theories and methodologies

Writing Islam in Contemporary American Poetry: On Mohja Kahf, Daniel Moore, and Agha Shahid Ali

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WHO WOULD WANT TO READ AN ESSAY TITLED "WRITING CHRISTIANITY"? "WRITING JUDAISM" MIGHT BY NOW SOUND A BIT DATED, GIVEN that Jewish subject matter is the domain of some of this country's greatest novelists and poets. "Writing Buddhism" still has an appealing ring to it. "Writing Islam" as a topic would not sound interesting to most Muslim authors in Muslim societies. In fact, "Writing Islam" could sound like a fundamentalist ploy to corrupt the thoroughly secular world of literature in contemporary Muslim societies. A more appealing angle might be to focus on writing Islam in the West, or on the global stage, where a growing body of Muslim literature written in European languages is emerging. The authors of this body of literature are outside two folds: Western literature per se and the literatures of their Muslim societies of origin. How do Muslim authors, specifically poets, fashion a voice when they are writing mostly to outsiders? What subject matter will they treat and in what manner? This essay explores these questions by examining how writing Islam is exercised differently by three American Muslim poets, Mohja Kahf, Daniel Moore, and the late Agha Shahid Ali.

In *E-Mails from Scheherazad* (2003), the poems of Mohja Kahf are primarily concerned with demystifying Muslim lives and practices in the United States and in altering misconceptions about Muslim women. These aims fall in line with Kahf's scholarly work, specifically her book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999), and her fiction, most recently the novel *Girl in a Tangerine Scarf* (2006). Aiming to educate non-Muslim audiences and to empower fellow practicing Muslim women, Kahf's poems sometimes home in on one segment of her potential readers. In "Hijab Scene," poems 1 and 2, we have cases of comparative weirdness: a Muslim woman wearing a hijab is confronted by a pierced, blue-haired punk teenager and a heavily made-up, skimpily dressed woman. Who is weirder, who is more conformist? the poems ask. If the American woman is acquiescing to a condescending form of male taste, and the punk teenager is conforming to a fad, why is the hijab-wearing woman not their equal,

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and why is she not equally tolerated? The poet anticipates the answer her generally tolerant poetry-reading audience will give her, which is, Yes, by all means, the hijab-clad woman is their equal and should be equally tolerated.

In the poem "My Babysitter Wears a Face Mask," Kahf expects resistance and thus needs a larger, more sympathetic portrayal of Salwa, the khimar-burqa wearing subject of her poem. Kahf renders the babysitter's veil as part of nature, and a magnificent part at that, since it shows her eyes "like the dark parts of the Himalayan mountains peeking" (32). Though Salwa is being watched by startled drivers, she has a sense of humor that allows her to be sympathetic toward the gawkers past whom she barrels in her husband's four-by-four. The poem ends with an image of her waiting at a traffic light where the music she and another woman driver favor is drowned out by an ad for a monster truck show blaring from a male trucker's stereo. Having set the scene for solidarity between Muslim and non-Muslim women, the poet then wonders why people do not "see behind the blind spot for an instant" (33). When the light changes, the poem affirms that Salwa is like everyone else, a hardworking American who is improving her English and working on her GED. She just happens to wear a face veil, that's all, as if the khimar or burqa is devoid of any repressive resonances.

Kahf presents us with situations that are familiar enough in our era of diversity discourse, where strangers are confronted publicly with their difference and where it is the poet's job to defend them. On the other hand, I cannot think of a contemporary, non-fundamentalist poet in the Muslim world who would write such an adoring portrait of a woman wearing a face veil. This attire is considered extreme and threatening among the vast majority of the literati in the Muslim world. But Kahf is not in conversation with her fellow Muslims in the Muslim world. As she addresses a largely Western audience, she presents portraits of seemingly intolerable Muslims and through them challenges the contemporary diversity discourse to make room for them. In the poem "My Body Is Not Your Battle Ground," Kahf, who is one of a generation of feminist and dedicated Muslim writers, critiques both Western and Muslim patriarchies. She demands that imperialist Westerners and their moral equivalents, the anti-imperialist Muslim chauvinists, cease using the Muslim female body as pretense for political violence, which has nothing to do with liberating or protecting women.

