



# Kent Academic Repository

**Anis, Rida, Aldared, Fozya, Kemal, Bahriye and Woolley, Agnes (2023) *Diasporic Syrian women writers: stories of resilience and survival*. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* . ISSN 1353-0194.**

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/99436/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2022.2164481>

## This document version

Publisher pdf

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives)

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

### Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).



## Diasporic Syrian women writers: stories of resilience and survival

Rida Anis, Fozya Aldared, Bahriye Kemal & Agnes Woolley

**To cite this article:** Rida Anis, Fozya Aldared, Bahriye Kemal & Agnes Woolley (2023): Diasporic Syrian women writers: stories of resilience and survival, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13530194.2022.2164481](https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2022.2164481)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2022.2164481>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 10 Jan 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 892




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Diasporic Syrian women writers: stories of resilience and survival

Rida Anis, Fozya Aldared, Bahriye Kemal  and Agnes Woolley

University of Kent

### ABSTRACT

In 2020, Ghada Alatrash and Najat Abed Alsamad noted that, 'Historically Syrians have written and spoken about exile in their literature, long before the Syrian war began in March of 2011 (p. 4). This paper brings together two Syrian women writers who straddle this epochal moment in Syrian history: Mohja Kahf and Ibtisam Tracy. It seeks to bridge the gap between these writers and to chart new trends in diasporic writing by Syrian women. It argues that bringing Kahf and Tracy into the same frame captures the complex diasporic positioning of contemporary Syrian women writers. This in turn offers new perspectives on transnational and postcolonial criticism, in particular by focusing on gendered resilience in the diaspora through the act of storytelling in solidarity. By bringing into discussion current socio-political issues presented by Syrian women, this paper seeks to challenge the dominant representations of Muslim/Arab women in general and Syrian women in particular.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 August 2022

Accepted 20 December 2022



You must remember: Where I come from,

Words are to die for. I saved the virgins

From beheading by the king, who was killing

Them to still the beast of doubt in him.

Speaking in the voice of the storyteller Scheherazad, transplanted from the Islamic Golden Age to twenty-first-century New Jersey, the Syrian-American writer Mohja Kahf asserts the importance of words in contesting prevailing perceptions of gender, race and religion in contemporary US. In the collection, *Emails from Scheherazad* published in 2003 Kahf explores Syrian diasporic identity long before the outbreak of war in 2011 and the newer forms of exilic and diasporic identities that ensued and are still evolving for Syrians outside Syria. This paper brings together two Syrian women writers who straddle this epochal moment in Syrian history: Mohja Kahf and Ibtisam Tracy. The former has dual-nationality, Syrian and American, having been born in Syria and raised in the USA; to date, the latter has single-nationality, Syrian, having been born and raised in Syria but displaced after 2011. Between them, Kahf and Tracy have enriched Syrian literature for more than

**CONTACT** Rida Anis  [rida.anis@hku.edu.tr](mailto:rida.anis@hku.edu.tr)  Hasan Kolyoncu University, 8 Dean Court, Broad Street, Canterbury, CT12LT

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

three decades. While speaking transnationally and reflecting global socio-political-economic concerns, they have also been integral to the evolution of women's literature in Syria by tackling issues of gender inequality. Kahf writes in English, contributing to Syrian-Arab-American Literature in the USA and addressing Western readers, whereas Tracy writes in Arabic, enriching Syrian-Arab literature addressing Arab readers. These opposing orientations mean that most Syrian-Arab readers know nothing about Kahf due to language barriers, while for the same reason, the West knows little about Tracy because she writes in Arabic.<sup>1</sup>

This paper connects these writers in order to chart new trends in diasporic writing by Syrian women. It argues that drawing Kahf and Tracy into the same frame captures the complex diasporic positioning of contemporary Syrian women writers. This in turn offers new perspectives on transnational literary criticism by focusing on different kinds of diasporic voices that share ideas of gendered resilience, survival and solidarity through the act of storytelling. By bringing into discussion current socio-political issues presented by Syrian women, this paper seeks to challenge the dominant representations of Muslim/Arab women in general and Syrian women in particular. As Leti Volpp suggests, assuming that minority or non-Western women are victimized by their own cultures 'is achieved by a discursive strategy that constructs gender subordination as integral to their culture'.<sup>2</sup> The writers we discuss below contest this framing by exploring contemporary female Syrian subjectivity in the diaspora.

Through an examination of selected poems, essays and novels by Kahf and Tracy, we chart the emergence of Syrian women's voices from divergent diasporic contexts. The counter narratives chosen reflect the different lived experiences of Syrian women, before and after 2011, demonstrating the plurality of Muslim/Arab Women's Literature as well as Syrian Women's Literature, both of which are often either stereotyped or overlooked. They represent the complexity of diasporic identity and a form of double-consciousness in the sense that the authors' diasporic experiences—before and/or after 2011—allow them to speak from both a national and transnational perspective through the act of storytelling within and beyond the context of the Middle East. For this, both women adopt the key trope of storytelling in their writing. They are a contemporary Scheherazad modelled on worldliness with consummate knowledge of both Arab-Islamic and Western literature. As we will show, this is a 'transnational' positioning that operates intertextually between the rich literary field of Arab and non-Arab works within a contemporary and classical narrative framing.

