “the enduring power of female selfless love and faithfulness” (Stowasser 50). The poet as a result reimagines Zuleikha’s character, representing her voice and expressing the story from her female perspective as a story of a woman in love.

Believing that reading and understanding the Qur’an has been heavily influenced by men’s vision, perspective, desires and needs over the history as Wadud states, women’s psyches and experiences in repercussion have either been overlooked or excluded from the basic paradigms of Qur’an’s interpretations (Qur’an 2). Hence, Wadud calls for re-negotiating, retrieving and reclaiming the woman’s voice that has been dominantly silenced by such patriarchal readings in order to arrive at a more holistic understanding of Islam and how to develop a Muslim identity (Qur’an 2). Wadud furthermore self-consciously seeks to identify the significance of the female voice in the text from a woman’s perspective. In correlation with Wadud’s invitation to unearth the female voice and experience in the Qur’an and re-interpreting women’s characters and narratives that are found there, Kahf retells Zuleikha’s story through her eyes as an ardent lover, who is passionately overworn by her affection to Youssef. Instead of portraying her as the epitome representative of the tempting Satan, through her sexual attraction to her lover, Kahf re-paints her with a gentler yet in still with a critical eye for her psychological condition as a woman deeply and passionately in love, whose infatuation was severely rejected.

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn propose in their *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women’s Writing* (2007) that postmodern feminist writers deconstruct and reinterpret the earlier narratives that have silenced or have been closed to female subjects (2). Along these lines, Kahf’s poetry revisits and appraises the historical interpretation of Zuleikha’s actions and motives that have been previously misjudged as a woman character.
In contrast to the monolithic interpretations of historical narratives, Kahf in her “Zuleikha Ionic” (63-64), is determined to produce a counter historical discourse, depicting her as a woman in love, not as an evil seductress but just as an emotional fervent lover who needs to learn how to channel her emotions properly, instead of burning herself and hurting her dear ones in the process. The poet uses the third pronoun (she) to re-narrate her story. The female narrator, created by the poet, can evidently see and understand Zuleikha’s character and actions better as a woman storyteller. Therefore, in the first stanza of the poem, she writes:

This is Zuleikha:
Love surges beautiful
high voltages in her
She is loose, frightened,
charring everything
she touches and
hurting, hurting, hurting
herself (63)

As Purkiss (1992) highlights, ways of rewriting women characters in revisionary works include changing the narrator from male to female, focusing on female characters and putting them in the center rather than marginalizing and relegating them to the periphery of the story as secondary/non-essential characters, transforming the negative female model into a positive female icon and strong matriarchal figures, that work as inspiring archetypes for later women generations (441-442). Accordingly, Kahf as a female narrator retells Zuleikha’s story and puts her in the center of her narrative, while compassionately reworking her motives and inner consciousness. Contrary to the dominant patriarchal stereotype of the image of Zuleikha as the sexual predator or the malicious woman who wants to betray her husband¹⁸ and takes advantage of her protegee, the young handsome innocent Youssef, Kahf presents her in the poem as the victim in reverse. She is refigured as the woman who fell victim to her emotions of love and unfortunately got things out of control. Her love and deep intense emotions of infatuation are compared to electrical voltage that when is let loose without proper constraint and direction, began to hurt everyone. Despite its great danger and power of destruction, electricity is such an

¹⁸ Zuleikha’s husband, Potifar who had a high-ranking position as the leader of Egyptian pharaonic armies, was reported to be an old and impotent husband by some Islamic scholars (Stowasser 55).
indispensable force in life that brought so many revolutionary developments and progress to modern life in particular. Zuleikha is thus compared to such force with her love that is key to life, yet with her uncontrolled passion that is destructive.

The poet correspondingly sympathizes with Zuleikha, whom she pictures as a blind frightened lover and who hurts herself the most, as is shown in the poem the extent of her self-harm with the repetition of the word “hurting” three times. This indicates how much the woman suffers from her unrequited love and is torturing herself with her impulsive actions and trials, rather than the typical image of the she-devil who conspires to entrap Youssef, her lover. That is to say, Kahf as a postmodern feminist writer employs feminist historiography in order to reconstruct the past as well as subvert the coercive discourse of classical history that constructed and ideologically propagated the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identities (Scott qtd in Friedman 210). In aligning with women’s and feminist scholarship on the Qur'an as Barlas contends, Kahf re-narrates Zuleikha’s story to the modern reader in order to reveal the patriarchal exegetical interpretation that has distorted such canonical text. Barlas additionally pronounces that such re-reading of the text is vitally suggestive. Rereading the qur’anic tales establishes the continuing relevance of its narratives to present-day Muslims, as well as rescues the Qur’an from the deforming shades of sexism and misogyny that have controlled and disfigured our understanding of it for centuries (Barlas 268). Kahf thus questions the construction of Zuleikha and Youssef in the archetypes of the satanic seductress and the angelic victim in respective.

