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## **HYBRID IMAGINATION: A STUDY OF MOHJA KAHF'S *EMAILS FROM SCHEHERAZAD* *AND THE GIRL IN THE TANGERINE SCARF***

### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to investigate the hybrid imagination in selected works by Mohja Kahf, a Syrian-American poet (born 1967, Damascus, Syria). The term hybrid imagination is coined by the researcher drawing on both 18<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism and the contemporary post-colonial theory. Kahf's attempts at cultural reconciliation and human understanding are fraught with both pains and pleasures. Yet her ability to foster her hybrid imagination seems to allow her to choose a "Third Space" between two roads. The road not taken by Kahf is the essentialist position of identity which is either "purely Arab" or "entirely and exclusively American". Her novel and her poetry, as this paper attempts to investigate, seem to open "a Third Space" for both the poet and her readers, and to create a Utopia which poetry can sanction and publicize. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, and on earlier definitions of the imagination by the Romantics, the paper will attempt to explore Kahf's mechanisms (conscious or otherwise) which help open up and maximize such third space.

**Keywords:** Arab-American literature, hybridity, post-colonial literature, moslem women writers, Mohja Kahf

Mohja Kahf (1967- ) is an Arab American writer who was born in Damascus, Syria. She was three years old when her parents left Damascus in 1971 for the United States. Currently, she is a professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and a creative writer with many works to her name. "Hybrid Imagination", I argue in this paper, is the lens through which Kahf sees the world and represents it to her readers in her poetry and prose. The paper begins by an explanation of this key term "hybrid imagination", clarifying its two components: "imagination" and "hybrid", then moves to its application to the works of the writer, and to an investigation of how it shapes her oeuvre and fine-tunes her vision.

Two works by Kahf are selected for analysis: a collection of poetry *Emails from Scheherazad* (2001), and a novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). Drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and "the Third Space", and on John J. Su's study *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel* (2011), I have coined the term "Hybrid Imagination", as it captures best what Kahf and her readers are achieving or rather experiencing in her poetry and fiction.

## Imagination

Imagination is often associated with 18<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism when it used to be regarded as the chief creative faculty, a "synthetic and magical power" responsible for invention and originality<sup>1</sup>. Romantic writers have often identified imagination as genius, inspiration, taste, visionary power, and prophecy ("Imagination"). For William Hazlitt, the imagination is "that faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves, but as they are molded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power"<sup>2</sup>. These characteristics of the imagination seem to be applicable to Kahf's poetry and fiction; however, recent rediscoveries of the concept are even more relevant.

In spite of a recent distrust of the imagination in modern literary theory, John J. Su's book *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel* reestablishes the value of this mental faculty as an epistemological tool. Building on writings by the contemporary philosopher Richard Kearney, and on recent works by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, Su argues that the imagination in a work of art could function as what Appadurai calls "a social practice" and not simply an individual activity<sup>3</sup>. Releasing the imagination from its historical misconceptions, Appadurai asserts:

No longer mere fantasy [...] simple escape [...] elite pastime [...] and no longer mere contemplation, the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work [...] The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order<sup>4</sup>.

Imagining is strongly needed to counter what Russel Jacoby calls an "age of extreme visualization"<sup>5</sup>. Su, therefore claims that, "[i]f ideology involves conditioning the empirical senses to take certain images as more real than others, then the imagination's

<sup>1</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* I, [in:] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. J. Engell and W. Jackson Bate, vol. 7, no. 1., Princeton 1983, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> W. Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets. Lecture IV*, Delivered at the Surrey Institution, London 1818, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> J. J. Su, *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel*, Cambridge 2011, p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> A. Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, London 1996, p.31.

<sup>5</sup> R. Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-utopian Age*, New York 2005, p. xvi.

unique status as a mediator between the senses and cognition makes it crucial to recognition and understanding<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, contemporary artists consistently retain faith in the power of the imagination: Doris Lessing in her 2007 Nobel lecture claims: “It is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, and create us – [...]. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth-maker, that is our phoenix that represents us at our best and at our most creative”<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, Chinua Achebe views imagining as a means through which individuals are provided with a “second handle on existence”<sup>8</sup>, and reach “the closest approximation to experience that [they] are ever likely to get”<sup>9</sup>. As such imagination can serve as a tool through which the colonizer could sympathize with the colonized. Imagination was also crucial to another influential African writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, for whom the writer of a novel is “totally immersed in a world of imagination which is other than his conscious self. At his most intense and creative the writer is transformed, he is possessed, he becomes a medium”<sup>10</sup>.

## Hybridity

In colonial discourse, hybridity was a term of abuse for those who are products of miscegenation and mixed-breeds. It is instilled in nineteenth-century scientific-racism<sup>11</sup>. Linguist and cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin was the first to use the term to suggest the positive, yet “disruptive and transforming power of multivocal language situations and, by extension, of multivocal narratives”<sup>12</sup>. In a post-colonial context, however, the term has come to be: “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to ‘negotiate the difference’”<sup>13</sup>.

Bakhtinian and post-colonial senses of hybridity are complementary. M. M. Bakhtin defines hybridization as:

[A] mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic

<sup>6</sup> J. J Su, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> D. Lessing, *Nobel Lecture*, Nobelprize.org, Nobel Media AB 2013. [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2007/lessing-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2007/lessing-lecture.html) [access February 2, 2015].

<sup>8</sup> C. Achebe, *Hope and Impediments: Selected Essays*, New York, 1989, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 145.

<sup>10</sup> N. Wa Thiong O., *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*, London 1972, p. xv.

<sup>11</sup> R. J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London 1995, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, *Post-colonial Studies: the Key Concepts*, London 2000, p. 118.

<sup>13</sup> A. Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Postcolonial World: the New Political Economy of Development*, Baltimore 1997, p. 158.

consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor.<sup>14</sup>

Homi Bhabha adopts the Bakhtinian concept of hybridity to the condition of post-colonialism. He applies the subversive quality of the dialogic moment to the interaction and the narratives taking place between colonizers and colonized; “Black” and “White”; “Self” and “Other”. He thus subverts earlier static notions of identity and goes beyond fixed models of national identity and “rootedness”. In the *Location of Culture*, Bhabha, who is himself a migrant, advocates novel ways of thinking about identity as developing from “the great history of languages and landscapes of migration and diaspora”<sup>15</sup>. The introductory chapter of this book, entitled “Locations of Culture” expounds many ideas about culture, identity, fiction and the role of the critic which are relevant to the present research.

Bhabha’s concept of hybridity discards the idea that culture is fixed or “pure”. Instead, cultural identities are continually transforming and incorporating an array of influences. Cultures are constantly interacting with one another, in a constant historical process. Bhabha believes that:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments of processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself.<sup>16</sup>

Cultural meaning is therefore created in a “Third Space” that exists on the borderlands between perceived oppositional identities. Although the concept of the “Third Space” has broad transcultural applicability, John Thieme points out, it has a particular colonial and postcolonial relevance<sup>17</sup>. Searching for a space of resistance that would undermine the authority of colonial control, Bhabha resorts to the potential of hybridity to create that space through linguistic ambivalence. For Bhabha, however, a hybrid writer does not only “invade, alarm, divide and dispossess, [but] also demonstrate the contemporary compulsion to move beyond; to turn the present into the ‘post’; or, [...] to touch the future on its hither side<sup>18</sup>”.