Kahf and Tracy belong to the rich traditions of Syrian women's writing and storytelling and—in Kahf's case—Arab-American writing. Syrian women authors have used writing to resist various difficulties, including the struggle to publish and be accepted in the literary world whilst engaging with socio-political issues.<sup>3</sup> The nineteenth-century poet and pioneer Marianna Marash entered the literary scene by hosting mixed-sex literary salons and in doing so paved the way for other women to use writing as a tool to have presence and a voice, including figures like Mary Ajami and, later, Diya Asabci. The next generation, coming of age in the mid-twentieth century, 'laid the foundations of feminist literature in

---

<sup>1</sup>Mohja Kahf, E-mails from Scheherazad. (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup>Leti Volpp, 'Feminism versus Multiculturalism', *Columbia Law Review*, 101, 5 (2001): 1185.

<sup>3</sup>Mohja Kahf, 'The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature' *World Literature Today*, 75, 2 (2001).

Syria before the Assad era, such as Ghadah Al-Samman, Colette Khoury, Qamar Kilani, Olfa Al - Idlibi and many others'.<sup>4</sup> Khoury shocked the Arab world with her attention to themes of love and eroticism, and Al-Samman worked internationally as a journalist and fiction writer. That said, this second generation of women were hesitant in explicitly exploring political and social themes that were considered risky. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, as Linda Istanbuli points out, there was a major shift in the literary scene with a remarkable flourishing of women novelists who explore taboo themes, such as repressed minorities and sensitive questions of sexuality, voiced through radical agency and empowerment in narratives depicting struggles for political and social freedom.<sup>5</sup> Istanbuli quotes Samar Yazbek, who argues that 'these writers strove to expose the current dark reality'.<sup>6</sup> Ibtisam Tracy is transgenerational, she began writing in the 1990s but shares themes and concerns with this later generation of female Syrian writers, which includes figures as diverse as Dima Wannous, Maha Hassan, Rasha Abbas, Rosa Yaseen Hasan and Samer Yazbek, all of whom have been displaced out of Syria by events following 2011. The rich diversity of these writers stems from the revolutionary context of contemporary Syria, which has accelerated women to write, publish, and openly shape the literary scene through the act of storytelling.

Mohja Kahf draws from the aforementioned Syrian literary forbears and from a rich field of Arab-American writing, which addresses issues of Arab-American identity, immigrant life more broadly and racial and religious prejudice in the contemporary US. Kahf—along with figures as diverse as, Randa Jarrar, Diana Abu Jaber, Etel Adnan, Susan Abulhawa, Naomi Shihab Nye, Susan Muaddri, Samia Serageldin, Hedy Habra, Amal Kassir, Suheir Hammad, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Leila Ahmed, Laila Halaby—negotiates with her complicated and hyphenated identity in a hostile environment, conflict and border-zone between Arab and American lands.<sup>7</sup> Earlier Syrian-American writers, poets and artists, like Etel Adnan, for example, have given way to younger Syrian-American poets like Amal Kasir, whose experimental poetic style shares some forms of address with Kahf's own. Additionally, Kahf's writing has channelled African-American women's protest poetry including, for example, dialogue with the tones and affect of Audre Lorde, in order to address Syrian culture and politics. Kahf 'situates herself as world-poet in a global tradition of politically oriented protest expressivity and in a particular strand associated with female intersectionality'.<sup>8</sup> Bringing Kahf and Tracy together in this paper constructs a bridge between conceptualizations of Arabs in the Middle East as well as in the West. Though publishing at the same time and focusing on shared experiences of intergenerational storytelling, gender issues and diasporic sensibilities, Kahf and Tracy speak to different audiences and in different languages.

There has been very little written on Syrian women writers.<sup>9</sup> Even within transnational and postcolonial critical paradigms related to Arab women's writing, there is a paucity of

<sup>4</sup>Ahmad Talb Al-Naser, 'Syrian Feminist Literature: The retreat of Poetry and the Dominance of the Documentary Novel', Syria.tv: 23 October 2020.

<sup>5</sup>Linda Istanbuli 'Mihyar's precarious journey: imagining the intellectual in modern Syrian literature', *Contemporary Levant* 7:1(2022), 5–21.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>7</sup>Amal Talaat Abdelrazek, *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* (New York, Cambria Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup>Daniel Behar and Alexa Firat, 'Syrian literary culture in retrospect' *Contemporary Levant*, (2022) 7:1, 1–4.