The poet then confirms Zuleikha’s state as a tender lover, comparing these emotions of adoration to electric charges and Zuleikha as an ion. Yet, Kahf reverses Zuleikha’s image to be the victim, due to the lack of support and love she gets from her husband. The poet thus expresses that:

Zuleikha, ionic,
charged electrically
from an excess
of passion, or a deficiency
She is a lover
She is a lover
She doesn’t know how to stop it (63-64)

That is to say, Kahf self-consciously problematizes the nature of the authored and
authorized character of Zuleikha in the long-established Islamic historical narrative as Heilmann and Llewellyn argue ("Hystorical Fictions" 138). By rewriting such historical narratives, Kahf alters the repressed aspect of the present reshapes the collective unconscious of a people (Heilmann and Llewellyn “Hystorical” 138). That is to say, such reappropriation emphasizes the recreation and the re-inspiration as well as the subjectivity of the historical character rather than being mere parody and pastiche (Harris 181). By reappropriating Zuleikha’s narrative, her historical account is revised. Through the use of historical metafiction, readers feel uneasy about the past with its influential ideologies. In effect, Kahf’s re-vision, disruption and subversion of the typical narrative of Zuleikha establishes a fresh dialogue with the past, which would lead to engendering different renewed interpretations.

Kahf furthermore pictures Zuleikha as lacking the due patience and the maturity of a typical lover on fire, who doesn’t care about anything in the world except for satisfying her urge and thirst for love and passion. The writer thus compares Youssef to an electrical conductor, whose proximity to Zuleikha adds more fire in her heart, swelling her heart with more desire and a yearning she cannot resist, as she pronounces:

This is Yusuf:
He is a conductor
Zuleikha doesn’t know from conductor
She wants to surge
She wants him to surge with her
She doesn’t have patience for science
She breaks the beakers and sweeps the table clean
She knocks over the gallon and lights the gasoline (64)

The poet moreover illustrates that Youssef, though he leaves and gets far away from her, he never blames, curses or hates her for her feelings of love to him.

Yusuf, scorched,
will have left
sometime in the night
He will not curse her
She is a lover (64)

Finally, the poet asks Zuleikha to be more patient, as she will learn from her great
suffering and experience that love needs time, rules to be fulfilling for both partners and the right timing to flourish, as the poet demonstrates:

One day she will learn
the science of conduction,
how to love and not be consumed

Then she will become
the spark itself and bond
to every blue and particle of gold,
to all that is Yusuf in the world,
spinning, sub-atomic,
alight in beauty
alight in beauty (64)

Instead of demonizing her and slandering all women because of her weakness towards her fond emotions towards her lover Youssef, the poet sets her as an example of a woman in love, who should be respected and appreciated for her tender heart and longing passion. In place of slyness and cunning as fixed traits in women’s nature, the poem never mentions any of these negative qualities. On the contrary, the poem celebrates these love emotions and considers them as noble and refined, which became iconic and emblematic of all loving relationships in history, especially those of unrequited love stories, where one of the parties involved gets devoured by their feelings and passionate love. Zuleikha’s major flaw, as the poem showed, was how reckless and eager she was to love and consume this love to feel the satisfaction she yearned for, but not as stereotypically portrayed as a decadent woman who wants to ruin a man’s chastity. Thus, Kahf’s re- vision of Zuleikha’s character and motives enacts what Hutcheon advocates as questioning the master narratives of history while promoting the possibility of the narrativization of past events in order to allow several possible interpretations and readings of these standard narratives. In this manner, Kahf reclaims the figure of Zuleikha and transforms her from an evil seductress into a loving woman who became symbolic for all spontaneous lovers in the world.