<sup>14</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Austin 2008, p. 358.

<sup>15</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, p. 235.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> J. Thieme, *Post-colonial Studies*, London 2003, p. 258.

<sup>18</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

For Bhabha, the “Third Space” is a space of both intervention and invention, which allows history to proceed “*beyond* the instrumental hypothesis”<sup>19</sup>. Within this invention and intervention process, hybrid fiction writers often resort to what Bhabha terms the “unhomely moment”: Following Freud’s definition of the “unheimlich” as “everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light”<sup>20</sup>. Consequently, a few pages later, Bhabha makes the following statement on the political responsibility of the critic: The critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present”<sup>21</sup>, a statement which I take very seriously as I approach the works of Mohja Kahf.

## Objectives and methodology of research

The concepts of hybridity and “the Third Space” have considerable implications for Mohja Kahf as an Arab American and a Muslim American writer. They offer the possibility of a cultural politics that avoids a ‘polarity’ between Arabs and Americans, Muslims and Non-Muslims. The paper poses the following questions: Does Kahf manage to go “beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities”<sup>22</sup>, and to highlight the unique moments and processes that take place while cultural differences are being articulated and negotiated? How does her work contribute to an approach that avoids the perpetuation of antagonistic binarisms and develops inclusionary, not exclusionary, and multi-faceted, not dualistic, patterns of cultural exchange and maturation? Does she make use of the “uncanny” to “relate the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence”<sup>23</sup>

The paper begins with an initial assumption that it is primarily through the imagination that Kahf is capable of actualizing Bhabha’s notions of hybridity. It is the imagination defined as inspiration, genius, visionary power, taste or prophecy” which allows her to “open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity* (italics in the original).<sup>24</sup> Kahf’s ability to disengage herself from the world of perception, I argue, is what immerses her and escorts her readers into that “Third Space”, where “we will find words with which we can speak

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

of ourselves and Others. And . . . elude the politics of polarity and emerge as others of ourselves.”<sup>25</sup>

The research is a cross-generic study which attempts to shed light on the power of the imagination in Kahf’s collection of poems, *Emails from Scheherazad* (2001), and her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). The emphasis will be placed on Kahf’s synthetic and magical power, and the analysis will help reveal her abilities of myth-making; dream-making and storytelling emanating from, and adding to, her hybridity as a Muslim American writer. Explaining how the imagination has been critically appropriated to the specific situations and the two genres in which Kahf writes is a core concern of this study. Showing such imagination as hybrid, and Kahf as an author who “leap[s] the gulch between two worlds”<sup>26</sup> is also a major endeavor behind this research.

### **“This is my poem”: *Emails from Scheherazad***

Both imagination and hybridity create a Utopia which poetry *can* sanction and publicize. Kahf seems aware of this Utopic nature of poetry: “This is my poem and I can do what I want/ with the world in it”<sup>27</sup>, she writes in her poem “The Cherries”. Kahf’s poetry seems to intentionally blur the lines of demarcation between Arab/Oriental history and culture, and American/Western Technology and Urbanity. Characters fly freely from each of those spheres to the other. In flights of a hybrid imagination, Hagar sends a letter<sup>28</sup>; Scheherazad writes emails, and Scheherazad and Shahrayar get a divorce and a joint custody of their little girl<sup>29</sup>.

Within the context of Kahf’s “hybrid imagination”, seemingly opposing places can be collectively referred to as “here”. Her poem “The Roc” is named after the huge Arabic mythic bird *Arrokh* which has the power of carrying people across deserts and oceans. Both Syria and the United States are reconstructed as “the immediate place”; five out of six stanzas begin with the adverb “here” which evokes presence and availability, whether the poet is referring to Syria or the United States. The two places come alive in the poem by virtue of sounds, movement and the portrayal of human beings in action. The first stanza which describes the departure from “home” is an attempt to capture through the imagination a lost space:

<sup>25</sup> H. K. Bhabha. *The Commitment to Theory*. “New formations” 1988, no. 5. Summer, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> M. Kahf, *E-mails from Scheherazad*, Florida, 2003, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> M. Kahf. “*The Water of Hajar*” and *Other Poems: A Performance of Poetry and Prose*. “The Muslim World” Spring 2001, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> M. Kahf, *E-mails From Scheherazad*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

Here is my mom and dad leaving  
 Damascus, the streets they knew,  
 The familiar shape of food, the daily  
 Boiling and cooling of fresh milk,  
 The measurement of time by mosque sounds,  
 The scrape of heavy wooden shutter. Anyone  
 back home who had no phone fell off  
 the disc of their new world: tomato-cart man,  
 Crazy Fat'na the Goatwoman,  
 All the gatekeepers at the door  
 They left behind<sup>30</sup>.

The longer lines of the first seven lines of this stanza often turn into enjambments. This reflects the ease of that world in which routine and habit breed safety, stability and temporal spaciousness. The sentences however get shorter and fragmented as people “fell off the disc of their new world”. Those people, mostly subalterns, who used to function as grammatical “subjects” in everyday life, have now become “objects” as they hang loosely out of “space” waiting for the subject and the verb in “They left behind”, as if longing for the poet to include them within an open “Third Space”. They appear at the end of the stanza in fragments of the imagination. Such fragments, however, were enough to evoke: nourishment in “tomato” and “goat”; and natural safety in “the gatekeepers at the door”.

Yet, far from being pathetically nostalgic, Kahf sees America as her “home” which is equally charged with pleasant memories: “That’s mom/laughing at the strange loaf of the bread/There’s dad holding up the new world coffee in its funny striped boxes”<sup>31</sup>. The States is described by the mother in the poem as a “fantastic, lunar terrain”, and the “ten-cent toys” are transformed by the child’s imagination into “our treasures of Sinbad”<sup>32</sup>. With the mention of Sinbad the image of “the roc” in the title reiterates: Readers who know “A Thousand and one nights” would recall Sinbad attaching himself to the roc in order to be transported to the valley of diamonds. Here, in Kahf’s hybrid imagination, however, the diamonds are nothing but the ten-cent toys of the daughter of immigrants.

The new and the old worlds of the parents and the children thus merge and simultaneously pulsate in the poetry of the daughter. “Hybrid imagination” further allows her to blend two cultures via the two discordant motifs of the Roc and the telephone. Though derived from the totally separate domains of mythology and technology, these two symbols result in the shrinking of distances the poem miraculously achieves:

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

Here they are, mom and dad, telephoning  
 back home, where the folks gather around  
 the transmission as if it came from the moon.  
 The phone call to Syria was for epic  
 events only. The line pulsates  
 with the beating of enormous wings.  
 They shout and shout into the receiver  
 as if the other end was a thousand and one  
 ages away. Spiny talon  
 digs into rock<sup>33</sup>.