<sup>9</sup>Though Linda Istanbuli notes a recent flurry of articles on the Syrian novel, there is very little written on the role of women writers in particular, see Istanbuli, 2022.

analysis of Syrian literature, in particular. Critics, such as Anastasia Valassopoulos and Lindsey Moore, have written on Arab women's writing from the Middle East, but neither have touched on Syrian Women's writing. By contrast, Miriam Cooke and Mohja Kahf have both focused specifically on Syrian women's writing and explored the reasons why Syrian women's voices have been silenced in the literary world.<sup>10</sup> In 1995, Cooke went to Syria to study women's writings. She writes:

I had little idea what I might find. Even specialists of Arabic literature did not know much about the cultural scene inside Hafiz Al-Asad's Syria of the 1990s. Many assumed that the authorities then were so repressive that writers of conscience were either in jail, like Nizar Nayyuf, or in exile, like Zakaria Tamer. In 1992, the critic Jean Fontaine reduced the whole of Syrian literature to a nightmare, overwhelmed by a sense of betrayal. How could it be otherwise in a climate devoid of freedom of expression, where there are no intermediaries between the people and the state? Were there women writing inside Syria? If there were, what were their preoccupations?<sup>11</sup>

Kahf herself notes that 'there is no such thing' as Syrian literature in an essay describing the repressive context for Syrian writing. She points out that:

Contemporary Syrian literature is created under the conditions of repression and censorship that have borne down on Syria from the beginning of the twentieth century to its end [...]. Syria has produced a good many major writers for a small country. Many of the best Syrian writers (Kabbani, Samman, Tamer, Adonis - who merit top ranking not only in Arabic literature but among the world's best contemporary writing) have been driven to leave Syria, and there is a significant lesson in this.<sup>12</sup>

Our discussion builds on the work of Cooke and Kahf by bringing to light Syrian women's literary contributions, including the work of Kahf herself, who is a poet, novelist and critic. Importantly, its interest lies in what is revealed by the diasporic gaze of our chosen writers. If, as Kahf argues, writers have been driven out of Syria, then what is revealed by this outsider/insider perspective through the act of narrative voice and storytelling?

One of the major challenges facing Arabic literature in translation, Emily Drumsta argues, is that 'the question of gender has historically been one of the most fraught, particularly as it presses upon Arab women writers'.<sup>13</sup> The persistence of Orientalist tropes such as the veil and the harem; the continual othering of the exotic and supposedly untranslatable East; the frequent lumping together of Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern identities, are some of the many phenomena that scholars and translators have examined in the Western academy.<sup>14</sup> Other issues, such as the stereotyping of Arab women as either voiceless victims, exceptional escapees, or deluded pawns of Arab patriarchy, all affect Arab women's writing (and literature featuring Arab women characters) with particular force:

<sup>10</sup>Lindsey Moore, *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations: Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Anastasia Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Miriam Cooke, 'No Such Thing as Women's Literature' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 1, 2 (2005), 25–54; Mohja Kahf, 'The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature' *World Literature Today*, 75, 2: (2001): 224–236.

<sup>11</sup>Miriam Cooke, 'No Such Thing as Women's Literature' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 1, 2 (2005), 25.

<sup>12</sup>Mohja Kahf, 'The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature' *World Literature Today*, 75, 2 (2001): 230.

<sup>13</sup>Emily Drumsta, 'Gender, Authorship, and Translation in Modern Arabic Literature of the Mashriq.' *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature*. (2021): 1.

<sup>14</sup>The foundational work of this criticism is of course Edward Said's *Orientalism*, 1979.

'escapee,' the battered female 'victim', and the unenlightened "pawn" of Muslim male patriarchy are the other side of the Islamophobic coin that has been used to justify not only past colonial regimes but also contemporary foreign wars and occupations. [...] This long history of imperial entanglement, combined with the surprisingly durable marketability of the Orientalist stereotype, drives US- and UK-based publishers to seek out not the real, complex concerns of various Arab women writing.<sup>15</sup>

The writers we look at in this paper speak back to and interrogate these stereotypes in a range of modes and forms, drawing on their experiences of diaspora to engage with a transnational history born of empire. Kahf and Tracy both work in diasporic contexts, which give their writing a transnational scope and enhance their capacity to reach wider audiences. As Alatrash and Alsamad suggest, 'The Syrian Diaspora today is a complex topic that speaks to issues of dislocation, displacement, loss, exile, identity, a desire for belonging, and resilience'.<sup>16</sup> From the space of the diaspora, both Kahf and Tracy document and draw on the historical legacies of colonial entanglement and subsequent displacements. This includes Ottoman control followed by French occupation and the continuing postcolonial nationalisms of various authoritarian Syrian governments. Khaf and her family migrated during the 1970s when the Ba'ath was consolidating their power after taking control in the 1960s. At this time, the Ba'ath party became the only permitted political party in the country. Khaf's grandfather and father had been involved in politics in Syria at this time, and although the family's displacement was initially voluntary, Khaf's father, who was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was soon considered a threat by the ruling party and was prevented from returning. Khaf was thus brought up in the United States while retaining strong links with her Syrian background. By contrast, Tracy left Syria as a result of the revolution in 2011 when her son was captured by government operatives for several months. She has since lived in Kuwait and Turkey.