Let us look at a poem where the poet depends on, and may cause, a split between her audiences:

> Your lips are dark, my love,
> and fleshy, like a date
> And night is honeyslow
> in coming, long to wait—
> I have fasted, darling,
> daylong all Ramadan—
> but your mouth—so sweet,
> so near—the hours long!
> Grant but one taste—one kiss!
> You know what good reward
> feeders of fasters gain
> from our clement Lord—
> See how the fruits are ripe
> and ready, O servant of God—
> Kiss me—it's time, it's time!
> And let us earn reward

Titled "More Than One Way to Break a Fast," this poem utilizes dashes, trimeter lines, and rhyme perhaps to allude to Emily Dickinson. The poem's coyness and witty eroticism hearken also to Marvell and Sidney. This ironic but self-conscious intertextual practice falls neatly into Kahf's aim to make the Muslim visibly and audibly recognizable in, and thus native to, the West. To better understand the poem, however, the reader will need to remember that during Ramadan practicing Muslims abstain from food, drink, and all forms of eroticism from dawn to sunset. Following a religious tradition, Muslims break their fast

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with dates, the famed fruit of the desert. The poet wants a kiss, which according to the poem's title is another way to break a fast, thus shifting the poem's focus to the sexual rather than nutritional deprivation experienced in Ramadan. But who could the speaker's "love" be? The poem is open enough for a Western reader to think it is simply her lover, or even a female partner. Its purpose is perhaps to show Islam as a faith where piety and open sexuality are harmonized. Kahf is being playful and provocative here, but in the end the poem acknowledges female desire only within the tightly proscriptive bounds of Islam.

Though Kahf's poem hides its piety behind coy lustfulness, it does manage to challenge the predominant mind-sets of both Muslims and non-Muslims. For pious Muslims who may find the poem risqué, the poet manages to assert that female desire can be expressed and even celebrated. After all, our speaker had been fasting all day, and her choice of how to break her fast is her own business. For a non-Muslim reader, unaware of the poem's flirtation with piety, the portrait of a lustful Muslim female helps undermine the stereotype of the sexually repressed Muslim woman, and that can only be good for all concerned, but especially for Muslim women.

So focused is Kahf on representing Muslims to outsiders and on empowering Muslim women, we never quite get a sense of what it's like to be a Muslim when not on display. Gifted with a sense of humor and comfortable with hipster idiom, Kahf also uses bravado and bombast to express pride in her Muslim history, as in the poem "By the Gates of Alhambra." These tones, however, often shield us from understanding the Muslim experience. Like ancestral praise songs, they are not meant to be questioned and can be really enjoyed only by the children of the ancestors. The poet, however, recognizes the limits of religion as a source of identity. In one of the most compelling poems in the collection, "Learning to Pray All Over," the poet promises, "One of these days, I'll add / A spiritual dimension to my life" (*E-Mails* 97). Envisioning a form of natural religion, she adds, "Nude I will go, everywhere, out- / rageous and inappropriate, reveling." Shedding traditional Muslim ways of worship along with hijab and face veil, she declares, "I will find / Rock, stream, tree, wind, road // These will become my daily prayers" (98). This poem ends Kahf's book. We will have to wait until her second volume to see what becomes of this spiritual, nonsectarian, even nontheist vision.

If Mohja Kahf's women are likely to be discriminated against because of their appearance, which makes their struggle as Muslims one about surfaces, Daniel Moore, a white male convert to Islam, has the privilege of not being detected, so he can practice his spiritual inclinations in peace. Of his two recent books, I turn to *Ramadan Sonnets*. In some ways, he is like his Puritan forefathers, for whom the experience of faith is an individual matter. Writing about Ramadan, the poet chronicles the pains, joys, and ecstasies of the fast largely on his own.

For Moore, Ramadan serves as the prism through which the poet both examines his individual faith and generates it. His work is full of allusions to infinities, multitudes, and depths. He often ponders the stars and the cosmos and laments human desecration of the environment. He meditates on the mysteries of the human body and the synergy of biology and spirituality that fasting reveals. We frequently encounter the image of miners in his poems, where the journey into the depths of the earth, with a frail light attached to one's head, seems an appropriate metaphor for a spiritual quest. A California native who led an experimental theater group in the Bay Area and befriended the original Beats, Moore seems to depend on a rich literary and visual imagination to affirm his faith. He accepts orthodox Islamic doctrine but needs his rich, even surrealistically inspired imagina-

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tion to re-create the space in which he, God, and the cosmos are at peace.