The use of these two motifs, the roc and the phone, proves the capacity of the hybrid imagination and its ability to dismantle the binary oppositions between mythology and technology, between past and present, and between “East” and “West”. Spaces shrink in the poem, and shouting is ridiculed, since the poet’s/the child’s magical mind envisages the two places as not far apart. Yet the harsh metaphor of “the spiny talon [which] digs into rock” is subtly and ambivalently indicative of the effort required to bridge the gaps and to negotiate the differences.

This awareness of the effort required for inscribing and articulating culture’s hybridity is revealed in “Fayetteville as in Fate”, a poem of hybrid imagination par excellence. In this refined poem, the poet juxtaposes the farmers who pick and cook the wild herbs of “poke” in Fayetteville with those who picked and cooked “*khibbeze*” in Syria. Such juxtaposition reflects the Bakhtinian “mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance”<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, in the next lines, Kahf more openly admits practicing “intentional hybridity” in what may be termed “a meta-poetic” reverie. Kahf deliberately unveils her cautious act of “mixing metaphors” which she knows is fraught with danger:

Whole populations of seed-sowers and herb-knowers,  
 some from Damascus, some from Fayetteville, they meet  
 In my head like the walls of the Red Sea crashing together  
 I roll dizzily toward them  
 like the bowling ball of a very bad bowler  
 I mix metaphors among them  
 like a reckless cook throwing things into a pot,  
 hoping they don’t explode when they touch each other,  
 hoping they don’t turn bitter when the heat rises<sup>35</sup>.

As much as she is aware of the similarities, however, she knows very well that in reality people on both sides will continue to cling to the “us-them” dualism: “Their names and

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

<sup>35</sup> M. Kahf, *Emails, op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.



their languages are wildly different/and they believe improbable, vile things about each other/But see the turn of the wrist when a woman from here / or a woman from there kneads dough/. . . the hands move with a similar knowledge”<sup>36</sup>. Bent on “coaxing” them into “The Third space”, Kahf sees poetry as the solution. The lines get shorter as she discovers the luring capacity of her imagination/poetry and turns into a whisper then transforms into a prayer whereby readers are lulled into a Utopic hybridity:

But who will coax them close enough to know this?  
 Darling, it is poetry  
 Darling, I am a poet  
 It is my fate  
 Like this, like this, to kiss  
 The creases around the eyes and the eyes  
 That they may recognize each other<sup>37</sup>:

*May their children e-mail one another and not bomb one another*  
*May they download each other's mother's bread recipes*  
*May they sell yams and yogurts to each other at a conscionable profit*  
*May they learn each other's tongue and put words into each other's mouth*

Say Amen  
 Say آمين  
 Say it, say it<sup>38</sup>

Kahf's hybrid imagination is at its best in this interplay of different languages in “Amen” and “آمين”, and a blend of different registers within the same language which allows a prayer to include the legal term “conscionable” and the mundane words “e-mail”, “recipe”, “yam and yogurt”. Like most of Kahf's poetry, this poem/prayer, is emblematic of Homi Bhabha's “Third Space”, the space of transformation between cultures, the space of appropriate dialogue, the space of beyond and “in-betweenness”, the space of encounter and the site of potential.

From a “Third Space”, Kahf mediates between her grandmother and Midwestern women in another significant poem entitled: “My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears”. In this poem Kahf's “in-betweenness” is materialized in the bathroom scene where she stands in the middle between her grandmother who washes her feet for *Wudu*, and the “Respectable Sears matrons [who] shake their heads and frown”. Kahf's imagination allows her to record her grandmother's inner thoughts whose “look in the mirror says, “*I washed my feet over Iznik tile in Istanbul/ with water from the world's ancient irrigation systems/I have washed my feet in the bath-*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

*houses of Damascus/ over painted bowls imported from China*<sup>39</sup> (italics in the original). One can spot here undertones of Langston Hughes's "I have known rivers", where the black persona speaks in elated pride of the ancient civilizations to which he belongs in an attempt to dismantle stereotypes of backwardness and barbarism. Kahf's syntax and vocabulary parallel Hughes's: "I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. / I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. / I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it"<sup>40</sup>. The pride in the two poems, is meant to provide a counter discourse of what Said calls: "[A] system of discourse by which the world is divided, administered, plundered, by which humanity is thrust into pigeonholes, by which "we" are human, and "they" are not"<sup>41</sup>. For the Sears' matrons, Mohja says: "my grandmother might as well have been squatting/in the mud over a rusty tin in vaguely tropical squalor,/Mexican or Middle Easter"<sup>42</sup>. Being a hybrid writer, however, Kahf presents both camps sympathetically and sarcastically at the same time: "My grandmother knows one culture – the right one"<sup>43</sup>. But the granddaughter who is both imaginative and hybrid could see two:

Standing between the door and the mirror, I can see  
at multiple angles, my grandmother and the other shoppers,  
all of them decent and goodhearted women, diligent  
in cleanliness, grooming, and decorum<sup>44</sup>.

Aware of her "in-betweenness" and of the predicament it entails, Kahf wittily writes:

I smile at the Midwestern women  
as if my grandmother has just said something lovely about them  
and shrug at my grandmother as if they  
had just apologized through me  
No one is fooled, but I  
hold the door open for everyone  
and we all emerge on the sales floor  
and lose ourselves in the great common ground  
of housewares on markdown<sup>45</sup>.

Though the grandmother and the Sears' women have not been *fooled* into understanding each other; Kahf's readers may be very well cajoled into sharing her double

<sup>39</sup> Mohja Kahf, "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears" <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/240896> [access 20 March, 2015].

<sup>40</sup> L. Hughes, "The Negro Speaks Of Rivers" "Poetry X", ed. J. Dempsey, August 29, 2005, <http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/11617/> [access 25 August, 2013].

<sup>41</sup> E. Said, *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, London 2005, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem.*

perspective and may be able to appreciate and even share her poetic wandering in the "Third Space".

### **The journey towards/W=within "The Third Space": *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf***

As in her poetry, Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, 2006 (henceforth *GTS*) reshapes assumptions about culture and identity from an 'us-them' dualism to an inclusive sense of 'both/and'. As shown in the analysis of the poetry above, the figurative indications of hybrid imagination are quite obvious and dense; in the novel, however, those elements are diffused throughout the narrative. Yet, elongated and elaborate as it is, *GTS* allows the reader to move slowly and gradually from his or her entrenched space of essentialism to what Bhabha terms the "alien territory" of the "Third Space"<sup>46</sup>.

In this quasi-autobiographical bildungsroman, Kahf's protagonist, Khadra Shamy, moves from what Homi Bhabha calls the "pedagogical" aspect of cultural identifications, which is fixed, exclusive and discriminatory, to the "performative" aspect of the articulation of identities. This, according to Bhabha "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People"<sup>47</sup> (upper case in the original).