Khaf and Tracy offer distinct diasporic perspectives able to enrich our understanding of evolving issues of gender in Syria and the Middle East more widely. Where Khaf is part of a historic diaspora, Tracy gives expression to an urgency related to the migration imperatives caused by the war in 2011. Kahf's transnational credentials are evidenced by her dialogue with other intersectional American poets and writers such as Audre Lourde, Etel Adnan and Leila Lalami. Indeed, Behar and Firat note that Kahf's poems 'carefully channel the moral fury and energy of African American protest poetry, especially that written by women, to bestow fuller dimension on her treatment of Syrian identity in flux'.<sup>17</sup> While Tracy's orientation is more towards an Arabic readership as evidenced by her use of popular narrative conventions of oral storytelling, her use of multiple voices and frame narratives, as well as themes of storytelling under circumstances of repression and displacement or migration all find echoes in key European narratives such as Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Moreover, Tracy's work evinces a subtle form of transnational connection through a broader Middle Eastern sensitivity in works touching on Palestine such as *Ascending* (2008), which is concerned with issues of exile and displacement in contexts outside Syria. Tracy's 2010 novel, *Ain Al-Shams*, written

<sup>15</sup>Emily Drumsta. 'Gender, Authorship, and Translation in Modern Arabic Literature of the Mashriq.' *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature*. (2021): 2–3.

<sup>16</sup>Ghada Alatrash and Najat Abed Alsamad. 'On Understanding Syrian Diasporic Identities through a Selection of Syrian Literary Work.' *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education* 15, 2 (2020): 3.

<sup>17</sup>Daniel Behar & Alexa Firat 'Syrian literary culture in retrospect', *Contemporary Levant*, 7:1 (2022), 1–4, p. 4.



before the Syrian revolution, which looks back to the political turmoil of the 1980s, was longlisted for the International Booker Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2011.<sup>18</sup> The migrant identity forced upon Tracy and other exiled writers is a clear theme in much of their work and Tracy's novels after 2011, all seek to capture the experience of displacement, while keeping alive the traditions and conventions of the Syrian narrative. Our suggestion is that Kahf and Tracy occupy the position of a contemporary diasporic Scheherazad; able to negotiate between the outsider/insider perspective, between Arabic, English and Turkish languages, and pre-/post-2011 moments through the act of storytelling, offering a distinct translation between places, languages, times and energies.

Both Kahf and Tracy support the rich scholarship about Arab women reviving the figure of Scheherazad from *One Thousand and One Nights* (c.1885).<sup>19</sup> As Suzanne Gauch suggests in *Liberating Shahrazad*, Arab women writers revive Scheherazad as one of resistance, foregrounding her storytelling as a liberating force. Safaa Alahmad points out that reviving Scheherazad suggests power and agency through cultural translation and interpretation necessary to map out the positioning of an Arab-American woman.<sup>20</sup> In her poetry collection, *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003), Kahf revives Scheherazad by placing her in the Arab-American diaspora. For Kahf, this is a 'contested home in the present global and political power dialectics', resulting from the 'war on terrorism' and the American occupation of Iraq.<sup>21</sup> Tracy also refers to Scheherazad in an interview entitled 'Scheherazad, most capable of describing details', confirming that, like Scheherazad, her own practice of storytelling shifts between different geographies and timeframes.<sup>22</sup> For both women, occupying the position of a contemporary diasporic Scheherazad enables a narrative storytelling modelled on worldliness with consummate knowledge of lived experiences between an Arab-Islamic and Western position. In line with Leila Pazargadi, we argue that Kahf and Tracy 'fashion their own images of the self through the retelling of their lives, thus using their voice as a creative agent of expression'.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, through their writing and the articulation of their distinct lived experiences, both writers are active agents of change within their extended cross-border communities, working on social and political issues that predominantly affect women.

## Mohja Kahf and the politics of diaspora

Mohja Kahf is a prolific writer of both fiction and non-fiction prose and poetry. Her most well-known work is the novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), which explores the experience of being a Muslim, an Arab and above all a woman living in the contemporary West. It questions the precarious positioning of Arab-Americans as existing between cultures: 'A tripartite model of subjectivity is ... presented [by Kahf] for classification of the inbetweeners into nativist, assimilationist, and hybrid groups'.<sup>24</sup> For the

<sup>18</sup>Lana Abdulrahman مدار الحكايات [The Orbit of Stories] (Giza: Arab Press Agency Foundation, 2016), p. 91.

<sup>19</sup>Suzanne Gauch, *Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism, and Islam*. (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup>Safaa Alahmad, 'Re-inscribing Shahrazad: The Quest of Arab-American Women in Mohja Kahf's Poetry', *Arab World English Journal* 4 (2016): 43.

<sup>21</sup>Kahf, *E-mails*, p.

<sup>22</sup>Hanan Aqeel, 'Ibtisam Tracy: Scheherazad is best able to tell the details', *Alarab*, Friday, 17 October 2014.

<sup>23</sup>Leila Pazargadi 'Re/calling Scheherazad: Voicing Agency in Mohja Kahf's Poetry' *Gender Forum*, 65(2017): 33.