The poems in *Ramadan Sonnets* point to the precarious social life of Muslims in the United States. Moore ponders the streets of America while fasting and how the world he lives in does not respond to his spiritual state. He reminisces about times lived in Muslim countries when he broke the fast with others and spent afternoons listening to his spiritual mentor in Meknes. He attempts to recapture the sense of community that Ramadan provided him and his fellow believers through communal worship and social contact. Again, like his Puritan forebears, he finds ecstasy in individual spiritual quest but also recognizes the solitude of his being a Muslim in America, especially during Ramadan. In this regard, his work provides a subtle critique of American life and the solitude that imbues it.

Moore is attuned also to the lives and turmoils of fellow Muslims outside America. Palestine, Bosnia, and Iraq feature among his preoccupations. Poems that address these subjects can only serve to cement his place in the American Muslim community. We would search in vain in Moore's work for any criticism of Islam or of Muslims, as if Muslim life in America and abroad would be trouble-free if it were not for outside forces such as colonialism and racism. It may be a convert's insecurity about his place in the community or a sense of protectiveness for his harassed cobelievers that prevents him from airing the community's dirty laundry. At every mention of Muhammad, he tacks on the pious phrase "peace be upon him." The phrase only slows the pace of the poetry. Given the poet's already venerational stance, such expressions are unnecessary.

Stiffness in phrasing and sometimes in thought is reflected in Moore's formal prosodic choices. His least successful poems in *Ramadan Sonnets* are the sonnets after which the book is titled. Inspired by Sufi teachings, his ecstatic quest in his sonnets sounds choked with ready-made wisdom and moralization. It is only in the free-ranging poems such as "Inestimable Water," "Drunkenness of the Word," and "The Human Tribe," where self-deprecation, tender humor, anger, fear, and acceptance of mortality commingle, that he manages to soar beyond his vast American surroundings:

> Who is this
>   pert and handsome
> rogue with the rose in his
>   teeth, the
> glamorous cotillion belle decked out in
>   flounces, who are these
> grinning, near-famous, utterly charming
> renegades who refuse to take the whole
> journey toward the light? What is their
> resistance, who do they paint such a
> wooden sneer on otherwise so
>   pliable faces?
> Why, in the valley of
> new-blown wildflowers are there
>   such hard rocks glaring
>   balefully at the
> sky? (43)

This is Moore at his best, without formal English prosody or the Muslim idiom of piety to contain him. His lines range and bend and swirl to reach the right image and argument for the moment of inspiration. It is these lyrical moments of expansion, as the poet searches for the appropriate metaphor for his experience of faith, that make his work illuminating to Muslims and non-Muslims.

Agha Shahid Ali, in his first book, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), underlines his Muslim origins with frequent images of prayer rugs and people engaged in worship. One gets the sense that he is staging departures from his inherited faith in those early poems. Assigning prayer and scenes of religious devotion to the dead or elderly, he allocates to the past these traditional means of seeking an inner life. In the poem "In the Mountain," the poet tells us he has forgotten "every name of

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God," while the man who lives his life, or his double, waits with "the Koran frozen to his fingertips" (56). The poet's double is frozen to the poet's shed faith but will outlive him and await news of the poet's death. The poem suggests that the lives exiles leave behind endure and haunt them. If the poet in exile sheds emblems of faith by assigning them to the dead, his double remains attached to these emblems. Ali portrays a Muslim's exile as a kind of Sisyphean enterprise: the poet attempts to move the solid rocks of his faith but instead creates a mountain of nostalgia. Appropriately, when Ali turned his attention to America, he titled his second book *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), confirming that much of what he brought with him is remembered experience that refuses to adhere to the present and refuses to vanish.

In *Nostalgist* and the volume that follows it, *The Country without a Post Office* (1997), Ali's personal concerns broaden into a cultural panorama. Ali returns to his native Kashmir in *The Country without a Post Office* to respond to the violence there. A cursory look at the epigraphs of the poems shows a variety of influences and inspirations (Yeats, Tacitus, Shakespeare, Herbert, Hope, Hopkins, Mandelstam, and Dickinson), and one epigraph is a passage from the Quran. The mixing of these sources highlights his hybrid literary genealogy. In several poems we notice the emergence of the Quranic and biblical figure of Ishmael, grandfather of Muslims, whom the Quran tells us was Abraham's offering to God instead of Isaac. Here Ali asserts that his allusions, if not cosmology, are Muslim. In this book he places Kashmir alongside Palestine, Sarajevo, and Chechnya, all predominantly Muslim territories whose struggles for liberation are supported by Muslims worldwide. In addition, a Muslim-to-Muslim conversation that is meant to be overheard by a non-Muslim gives the poem "Hans Christian Ostro" its form and content. The poem is an elegy for a German tourist who was kidnapped and killed in Kashmir. Here Ali turns to Muslim tradition to decry the innocent man's murder. "Whoso gives life to a soul shall be as if he had to all of mankind given life" goes the Quranic passage referenced in the poem, which also contains its reverse: "Whoso ever has taken life from a soul shall be as if he had taken life from all mankind" (86). Ali condemns the grave violation by his fellow Kashmiris of the faith they purport to defend and attempts to absolve Islam of being the inspiration of such crimes.