This "pedagogical" identification is revealed at the beginning of the novel with the teachings of Kahf's parents wherein American people are homogenized into one category *kuffar*<sup>48</sup>, meaning the unbelievers. A rigid "us-and-them" hierarchy is enforced by the parents on the minds of Khadra, whose name in Arabic means green, and brings connotations of immaturity and naivety. According to this hierarchy "us" "the Muslims" are clean, faultless, and clever as opposed to "them", "the Americans", who are filthy, immoral and lazy. It takes the whole novel and a life journey for these rigid boundaries, and for stereotypes to dissolve in Khadra's consciousness.

Both the fear of the American "other" and that of "becoming" the American "other" reach their peaks at the bathtub scene which has a strong effect on Khadra's development. Coming home late and mud-spattered after an exciting excursion in the raspberry bushes of Indiana, Khadra is met with her mother Ebtehaj "trembling all over, her pale ivory face ashen"<sup>49</sup>. Ebtehaj, pushes Khadra into the bathtub while water runs hot and hard. She "scrubbed and scrubbed her daughter with an enormous loofah from Syria. 'We are not Americans!' she sobbed, her face twisted in grief. 'We are not Americans'".

<sup>46</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, p. 38.

<sup>47</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences*, [in:] *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, New York 2003, p. 208.

<sup>48</sup> M. Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, New York 2006, pp. 13-14.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

Americans, her father and mother would define “were the white people who surrounded them, a crashing sea of unbelief in which the Dawah Center bobbed, a brave boat”<sup>50</sup>. This sarcastic tone in which Kahf’s narrator often portrays the naivety of Khadra’s parents is only paralleled with the mockery with which she treats the other camp. For xenophobia was not by any means one-sided in *GTS*. Islamophobia and violence against Muslims takes different forms in the novel, some of them quite fatal. Yet, being the hybrid she is, Kahf is sensitive to accusations and antagonism from both parties.

As a result, Kahf’s tone is equally sarcastic when she deals with Anti-Muslim sentiments. Orvil Hubbard who initiated the “American Protectors of the Environs of Simmonsville” was “a gaunt man with a crew cut and a limp who liked to wear his old army uniform with the Congressional Medal of Honor pinned on whenever he protested against Muslim presence”<sup>51</sup>. Kahf is equally sarcastic of his way of speaking and the understatement he uses to reveal his “knowledge” about Muslims: “I am not speaking from ignorance . . . They *will* destroy the character of our town”<sup>52</sup> (emphasis in the original).

Within Kahf’s hybrid imagination, both Hubbard and the “learned” uncle Kuldip of the Da’wa center had prosthetic limbs, the former having lost his leg from stepping on a mine in Korea, while the latter lost his right arm in a printing-press accident in Pakistan. Indicative of loss in former colonies, both missing limbs may reveal the indelible marks of colonialism that will continue to haunt human interaction in the ‘new’ world. The parallelism, however, is meant to reveal how fragile, pitiful *and* ironically similar both antagonistic parties are. It may also be read in the light of the “unheimlich” which Bhabha sees as a novelistic device for “relat[ing] the traumatic ambivalences of personal psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence”<sup>53</sup>.

Ironic parallelism/similarity is created by Kahf in another scene where the two parties are exposed as fragile, frantic and pitiful. Invited by Ginny Debs, one of the white girls at Khadra’s school for a sleepover, Khadra was allowed by her parents to go to the party, but not to sleep over. The scene brilliantly captures reciprocal xenophobia:

Ebtehaj whispered three *kursis* for her daughter’s safety as she slipped behind the wheel of the station wagon. The thought of staying parked outside the kuffar house until pick-up time crossed Ebtehaj’s mind, but she cast a final doubtful glance at the door and pulled away.

Just as she did, Ginny Debs’s mother was picking up the phone. Her neighbor on the line said, “You know what you have in your driveway?”

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>53</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.* p. 15.

Mrs. Debs looked out the window. "It's just one of the mothers dropping off her kid," she said.  
 "Hmmpf," the neighbor said, and then hung up.<sup>54</sup>

It is Kahf's ability to gently expose both sides from an insider's point of view which gradually allows her to proceed to the "Third Space" and helps her readers to appreciate her imaginative 'border-crossing'. Kahf's journey towards the "Third Space" begins with questioning her parents' behavior and passes through disillusionment with the idea of a "pure" Muslim community, the realization of America as "home", the negotiation of many "Muslim" traditions, an acquaintance with Sufism, and finally an acceptance and a love for both the hybrid self and the different other.

All this takes place while Khadra is steeped into American culture, learning the language, making and breaking friendships, and watching TV programs including those which her parents considered inappropriate for children. Khadra used to watch Charlie's Angels at al-Deens's who are less strict than her parents, and used to subconsciously connect the characters in the show with her Muslim background: "Khadra liked Sabrina best because she never wore bikinis but dressed modestly . . . Sabrina was almost the Muslim Charlie's angel, she and Hanifa agreed"<sup>55</sup>.

Questions addressed at the Sunday school by Khadra and her two friends Hanifa and Tayiba attest to what Homi Bhabha calls "an interrogatory interstitial space" in which fixed "primordial polarities"<sup>56</sup> begin to be unsettled:

Khadra, Hanifa, and Tayiba gave Uncle Taher a workout with their questions. *Are birthdays haram? Mama said birthdays parties are vainglorious. What is vain-glorious? . . . How come Muslim men can marry non-Muslim women but Muslim women can't marry non-Muslim men? Will all non-Muslims go to hell?* He called them the "How Come Girls"<sup>57</sup>.

Khadra gets disillusioned about her family's moral codes when she discovers their attitude toward blackness and realizes the discrepancy between the just Islamic values they are constantly preaching and their racist attitudes towards people of color. When Khadra wanted to braid her hair in the African American style of her friends, her mother "vetoed it" and her grandmother's language of disapproval betrayed a stark racist attitude: "Such pretty hair, not like that repulsive hair of *Abeed*, all kinky and unnatural"<sup>58</sup>. It is interesting in this scene how the young girl and her brother begin to *teach* their parents morals and religion:

<sup>54</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.

<sup>56</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> M. Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, p. 37.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

“It’s haram to be racist,” Khadra protested. “Eyad! Isn’t it haram to be racist?”  
 “Yeah. You can’t say ‘abed.” He gave Teta a look that reminded her of his father  
 in his teenaged years, when he started to getting religion.  
 Teta looked bewildered. Hurt<sup>59</sup>.

In spite of such awareness, however, Khadra remains entrenched in her camp for most of her childhood and adolescence. In a chapter which begins with an extract from the final scene of E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Kahf reveals how Khadra breaks her childhood friendship with Livvy Morton, who is also fixed in a rigid Christian dogma<sup>60</sup>. Again, Kahf makes her readers laugh at, yet pity, both girls for their antagonistic positions which ruin their friendship in the name of Allah/God. In doing so, she subtly invites her readers to occupy the “Third Space” and to question “the binary division through which spheres of social experiences are often spatially opposed”<sup>61</sup>. The scene is sad and satirical at the same time:

Livvy kept saying “God’s son this” and “God’s son that.” Each time she said it, fingernails scraped against a blackboard in Khadra’s head.  
 She finally put her hands to her ears and said, “Stop!”  
 “Stop what?” Livvy said.  
 “You don’t understand. That’s the worst possible sin in my religion, okay?”<sup>62</sup>

The conversation developed from there to Livvy assuring Khadra that Khadra is going to Hell because she has not accepted Jesus as Savior. The only exception that may save her friend from Hell, according to Livvy, is dying young and being accepted in limbo. An exception to which Khadra responded nervously: “You want me to die young? Well, guess what, Livvy, you’re going to hell too”<sup>63</sup>. The two girls are therefore victims of what Bhabha calls “pedagogical identification” and the stiff “us-and-them” hierarchy enforced by parents and religious institutions.