<sup>24</sup>Abbasali Borhan & Alireza Anushiravani. 'Resistance and Uncanny Moments of In-Betweenness in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in Tangerine Scarf*'. *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 8, 1, (2016): 1.



purposes of this essay, we will focus on her earlier poetry collection *E-mails from Scheherazad*,<sup>25</sup> and the autobiographical essay 'The Daughter's Road to Syria',<sup>26</sup> which together chart Kahf's development as a transnational writer. Through a witty, epistolary style, Kahf's poems draw on social media forms to update traditional storytelling conventions as figured in Scheherazad, who is the primary speaker in the collection. The mode of address and the themes of female empowerment and the potency of words keep buoyant both Middle Eastern traditions of oral storytelling and contemporary global modes of discourse. By bringing in Kahf's later non-fiction work, we aim to demonstrate the ways in which the Syrian war initiates for Kahf a process of connection with a broader Middle-Eastern diasporic sensibility.

*E-mails from Scheherazad* is Mohja Kahf's first collection of poetry that touches on a wide range of topics, most pressingly, questions of Syrian-Arab-Muslim identity and displacement before 2011, the significance of gender in this context and the role of the diasporic writer. It offers the most articulate example of the challenges facing Arab-American women and the resistance they practice. As Haydar Jabr Koban notes, it is 'a sustained examination of the problem of belonging related to the people of diaspora and [...] how both the host community and the country of origin complicate belonging'.<sup>27</sup> The collection gives an insight into how an Arab, a Muslim and above all a woman is perceived by Western hegemony at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Kahf fuses the personal with the political, fiction with non-fiction, imagination with reality, humour with trauma and pain, entertainment with reformation, playing with words as weapons to achieve her ultimate goal of deconstructing Western hegemony which stereotypes 'the other'.

In the title poem, 'E-mails from Scheherazad', Kahf utilizes the legendary Scheherazad's resistance to patriarchy and Western hegemony and transforms it into a modern conflict. Her contemporary Scheherazad is able to think smartly and creatively to find solutions for misconceptions of the 'other' in mainstream America. Kahf locates her Scheherazad in twenty-first-century Hackensack, New Jersey: 'Hi, babe. It's Scheherazad. I'm back/For the millennium and living in Hackensack,/New Jersey. I tell stories for a living'.<sup>28</sup> As Pazargadi points out, 'recast as the storytelling Scheherazad' Kahf 'uses her spoken-word poetry to help readers uncover truths and confront their own ignorance. As a motif, the role of storyteller is important for the poetess to establish herself as an agent of her own life writing'.<sup>29</sup> The poem is a narrative of a feminist Arab-American women voicing stories of sexism and racism in the US. Oral storytelling becomes written work, which the writer aspires to publish despite Western hegemony: 'You must remember: Where I come from,/ Words are to die for. I saved the virgins/From beheading by the king, who was killing/ Them to still the beast of doubt in him'.<sup>30</sup>

As Suaad Alqahtani argues, the image of Scheherazad in Kahf is more powerful and persistent than the original character of Scheherazad. Her stories that are meant to rescue her from death embody the notion of 'words to resist death' in contrast with 'words are to

<sup>25</sup>Mohja Kahf., *E-mails from Scheherazad*. (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003).

<sup>26</sup>Mohja Kahf. *The Daughter's Road to Syria*. (Asheville, NC: The Rumpus, 2011).

<sup>27</sup>Haydar Jabr Koban. 'Testimonies of Resistance and Assimilation: A Postcolonial Study in Mohja Kahf's *E-mails from Scheherazad*' *Journal of Al-Ma'moon College*, 1, 27(2016): 310.

<sup>28</sup>Kahf., *E-mails*, 43.

<sup>29</sup>Pazargadi, L. M. (2017). 'Re/calling Scheherazad: Voicing Agency in Mohja Kahf's Poetry'. *Gender Forum*, (Special Issue of 'gender forum': Contemporary Muslim Women's Voices) (65), 28–49, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 43.

die for'. Such 'an aphoristic phrase', Alqahtani writes, 'demonstrates not only the major role played by Kahf in dismantling Western racial conceptions of the Arab world, but also the power of words'.<sup>31</sup> Not only is the political agenda clear in Scheherazad's narration, her personal stories speak of sensitive issues:

I told a story. He began to listen and I found  
 That story led to story. Powers unleashed. I wound  
 The thread around the prin of night. A thousand days  
 Later, we got divorced. He'd settled down & wanted a wife  
 & not so much an artist<sup>32</sup>

The power of Scheherazad's narratives liberates the Muslim Arab-American woman who drives her husband, Shahryar, a representative of patriarchy as well as Euro-centric Western hegemony to consider:

landing in a field where you wrestle with Iblis,  
 whose form changes into your lover, into Death,  
 into knowledge, into God,  
 whose face changes into Scheherazad<sup>33</sup>

Scheherazad, then, is a tool of decolonization and liberation. The use of 'anaphora', Safaa Alahmad writes, reinforces 'the notion of Iblis, an Arabic term for Satan, as taking different shapes of the forces that attempt to confine and control the subjectivity of the Muslim woman, such as patriarchal and religious institutions, Orientalist discourses, nationalist movements and Western feminism, to mention some'.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Scheherazad is not simply the exemplar of 'oriental' women but also of storytellers, orators or writers. Lisa Suhair Majaj suggests that Scheherazad is Kahf herself; she is the writer who is sending contemporary urgent messages to a world which is still not prepared to recognize the wit, humour, lyricism, passion and/or intellect of a female, and yet ready to negate her worth as a Muslim Arab woman. Like Scheherazad, Kahf is engaged in the act of saving her life through words.<sup>35</sup>