Hence, Kahf’s poem reframes and refigures Zuleikha’s narrative as part of recovering the lost past and the nameless and ostracized woman figure in history after decades of being marginalized, voiceless and disfigured, while focusing on the female experience. Kahf ‘s revisionary poem re-introduces her story and voice, actions and
motives from a different feminist perspective. Kahf’s Zuleikha stands in juxtaposition to this archetypal image of women’s inherent attributes of lust, seduction and debauchery. While she is portrayed as a depraved and immoral woman who is only driven by her basic instincts as sexual craving, Kahf delineates her as an inexperienced lover who is driven by ardor but not desire, and as a result, gets consumed by the demands of love. As Heilmann and Llewellyn assert, one can never escape from one’s past and roots, for it is one’s history(ies) that the core of identity is constructed (Metafiction 6). Accordingly, Kahf’s revision of Zuleikha is extremely vital since such historical revision and re-appropriation of those momentous characters are pivotal to contemporary Muslim Arab women’s identity formation.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, believing in the importance of actively remembering, claiming and rewriting the stories of Hajar, Balqis and Zuleikha as distinguished women in Islamic historical and religious narratives reverberates postmodern feminist and Islamic scholars’ re-visionary enterprise. Kahf, along with many (Islamic) revisionary feminist scholars, reframe and reproduce medieval/prehistoric women to contest the mostly masculinist textual culture as well as androcentric interpretations. To elaborate, Kahf’s revisionary poetry represents what Omaima Abou-Bakr (2013) identifies as evidence of “an interlocked structure of both patriarchal exclusion and female resistance” (332). As Abou-Bakr emphasizes, Kahf’s re-introduction and re-writing of these women’s accounts create visibility of women in Islamic history and allows present scholars/writers to review the tradition and generate new trends that aid in knowledge production of different female archetypes, by turning the traditional works from texts about women to texts by women (my emphasis) (Abou-Bakr 332). Since women’s historical presence still holds an intimate relationship with modern-day women through our thoughts about them, Abou-Bakr maintains that it is the feminist critic of cultural history’s task to use our vantage present perspective in order to divulge the latent empowering meanings through such re-interpretation of these historical women (322).

Kahf’s revisionary poetry indeed dismantles the standard narratives of representing female historical figures, who were introduced and are understood solely through male-authored narratives. As an alternative, Kahf features the three historical/Qur’anic women while praising and admiring them for their heroism, courage, articulation, agency and daring sense of adventure, contrary to women’s common portrayal in historical narratives.
as solely favored as romantic, love interests, passive subjects or evil women (Cooper and Short 2). Kahf liberates her Islamic women figures from the static time frames and history to renew their characters and releases them from the inescapable eternity of the stereotypes they were forced to fit into. The re-appropriation and the re-narration of these women’s stories alter the patriarchal basis of history and disrupts the patriarchal stories of these historically renowned figures and women (Heilmann and Llewellyn, Metafiction 6). Such revision as Yorke (1991) equally perceives, pertains a possible divergence to the patriarchal symbolic (203), describing such reworking of women’s stories as “wonderful expansions of the subversive pertinence” that would result in opening up “a vast field of possible becoming for women” away from the entrenched psychic restraints imposed by the patriarchal social forms (205-206) in order to cause a change in cultural power relations.

Through her poetry, Kahf exhibits what Hamilton terms as ‘herstory’; by replacing the past histories that have been generally written by men about men, where women’s state has been rendered almost invisible and their roles, contributions and achievements have been minimized or totally ignored (Southgate 94), making it time for women’s stories to stand on equal terms with ‘his story’ (Hamilton 192). Instead of viewing history, as his story and the preserve of the male, Kahf’s retelling of these women’s accounts problematizes their patriarchal interpretations, releasing it from its inherent bias, and it cultivates history to be regarded as narratives that are by, for and about women as well (Cooper and Short 3). This revision and rewriting make them survive along with freeing them, just like Scheherazade survived through the telling of tales, who was yet liberated again through the retellings of her own story (Cooper and Short 7). The poet also uses intertextuality from Qur’anic verses/stories to first unsettle the traditional linear narrative about these women, recreating them in different archetypal forms. Second, the poet’s revision opens up a dialogue between past and present to inspire younger Muslim women generations and subvert the dominant negative cultural stereotypes of women. Kahf’s restatement of the stories of these three historical women is quite symbolic, as they represent myriads of women symbols, not only as wives, but rather as mothers, monarchs, and women in love. Kahf mines the tradition for such stories and offers novel interpretations which would help create this voice, as “she frequently turns to language, imagery, and dramatic moments that focus attention on the physical bodies that express Muslim experience” (Waldmeir 227) and lets her female characters speak in their own voice from within an Islamic paradigm. The poet also deconstructs the western one-
dimensional representation of Muslim women and re-introduce emerging resilient Hajars, bold queens and amorous women, and explores the ramifications of unraveling the embedded layers of meanings in their stories (Waldmeir 233). This act of uncovering a second story aligns with Kahf’s ideology and efforts to reconstruct a female Muslim protagonist in a new non-monolithic form from a postmodernist revisionary perspective. Consequently, Kahf’s poetry reframes and refigures these women’s narratives as part of recovering the lost past and the nameless and ostracized woman figure in history after decades of being marginalized, voiceless and dispossessed, while focusing on the female experience. Kahf’s revisionary poems re-introduce their stories and voices, actions and motives from a different feminist perspective as they form the basis of the formation of contemporary Arab Muslim women’s subjectivity.

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