Khadra’s journey towards “the Third Space” paradoxically begins with a physical journey to Mecca to perform Hajj (pilgrimage) with her family. Kahf’s hybrid imagination selects this specific place to stage Khadra’s sudden awareness of the essence and meaning of home and exile. Kahf brilliantly captures Khadra’s hybridity as she views the Ka’ba for the first time in her life. The spiritual joy of watching the Ka’ba is intertwined in Khadra’s mind with her intellectual perplexity about racism and her subconscious attachment to American culture represented in a phil Collins song: Only within a hybrid imagination do a Muslim pilgrim’s feelings of longing for the sacred place get translated through a song by Phil Collins:

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 76.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127.

<sup>61</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>62</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 127-128.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

Khadra tried to keep the joyous talbiya in her mind and on her tongue: *Here I am, O my Lord, Here I am! Labbaik, allahumma, labbaik!* But she kept getting it crossed with Phil Collins in her head crooning, “*I can feel it coming in the air tonight, oh Lo-ord . . . I’ve been waiting for this moment for all my life, Oh Lo-ord. . .*”<sup>64</sup>.

Calling the Ka’ba “Islam’s Lady in Black” can be read as her unique tribute to both women and blackness which is accentuated by remembering Zuhura, her black American Muslim friend who was literally raped and murdered by bigotry and racism<sup>65</sup>. Drawing on historical records which say that Hajar, prophet Ibrahim’s second wife and the mother of Ismail was Nubian, Kahf’s description of Al Ka’ba places blackness at the heart of Islam and the heart of the universe:

She was hostess. Come in, come in. Come into my circle, gracious and kind. . . Many pilgrims threw themselves into her Lap or *Hijr*, the half-circle on one side where the Kaba used to extend, where Hajar and Ismail slept: where a black woman lay buried in the heart of Islam. . . . *Imagine*, Khadra thought, looking at the massive tides of pilgrims around the Kaba, *these circles get bigger and bigger, as people all over Mecca face her to pray, then all over the world, even as far as America, wave after wave of people, in concentric circles going all around the earth, and I am here at the center of all that*<sup>66</sup> (italics in the original).

The Phil Collins lyrics playing in Khadra’s mind during *tawaf* function at this stage of the journey/the novel as dramatic irony where the reader is aware of Khadra’s hybridity while she herself still cherishes the “fixed” identity of the pure and superior Muslim woman. She gets disillusioned about this identity through several incidents during the Mecca episode. Mecca, idealized in her mind as the land of the prophet, seizes to be “home” for her through a series of encounters. The first of these occurs during the very act of pilgrimage, when a man jabbed Khadra in the ribs and “a wall of Arab Gulf men stormed through, elbows locked around their women kin [as] they shoved everyone aside barking: ‘we have womenfolk’”<sup>67</sup>. Khadra felt humiliated and angry: “What are we, chopped liver? [She] thought as she was pulled over to the right”<sup>68</sup>. Here again, Kahf’s hybrid imagination evokes Zuhura in the scene, as “a tall black teenage girl, round-shouldered like Zuhura, got pressed up against her . . . her face, up close to Khadra’s and meeting her eye, was serene. ‘Peace,’ she whispered in Khadra’s ear. ‘*Salamu. Yasalam*’”<sup>69</sup>. Arousing Zuhura in this scene, Kahf may be evoking the “unheimlich” in order to say that oppression is universal whether you are at “home” or in “exile”.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162-163.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*.

For Muslim women, black and white alike, Mecca, the land of the prophet should function as an impartial and secure “home”. Nevertheless, to Khadra’s dismay, racism and sexism could not have been worse. Two other episodes help Khadra to get disillusioned about her romanticization of “home”: first she is prevented from praying fajr at the mosque and brought home in humiliation by “two burly matawwa policemen with big round black beards and billy clubs belted over their white caftans”<sup>70</sup>. Again Kahf’s sarcasm is funny and sad at the same time: “‘Is this one of your womenfolk?’ they asked Uncle Zaid, . . . ‘we found her trying to get into the mosque.’ They said as if she was a vagrant or something”<sup>71</sup>.

Kahf then presents another episode which completely shatters Khadra’s romantic view of “home” and helps her proceed to the “Third Space” beyond what Bhabha calls “an originary [sic] identity or a ‘received’ tradition”<sup>72</sup>. Getting pulled into a car full of young Saudis, by her cousin Afaaf, she was driven at a high speed to the desert and was sexually harassed by one of the young men. The man who stereotyped Khadra as immoral said, “you grew up in *America*– don’t tell me you never do stuff like this in America –”<sup>73</sup>. Again dramatic irony occurs as Khadra keeps shouting and asserting “I am an Arab, like you”<sup>74</sup>, “I’m *not* American”<sup>75</sup>, yet when she wished to express herself and to counter attack Afaaf “she launched into a torrent of English: I *hate* you–you’re a FILTHY girl, with FILTHY friends – you take me home – you take me home RIGHT NOW. You –you – you *goddamn bitch*”<sup>76</sup>. It is interesting here how Khadra begins to use the word “home” with America in mind. The airplane flight back to the States marks her new awareness of America as her “home”, and of her identity as not purely Arab or Muslim, but rather a hybrid Arab-American and Muslim-American. This chapter of the novel/the journey ends with Khadra “press[ing] her nose against the airplane window. The lights of Indianapolis spread out on the dark earth beneath the jet. The sweet relief of her own clean bed awaited her there – and only there, of all the earth”<sup>77</sup>. Although this awareness is a crucial point at Khadra’s story/journey, she has not yet entered into what Bhabha calls the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications [which] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy”<sup>78</sup>. This takes place later in the novel/the journey after Khadra passes through Four significant experiences: her acquaintance with the Shelbys, her

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 166.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>72</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 174.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 176.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 179.

<sup>78</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 5.



marriage to Juma, her encounter with Sufism, and her journey to Syria where she listens to her grandmother's stories and learns about her mother's and grandmother's traumatic histories that expose colonial and sexist horrors.

Meeting Joy Shelby at college and visiting her family marks the defeat of the ethnic purity principles that Khadra lived by throughout her life. Joy's name is quite representative of her family which relishes music, friendship, and good food; and that views Islam as a faith not as a strict lifestyle<sup>79</sup>. Joy's Anglicized family name Shelby, which is originally Shalaby attests to the hybridity of the family and to their ability to live *joyfully* in an "in-between" space. Khadra visits the Shelbys with her brother Eyad who was bewildered, but not fascinated, with that hybrid family:

She and Eyad had never seen Arab folk like this: women called Rose who mangled Arabic with an American accent and played Arabic music on American guitars, and men who looked like Hoosier farmers in denim overalls but a shade or two darker. All sitting around eating kibbeh<sup>80</sup> of an Indiana evening as the midges and moths played in the porch light<sup>80</sup>.