In the poem 'Ishtar Awakens in Chicago', Kahf rewrites the myth of another powerful female figure, Ishtar, the contradictory goddess of love, war and fertility. Here the language is more assertive, her attitude is more aggressive and her images are more exotic. The poet claims that she is Ishtar, the many-thousand-year-old, pre-Judaic, pre-Christian, pre-Islamic Goddess to serve the end of challenging racist and sexist discourses and ideologies historically constructed by patriarchy and Western hegemony. The

<sup>31</sup>Suaad Alqahtani, 'Arab-American Poetic Resistance in *E-Mails From Scheherazad*', *Studies in Literature and Language*, 14, 5(2017): 20.

<sup>32</sup>Kahf., *E-mails*, 43–44.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 45.

<sup>34</sup>Safaa Alahmad, 'Re-inscribing Shahrazad: The Quest of Arab-American Women in Mohja Kahf's Poetry', *Arab World English Journal* 4 (2016): 49. Anaphora here refers to Kahf's repeated use of 'into' to express the shape-shifting qualities of Satan.

<sup>35</sup>Lisa Suhair Majaj, 'Supplies of Grace': The Poetry of Mohja Kahf. <http://baithak.blogspot.com/2008/06/supplies-of-grace-poetry-of-mohja-kahf.html>

narrator, who is a twenty-first century American woman of Middle-East origins, does not hesitate to start with her pledge, right in the first stanza:

*My arrogance knows no bounds  
And i will make no peace today,  
And you should be so lucky  
To find a woman a woman like me*

She powerfully claims her positioning and rights<sup>36</sup> as a human being, as a woman, and as an American citizen living in the West (Chicago) but of Middle-Eastern origins (Mesopotamia). She insists that her ancient Mesopotamian roots and history are behind her depth and strength of character. She will waive her rights at any cost:

*No I will make no peace  
even though my hands are empty  
I will talk as big as I please  
I will be all or nothing<sup>37</sup>*

She defies distorted, Orientalist discourses that depict her as a voiceless dangerous creature for having Middle-Eastern ancestries. Kahf challenges these pre-set notions; she challenges her readers' conceptions about non-Western cultures because such stereotypes might be 'just ignorant and impolite delusions that are about to be shattered as the awakened woman is voicing her lived realities and individuality from the threshold between east and west'.<sup>38</sup> Here again we see a contemporary Ishtar awakening, using her voice and stories to position herself in a new kind of underworld, between the east and west where she reigns and resists dominant narratives.

This can also be seen in the series of poems 'Hijab Scenes', written a few years before the 9/11 attacks, which are a series of headscarf-centred poems that tackle issues of migration, gender, racism, Islamophobia and Islamoprejudice. They explore Western depictions of the immigrant body and provide a contextual analysis of embodied encounters. They address 'stereotypical representations of Arab and Muslim men as terrorists and Arab and Muslim women as oppressed subjects'.<sup>39</sup> As Nadine Sinno suggests, they demonstrate 'the ways in which the immigrant body functions as a site for exposing and deconstructing Islamophobic narratives'. Rather than asserting an ethnic identity, Mohja's poems articulate 'shared humanity' and 'mutual vulnerability' among people all over the world.<sup>40</sup>

In her seminal essay 'Under Western Eyes', Chandra T. Mohanty critiques representations of the veil as a 'unilateral' institution of oppression, questioning such stereotyping Western feminist perspectives that consider the act of veiling as 'control' over women or

<sup>36</sup>Kahf., *E-mails*, 63.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>38</sup>Rama Hirawat. 'Mohja Kahf's *E-Mails to Scheherazad*: A Riposte to the Parochial Perspectives of Identity', *IJELLH*, 8, 4 (2020): 27.

<sup>39</sup>Nadine Sinno, "'Dammit, Jim, I'm a Muslim Woman, Not a Klingon!': Mediating the Immigrant Body in Mohja Kahf's Poetry', *MELUS*, 42 (1): 117.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 118.

a 'universal' symbol of 'backwardness'.<sup>41</sup> She criticizes Western feminism and their writings about Third World women for portraying the average 'Third World' woman as being dependent, sexually constrained, ignorant, poor, uneducated, family-oriented, domestic, weak, victimized, etc.<sup>42</sup> As Pazargadi notes, this is similar to colonialist men using a 'binary equating unveiled women with being educated and modern' in contrast to 'veiled women with being uneducated and backward'.<sup>43</sup> Western feminism, she adds, 'has also universally reduced veiling discourse to a binary of oppression and liberation within Muslim communities'.<sup>44</sup>