Ali's *Rooms Are Never Finished*, published as the poet was dying in 2001, fuses the political, personal, and spiritual into a powerful elegy. Ali found no solace in Muslim platitudes when he confronted his mother's death two years earlier. In the book's opening sequence, "From Amherst to Kashmir," he turns to the legend of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and the lament of Hussain's sister, Zainab, to voice Ali's grief at the loss of his mother. On Ashura, the greatest holy day in Shia Islam, believers passionately grieve the murder of Hussain by telling his story and enacting Zainab's lament. Ali's poetic sequence quotes the women accompanying Zainab. "O Muhammad," they wail, "the angels of Heaven send blessings upon you, but this is your Hussain, so humiliated and disgraced, covered with blood and cut into pieces, and your daughters are made captives, your butchered family is left for the East Wind to cover with dust" (14). The women honor the prophet of Islam but are dumbfounded by God's injustice. "How could God allow this to happen?" they ask (25). Ali's poem turns in anger at God, declaring, "God is the only assassin" (44). The poet makes religious legend personal by positioning himself as the grieving Zainab and his mother as the martyred Hussain.

"From Amherst to Kashmir" is ambitious, as it carries the burden of a double elegy. But it is not the best of Ali's work. When alluding to Muslim symbols or history, Ali is at his best when he is aware that an outsider is listening. Not burdened by the defensive-

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ness that colors Kahf's and Moore's work, his references to Muharram, Ashura, and even martyrdom have a natural ease about them, an ease that we notice in the poetry practiced in Muslim countries and directed at Muslims. Self-identified as an exile, Ali wrote poems that meant to disarm outsiders by his mastery of English verse and his ability to make the exotic familiar or even inevitable. In "From Amherst to Kashmir," however, his desire to make the metaphor of mother as victim or martyr forces him to pile on cultural references, thus displacing the personal grief. When grief does voice itself, it comes out in high-pitched cries. The problem faced here is not specific to Islamic allusions; it is the ability or inability of myth to express personal trauma. Images of Ashura in a Shiite context resonate with viscerally impacting emotion; it is perhaps this powerful inheritance, which the poet was unable to shed, that proved nontransferable to outsiders in his elegy.

Though more imaginative and daring in its use of Islamic references, Ali's passionate reversal of myth into raw, secular grief recalls some of Kahf's and Moore's strategic approaches. To varying degrees, the poets presented here do not take Islam's dicta at face value. Kahf turns a declaration of piety into a scene of seduction, albeit within the parameters of propriety. Moore's wild surrealist-inspired visualizations assert that orthodox belief and practice require as much active imagination as they do discipline, and imagination is a quality that most orthodox believers in most religions do their best to suppress. Islamic traditions in the hands of these poets offer ample opportunities for poetry. But to what end?

To ask what is aimed also demands that we know the context where these aims are devised. Ali's use of the martyrdom of Hussein to elegize his mother would be seen in the Muslim world's generally secular literary scenes as audacious in the way that a twenty-first-century Western poet using the passion of Christ for the same purpose would seem preposterous. The use of Islamic allusions in the works of Kahf and Moore would seem equally heavy-handed. However, the use of these allusions in the context of American poetry plays a large role in establishing these Muslim poets' claim to distinction and innovativeness. That most of their audiences are slow to decipher their allusions provides our poets with opportunities to be both heretical and traditional without the burden that these categories entail. The Islamic allusions they incorporate are integral to their poetic visions, which are based on living on the margins of both the United States and the Muslim world at large. These allusions emerge from a desire to belong as well as from a desire to promote tolerance and understanding. Reading these works, we can be comforted by the fact that poetry brooks no orthodoxy and that, while our poets are conscious of their alterity, their poetry is, at its best, comfortable in its alien skin.

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