The Shelbys' chapter begins at the kitchen of ImLitfy, the family's Christian neighbor, where Khadra and Eyad accompanied Joy at the beginning of the visit. Not realizing the lady was Christian, Khadra and Eyad instinctively felt at home at ImLitfy's with the smell of peeled onions, ground lamb meat, and the site of the mountain of bulgur. Kahf seems to use kibbeh as a metaphor for the hybridity of cultures to which the whole chapter is a tribute. Speaking of Kibbeh ingredients: onions; meat; and bulgur, the narrator observes: "Into the maw of the Moulinex were poured these three, whose fates would be forever ground together, though they knew not each other before that hour"<sup>81</sup>.

Whereas Eyad is more rooted in his fixed identity, Khadra's infatuation with the Shelbys indicate that she is willing to trade the security of "roots" for itinerant "routes". These two homonymic terms "roots" and "routes" are borrowed from Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic*. Though dealing mainly with the development of identities through the Middle Passage, Gilroy's book is as relevant to black studies and the Atlantic world as it is to any diaspora. "The conceptual frameworks of motion, encounter, and identity shift" set by Gilroy in this book, are generally useful for understanding how cultural forms and expressions develop through routes of communication across borders"<sup>82</sup>. Gilroy stresses the importance of plotting routes which take migrants and their children

<sup>79</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 191.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 188.

<sup>82</sup> J. Heathcott, *Urban Spaces and Working-class Expressions Across the Black Atlantic: Tracing the Routes of Ska*. "Radical History Review" 2003, no. 87, p. 183.

“*imaginatively* as well as physically, to many places and into contact with many people”<sup>83</sup> (emphasis added). Khadra experiences this at the Shelbys while also experiencing “loss and hope”, two feelings that James Clifford sees as symptomatic of diaspora consciousness<sup>84</sup>. Loss of the “pure” ethnic identity is expressed via interior monologue as Khadra realizes that ImLitfy is Christian:

Khadra glanced at their hostess’s face, her features so familiarly Syrian, her cadence and voice equally so. What other homes of similar sweetness and joy had they passed by all these years, insisting as they did on their separateness and specialness, then? What a waste. Something started to unravel in Khadra there in the kitchen, bringing her almost to the point of secret tears. Confused, she kept them in<sup>85</sup>.

The “loss” Khadra feels is accompanied by “hope” and the pleasure of exploring new “routes”. This is symbolized in her shaking hands with Baker, Joy’s brother, regardless of the stern looks Eyad flashes at her. It is interesting to trace Khadra’s imagination until the moment when “[her] little pudgy [hand] instinctively homed into [Baker’s] big clasp [as] he covered it with his other hand”<sup>86</sup>. When Khadra sees Baker, “Fresh cold air came in with him, and a smell of wood burning that made Khadra think of crackling logs on a fire and rustling piles of autumn leaves”<sup>87</sup>. Khadra was equally fascinated by Joy’s father; she couldn’t help compare him to her own father in a perplexity indicative of her transformation and her progress towards “in-betweenness”.

As Khadra made her way over the creaky floorboards after using the bathroom to make ablution, she spied, through a door slightly ajar, Joy’s father on his prayer rug, his back to her, finishing off a slow-morning rakat. He had made no fuss of “clap-clap-clap, it’s prayer time, everyone hop to it.” But wasn’t it a father’s duty to call everyone to prayer?<sup>88</sup> (192)

In spite of this confusion, the visit to the Shelbys helped Khadra “imagine” new “routes”; the Shelbys Chapter ends with Khadra imagining herself “riding full gallop through tall grasses right up to the edge of a deep woods”<sup>89</sup>. These “routes” open up between the East and the West in an “interstitial space” between the two; hence, Kahf’s use of the following Quranic epigraph: “Say, ‘He is Lord of the East and of the West and of all that is between the two’, if you have intelligence.’ Quran: The Poets, 27”<sup>90</sup>. It is interesting how

<sup>83</sup> J. McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester 2010, p. 249.

<sup>84</sup> J. Clifford, *Diaspora*. “Cultural Anthropology” 1994, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 190.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 189.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 192.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 187.

such juxtaposition of the Quranic verse and the Shelbys' scene suggests a new reading of the Quranic verse, one which does not only imply the physical space between the East and the West, but also the cultural "in-betweenness", to use Bhabha's term. Kahf's intertextuality, which springs from her hybrid imagination, therefore, causes us to re-read, or reassess our understanding of the original text.

While the hybrid Shelbys give Khadra hope for itinerant "routes", it is Khadra's marriage, however, which signals her disillusionment with the fixed "roots" in which all Muslim women should tie themselves. Juma would not let Khadra "become" the hybrid woman she is destined to be. His rigidity and narrow mindedness would hinder her identification process by imposing on her what Bhabha calls "designations of identity"<sup>91</sup>. Yet Khadra's hybridity was too strong to be dismantled by such designations; this strength leads the marriage to end up in divorce and an abortion which precedes Khadra's own rebirth. Several scenes are indicative of such conflict between imposed identity and ongoing identification during the Juma phase. The bike on which Khadra insists on riding, while Juma adamantly rejects, could be read as a symbol of mobility and by extension of an ongoing process of identification. Unveiling Juma's perspective during one of the bike scenes, Kahf's narrator reveals how he feels perplexed while trying to understand the hybridity of his wife: "But—' he looked puzzled. She was an Arab girl, familiar with Arab customs. He hadn't expected her to be doing things that would embarrass him"<sup>92</sup>. As a result of several quarrels over the bike, in which Juma would leave home for days without telling her and would come back whenever he was ready, Khadra put the bike in the storage area until "the gears rusted and . . . [s] omething inside her rusted a little, too"<sup>93</sup>.

Khadra's education was another important step towards her final arrival at the "Third Space": "In Professor Eschenback's class, she began to see what her belief looked like if you *stepped* away and observed it from a *distance*"<sup>94</sup> (emphasis added). Renee Green uses exactly the same metaphor to express her dilemma as an African-American artist: "Multiculturalism doesn't reflect the complexity of the situation as I face it daily. . . It requires a person to step outside of him/herself to actually see what he/she is doing"<sup>95</sup>.

Later, however, Kahf exchanges the soft metaphor of "stepping away" with the tougher image of "earth plates" moving in different direction, an image reminiscent of the primordial "plate tectonics". Such tough image seems to convey more aptly Khadra's risky process of identification and its terrifying and unsettling moments:

<sup>91</sup> H. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 230.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 231.

<sup>95</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Khadra felt as if she were standing atop two earth plates grinding as they moved in different directions. The one directly under her was the view of Islam she'd grown up knowing. The other was what she was catching glimpses of. A rift occasionally opened beneath her feet, but she steadied herself against it. Otherwise, suddenly, what she'd always thought was right appeared wrong, and what she'd always known was bad seemed, for an eye-blink moment, good. It was terrifying<sup>96</sup>.