'Hijab Scene #7' represents the inner monologue of a Muslim American-Arab woman wearing a hijab and her feelings of being discriminated and judged everywhere she goes. The poem is an address to mainstream America: 'No, I'm not bald under the scarf/No, I'm not from that country where women can't drive cars'. She confirms that 'I'm already American'.<sup>45</sup> What really upsets her is that her hijab is a signal of foreignness to mainstream America. The poet shifts from the personal to the political, from a polite tone to another that is more defensive and satirical, 'What else do you need to know/.../relevant to my buying insurance,/opening a bank account,/reserving a seat on a flight?'<sup>46</sup> Her anger increases, and she aggressively defies Islamophobic correlations with terrorism, 'Yes, I speak English... Yes, I carry explosives'. She concludes that her words as a writer are mighty weapons:

Yes, I carry explosives  
 They're called words  
 Yes, I carry explosives  
 They're called words  
 And if you don't get up  
 Off your assumptions  
 They're going to blow you away<sup>47</sup>

As we see, 'Hijab Scenes' (#1, #2, #3, #5, and #7) reveal the never-ending struggles faced by Muslims, especially those women marked with hijab, to fit into the Euro-centric-American community. They depict the challenges those citizens face while trying to 'balance their "Islamness" with their "Americanness"', Suaad Alqahtani asserts. Those challenges and conflicts, she adds, 'can be better understood against a background of alienation from their original countries', both the native and the hosting.<sup>48</sup>

There is a marked shift in Kahf's work once the Syrian war begins in 2011. While *E-mails from Scheherazad* reflects on Arab-American identity and issues of Islamophobia, after

<sup>41</sup>Chandra T. Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 56.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Leila Pazargadi 'Re/calling Scheherazad: Voicing Agency in Mohja Kahf's Poetry' *Gender Forum*, 65(2017): 42.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid, 42.

<sup>45</sup>Mohja Kahf., *E-mails from Scheherazad*. (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003), 39.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Suaad Alqahtani, 'Arab-American Poetic Resistance in E-Mails From Scheherazad', *Studies in Literature and Language*, 14, 5 (2017): 20.

2011 Kahf's writing turns to explore her Syrian identity. In her short narrative essay 'The Daughter's Road to Syria', published in 2011, Kahf reflects on her national identity and her sense of Syrian-ness. The work reflects on a visit made by Kahf and her 17 year old daughter to Syria via Turkey to work with Syrian escapees: 'We met Syrian activists in Harbiya village, original source of laurel soap, whose green cakes my Aleppan grandmother brought for us to America. . . . Antakya felt close to Syria. It smelled like hugging my grandmother'.<sup>49</sup> Before they could spend time there, however, Kahf was informed that Syrian agents had offered 100 million Syrian liras for the capture of her and her daughter. So she immediately left the area and returned to the United States, her second country. The opening paragraph reflects the complexity of national borders as well as her own daughter's complicated relationship with Syria:

I saw Syria this summer, for the first time since 1976. I saw the white rooftops of Syrian villages nestled in the mountains of Idlib. "That tractor's Syrian," I said to my seventeen-year-old daughter, Banah, standing roadside in southern Turkey. "That tilled soil not nineteen meters from us is Syrian. Those crops are *Syrian*." "Those goats are Turkish," Banah said.<sup>50</sup>

The essay reveals Kahf's deep concerns for Syria and her desire that her American-born daughter be proud of her Syrian-Arab ancestry, keeping faith in her roots. Kahf starts her narrative with an elegiac sentence, 'Despair about Syria had become a habit',<sup>51</sup> but ends with a resonant statement of action calling for the freedom of Syria and Syrians:

We want a free, democratic, pluralistic Syria, achieved through nonviolent struggle. If one road is closed, we're coming through another. A line has been crossed, inside Syrians. This is our time to be free.<sup>52</sup>

In one of her public performances after 2011, Kahf stated that Syria had transformed her once and for ever. Later, in August 2013, she stated: 'I hear the roar of pain from my Syria, hear it loud, hear it every day, in minute detail, with names of friends and relatives attached; it not only breaks my heart but in Syria it breaks whole lives'.<sup>53</sup> These sentiments are reflected in her later poetry, which has become increasingly involved with the struggle of the Syrian people: 'This revolution is about life', she said, 'about Syrians finding a new life amidst the destruction'.<sup>54</sup> She declares that '[P]oetry is a witness', which reflects both the suffering and the resilience of the Syrians during and after 'this bizarre, twisted revolution'.<sup>55</sup>

What distinguishes Kahf's writing is that on the thematic level, she mixes history with the present, the legendary with the real, fiction with non-fiction, art with politics, humour with pain, transcending binaries to achieve her goal of presenting a literature that can simultaneously reform and entertain, a literature that can help untangle the complexities of transnational identities. Such a literature is of a transnational dimension, reflecting her

<sup>49</sup>Mohja Kahf. *The Daughter's Road to Syria*. (Asheville, NC: The Rumpus, 2011), 4.

<sup>50</sup>Kahf. *The Daughter's Road to Syria*, 1.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid, 2.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid, 13.