The above quotation, with its “plate tectonics” metaphor can best be explained in terms of Bhabha’s definition of the “au-del’ a”, or the “beyond”, which according to him is “neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past”<sup>97</sup>. What Khadra is experiencing here is “The borderline engagements of cultural difference [...] which may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity”<sup>98</sup>.

Terrifying as it is for Khadra, stepping into the “beyond”, or moving to a state of “in-betweenness” requires an act of the imagination which transcends logic in order to reconcile opposites. This takes place in Khadra’s journey on the subconscious level while she tries to find her way to Professor Eschenbach’s house to deliver a delayed assignment. She goes through a horrifying, yet healing, experience in the night; subconsciously again, and in a way reminiscent of the Ka’ba scene “[she] found herself reciting Poe along with prayer as she picked a path over the uneven gravel”<sup>99</sup>. To her surprise the Professor was in the basement with many others who were swaying in time to the rhythm of words weirdly familiar: *All-lahh, All-ahh*. . . . then Khadra realized. . . *Hayy—Alive*. . . *The clashing earth plates shifted under [her]*<sup>100</sup>. In her attempt to capture Khadra’s dilemma, Kahf’s language then turns into what Julia Kristeva calls the “semiotic”; sentences get fragmented, and poetic as, on her way home, Khadra thinks of Juma and of whoever may hinder the enunciation of her new hybrid self:

She fled home, the car wheels slipping and sliding on the country road. Home. Bed. Edgar Allen Poe dreams, a brick cavity inside a house. A niche, a manger. Snow, a green branch in the white. Brick by brick. Mantle. Dismantle. A lamp in the niche, walled up. Oil lamp, yes, or maybe child. Flailing. Flail whale belly of a wail. She would pluck the child out of the wall and save the one who was “Alive.” Tracks in the snow like a gabelle. Hold the lamp up high –run [...] <sup>101</sup>.

While the lamp in the niche connects with the lantern she has just seen in Professor Eschenbach’s house, it also stands for the light at the end of “the route” she wants to plot for herself, away from her family’s attempts to fix her in a specific “home”, which

<sup>96</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

<sup>97</sup> H.K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 1-2.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>99</sup> M. Kahf, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 239.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*.

Juma steadfastly perpetuates. The plucking of the child out of the wall that has been built “brick by brick” may foreshadow the imminent abortion, but it can also refer to the birth of her own self which has been trapped by “pedagogical” cultural identifications; the plucking of *that* child, the old Khadra whose identity was fixed, exclusive and discriminatory, was the only hope for saving the mature one whose hybrid imagination can keep her and others truly “Alive”.

Khadra herself seems to realize the link between maturity, hybridity and the imagination. On her way from the hospital after the abortion, Khadra tells Joy Shelby, who does not approve of abortion yet stands by her friend’s side, that entomologists call “the adult instar—the mature bug”: an “imagine”. Khadra repeats: “Yeah. Like, you and I are the ‘imagines’ of the human species”<sup>102</sup>. By announcing herself and her hybrid friend Joy as the “‘imagines’ of the human species”, Khadra seems to be aligning herself with the Shelbys and with Joy/*joy*. She seems to be celebrating her maturity and her newly discovered hybridity which would allow her to bridge the “us-and-them” division like Joy does in Im-Litfy’s kitchen.

Yet Khadra does not come to full awareness of the hybridity of cultures until she visits her grandmother, Teta, in Syria and learns about her two friends the Christian Hayat and the Jewish Iman who worked with her as telephone girls in the Syrian *Centrale*. The choice of this triad and of their job is symbolic; the phone, as we have seen in the poetry, is a favorite symbol in Kahf. Tetare collects the old days and tells Khadra about her job and that of her two friends: “*AlôCentrale? Connect me, please – and we’d connect [people]. Strangers, neighbors, wasn’t it marvelous*”<sup>103</sup>.

Visiting Jobar *Kanees*, the synagogue of Teta’s old friend Iman, gave one final blow to Khadra’s essentialism. Listening to the rabbi welcoming her in a warm Damascene accent, “she could suddenly *imagine* being his granddaughter... pattering about in faded house slippers to find him dozing in his chair, his finger on a word in the holy book in his lap”<sup>104</sup> (emphasis added). Following such imagination she started to question her own identity: “Who was she? What was she, what cells of matter, sewn up into this Khadra shape, this in star? Imagine”<sup>105</sup>.

In his epiphanic moment, Khadra realizes her affinity with the rabbi and sees one more lantern in the wall of the synagogue; boundaries continue to blur in her imagination as glimpses of her lost friendships “flash upon her inward eye” in a Wordsworthian “host”:

<sup>102</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 250.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 271.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 306.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibidem*.

She slept and woke. Slept again. Dreamt, cried, and blessed . . . Now the barrier was removed, and they all rushed into her heart, and it hurt: Livvy. Hanifa. Im-Litfy. Joy's Assyrian boyfriend, whose holocaust she denied. Drove of people, strangers and neighbors. *We are your kin, we are part of you.* Where are those who love one another through my Glory? *Their souls are in the roundness of green birds, roaming freely in paradise*<sup>106</sup>.

In the above extract, the *Qudsi* (sacred) *Hadith*, "Where are those who love one another through my Glory?", merges with a *regular Hadith* on the status of martyrs in paradise which describes their souls as "roaming freely" in "the roundness of green birds". Moreover, as usual within the hybrid imagination of Mohja Kahf, the two *Hadithes* gradually merge with Coleridge's *The Ancient Marnier* which flashes as another subtle intertext when Kahf suddenly realizes that "he prays best who loveth best":

Khadra came to prayer. She felt as though she were praying now for the first time, as if all that long-ago praying, rakat after rakat, had been only the illusion of prayer, and this – what she began to do now – was the real thing. All that had been lost was returning. All that had been disconnected was connected again – *alôCentrale?*<sup>107</sup>

In Syria, Khadra goes through many experiences that help her secure her entry into the "the Third Space": In Muhyiedeen Ibn al-Arabi's mosque, she is pacified by the sound of *dhikr* and the sight of architectural hybridity: "She was still. Dark brick, white stone, dark flesh and white side by side, striped the arch-work of the mosque"<sup>108</sup>.

Besides, Teta's stories reveal the hybridity of Khadra's "original" culture, while also debunking a painful personal and colonial history according to which Teta's teacher and her husband, with whom she eloped, are killed by Zionist terror squads in 1948. In another encounter, Aunt Razanne, tells Khadra the story of her mother's traumatic rape as a young girl by her history teacher in a school trip to France, a story which explains for both Khadra and the reader why Ebtehaj developed into the religious fanatic she is.

In Syria, also, Khadra meets a poet who tells her, "You are the baklava"<sup>109</sup>, and reminds her that she has to love her "self" regardless of its seeming contradictions. Like Paul D. who tells Sethe at the end of Morrison's *Beloved*: "You your best thing"<sup>110</sup>, this poet reminds Khadra at a crucial moment of her journey that in her very chest resides her "church" and her "mihrab"<sup>111</sup>. It is interesting how Kahf creates an ambiguity about

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 306-307.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 307.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 292.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 308.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 335.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 302.

the character of that poet; she even makes the reader doubt at a certain moment that he exists outside Khadra's imagination.

Kahf's newly discovered hybridity, and her awareness of the continual flux of her ever-changing identity is symbolized by the tangerine scarf she buys in Syria, a scarf which she lets "hung from the crown of her head. Not tightly, the way Ebtehaj wore it [but] loosely, so it moved and slipped about her face and touched her cheek, like the hand of a lover"<sup>112</sup>. It is interesting how Khadra buys this scarf in Teta's favorite color and how she buys a long piece of tissue silk fabric enough to make two scarves, one for her and the other for Teta, a gesture which symbolizes the eternal connection between these two "girls", a connection which allows Khadra, like the scarf, to move and to fly, while she remains connected.

Syria, however, was not the last physical journey Khadra makes in her attempt to protect her newly discovered hybrid imagination; she has to come back to the States; "she whisper[s] as the wheels hit the ground. Homeland America. *bismillah*"<sup>113</sup>. Yet, in order to maintain the fluidity of her identity, Indiana was not the right place for Khadra; there, many people would fix her as "Wajdy Shamy's daughter of the Dawah Center?" and would require her "to carry the banner"<sup>114</sup>. Khadra, therefore, chooses Philadelphia, which her new Jewish friend Blu describes as "The City of Brotherly Love"<sup>115</sup>. From there, she manages to connect with her now old and fragile parents and to reassure them of her love. Making *tabouleh*, a traditional Syrian salad, with her mother in the kitchen, she is disappointed about how her mother believes she lost her to America: "Khadra sighed and went around to her mother and kissed her soft Nivea-scented cheek. 'I am not lost,' she whispered. 'I'm right here.' And there she was, hands flecked with parsley"<sup>116</sup>.

Expressing love, pity and gratitude to her parents, does not however deter Khadra from supporting her brother Jihad, in his decision to marry their white American Christian neighbor Sariah Whitcomb. After Jihad tells Khadra of his intention to marry Sariah, Khadra thinks: "It's going to take every inner resource we've got to give this love a place to grow. All our families"<sup>117</sup>. Kahf's use of irony and intertextuality is at its best in this episode: Jihad, the youngest child of the Shamys is a member of a music band named "The Clash of Civilization", after Samuel Huntington's famous "theory"/book. Jihad's band is an eclectic group of boys, which include two Muslims: Jihad and Garry Abdullah, an African American Muslim teen, in addition to Brig and Riley Whitcomb,

<sup>112</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 313.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 314.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 317.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 384.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 433.

two Mormon boys. Kahf's critique of Huntington is her novelistic "theory" that when civilizations meet, they produce music not war. She later uses the name of the band as a pun to hint at the potential of love and marriage to end the wars among people: When asked by Khadra about the future of his music band after he gets married to Sariah: Jihad answers, "When me and Sariah get married, it might break up The Clash of Civilizations. Or it might not"<sup>118</sup>. Kahf's choice of the name *Jihad* is also significant of her ironic inversion of cultural stereotypes; Jihad, the sweetest of the Shamys, is keen on love, not war, and his "Clash of Civilization" is nothing but a band of music.

Khadra's "in-betweenness", however has its perils in her own search of romance and marriage: "I'm too religious for the secular men, and too lax for the religious ones", she tells Blu<sup>119</sup>. She, however, feels attached to Hakim, her black childhood friend who is himself "on some kind of journey, he's somewhere betwixt and between, like she is"<sup>120</sup>. An Imam and a player of the trombone at the same time, Hakim is best suited to understand Khadra's incessant journey: He tells her he has always felt she had two sides: "You, and then you trying to fit the mold"<sup>121</sup>. Khadra is satisfied with how Hakim diagnoses her doubleness, and she comments using a language that coincides with Homi Bhabha's depiction of the "Third Space"; she says to Hakim: "I guess what I've been doing is trying to get to a *place* where I could reconnect the two, and be a whole person"<sup>122</sup> (emphasis added). The prayer scene where she and Hakim pray on grass is symbolic of a new beginning of love and sharing; Khadra's decision to stand beside and not behind Hakim as a "correct" prayer should be, and Hakim's flexibility as an Imam in accepting her different posture, foreshadows a relationship of equality, acceptance, malleability, and understanding.

Broad-minded and tolerant of difference, Hakim surrenders to Khadra's wish not be labeled by a fixed identity. Speaking in pride about his sister Hanifa who has become a professional driver and bragging that she is the first Muslim woman to share in professional races, he is nervously stopped by Khadra, who has suffered throughout her life from that type of fixation:

"Don't" Khadra says. She puts her hand up. "Don't say it. Don't put that on her. I'm so tired of everyone putting that on us. Every single thing we do has to 'represent' for the community. Zuhura, having to represent this and represent that. Everyone had to put their meaning on her. Just let her be, for God's sake. For the Prophet's sake, just let us *be*"<sup>123</sup>.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 432.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 354.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 411.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 394.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 395.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 399.



*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a life journey of identification that the reader begins but never manages to finish. The final scene, which ends in a car race attests to the continuous mobility and risk-taking which even the last page of the novel cannot bring to a stop. The skidding of Hanifa's car against a wall, and her subsequent re-grouping echo Khadra's "loss and hope" and her perilous route in-between the "us-and-them" dyad. "I am regrouping too, Khadra thinks with elation, and she is full of gratitude – she is gathering speed – and there she goes!"<sup>124</sup> In media res, thus, do readers leave Khadra to continue her journey of hybrid imagination not towards but rather within "The Third Space" which lies on the borderlands between perceived oppositional identities.

## Conclusion

Both *E-mails from Scheherazad* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* are unique texts created by a hybrid imagination strong enough to sustain both writer and readers alike while "earth plates" seem to be moving in different directions beneath them. In spite of the stylistic differences between the poetry collection and the novel, both texts manage to merge "Self" and "other" in a "Third Space", where both are censured and loved at the same time. Hierarchies thus fade away and stereotypes are subtly destabilized as Kahf gently "coaxes" readers to see and "recognize each other". Due to characteristics of the genre itself, the poetry in *E-mails from Scheherazad* distills Kahf's experience of "leap[ing] the gulch between two worlds" before she realizes it is "Impossible to choose one over the other". The novel, on the other hand, with the narrative space it allows, reveals the arduous journey(s) towards and within "The Third Space", journeys which never end as the character is caught forever in what Homi Bhabha calls "an exploratory restless movement. . . here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither [and] back and forth"<sup>125</sup>.

By adopting the hybrid imagination, the two texts analyzed in this paper perform active intervention, which involves a dislocation of exclusionary conceptions of "Americanness" as essentially "white" and "Christian". They destabilize fixed cultural power relations between white and black, non-Muslim and Muslim, center and periphery, the "West" and the "rest", not through a mere inversion of these hierarchical binaries, but by throwing into question these very dualisms through an imaginative blurring of boundaries.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 441.

<sup>125</sup> H. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 2.