<sup>53</sup>Ingrid Kerkhoff, 'Bridging Cultures, Building Peace: Mohja Kahf. The World Speaks English.' *The World Speaks English* Sept (September 2016). Bridging Cultures, Building Peace: Mohja Kahf—The World Speaks English (the-world-speaks-english.com) (Accessed 25 August 2022).

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ingrid Kerkhoff, 'IN THE WAKE OF THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION: POETRY.' *The World Speaks English* Sep (Oct 2016). In the Wake of the Syrian Revolution: Poetry—The World Speaks English (the-world-speaks-english.com) (Accessed 25 August 2022).

sophisticated hybrid and diasporic identity. Linguistically speaking, she uses Standard English that is highly embedded with vernacular jargon and pop-culture. She even inserts some words and terms from Arabic (*E-mails from Scheherazad*), Turkish (*The Daughters' Road to Syria*) and other languages in her narratives, aspiring to a transnational audience. Transnational literary productions written in English, Amin Malak emphasizes, play a major role in transforming English from a language of colonization to one of decolonization with constructive and reformative dialogues.<sup>56</sup> Kahf's work participates in this process.

Kahf's poetry and prose works capture resilience, healing, and agency through storytelling and exchange that operates within a historical, cultural and geographical translational space between Arab women through the ages. Her poetry re-writes literary and cultural heritage through Scheherazad and Ishtar, for example; displaced between the Middle East and the US, Syria and the US, Post-2011 Syria and Pre-2011 Syria, Kahf offers a rebirth that translates the stories of these powerful literary and mythical figures beyond gender binaries, nationalisms and war, and towards a new underworld with stories shaping multiplicities across borders. As we will now show, Tracy shares Kahf's aims to destabilize rigid hierarchies through her diasporic literary perspective. Positioned between borders in Syria, Turkey and Europe, Tracy shows an unwavering faith in the power of storytelling across generations as a mode of solidarity and resilience.

### Intergenerational narratives: Ibtisam Tracy

Since leaving Syria after the revolution, Tracy's writing has charted the experience of displacement and deepened her sense of writing transnationally. Her most recent novel *كتاب الظل* [*The Book of Shadow*], which was published in 2020, centres on storytelling between women without men in the context of displacement and diaspora.<sup>57</sup> Having traversed the globe, a group of women meet in a nature reserve, a remote space of sanctuary where they share stories of resilience and survival and connect with the landscape:

All of us in the reserve came for similar reasons, we were looking for change, psychological calm, self-denial, and benefiting others. Unhappy, we women established a reservation to enter a new becoming, beyond environmental and spiritual pollution imposed by the complexities of life in cities and human relations that crossed all limits of brutality and excessive crime.<sup>58</sup>

In *The Book of Shadow* there is a female oracle figure or elder, named Tila; a repeated narrative trope in Tracy's work also found in *24 Street North* in the figure of the elders, Umm Muhammad and Ruqayya, and the grandmother of the protagonist in *Ladder to Heaven*. Indeed, the creativity of the female figures in *The Book of Shadow*, who cultivate the land with plants brought with them from their homelands, reflects that of many of her literary characters, all of whom use their creative and narrative energies as a means of asserting agency, healing and learning.

<sup>56</sup>Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

<sup>57</sup>All translations of Ibtisam Tracy's work have been done collaboratively by the authors and the translator/interpreters, Asma Shehadeh and Lina Stas.

<sup>58</sup>Ibtisam Tracy, *كتاب الظل* [*The Book of Shadow*](Cairo: Egyptian General Book Authority, 2020).

*The Book of Shadow* is indicative of Tracy's shifting literary sensibilities and of her interest in exploring what is produced by the conjunction of places and people as a result of displacement. In what follows, we will consider two of Tracy's novels that demonstrate the novelist's move from a more nationally and locally oriented perspective to a more transnational approach: *الشارع 24 شم ال* [*Street North*]<sup>59</sup> and *س ل م إلى السماء* [*A Ladder to Heaven*].<sup>60</sup> As we shall see, the scope of her novels becomes broader with her own migratory moves. Unlike Kahf, Tracy spent most of her life in Syria, and was active in the cultural and political scene, both as a writer and a social reformer and activist until 2011. Dismissed from her work teaching Arabic Literature because of her opposition to the Syrian Regime, Tracy was forced out of Syria and settled between Turkey and Kuwait, where she continues to write in Arabic, her native language that she has been using as a writer and thinker for more than four decades. As a writer of free will and national consciousness, Tracy also withdrew from the Arab Writers' Union (AWU) in protest at its complete silence on the Syrian war. Tracy has published five novels and two short story collections since 2007. Her novel, *عين الشمس* [*The Eye of the Sun*]<sup>61</sup> was long-listed for the Arabic Booker Prize in 2011. In her novels, Tracy is concerned with the Syrian social context, the nature of the formation of Syrian society and the Syrian family, with women being the fulcrum around which it turns. She is currently a member of the Syrian Writers' Association, which was founded after the revolution. She is also a member of the editorial board of *Awraq Magazine*, which is issued by the Syrian Writers' Association.

Tracy is notable for her focus on female experience, a reflection of the context in which women have taken on multiple public roles after the loss of so many men in the war. Moreover, Tracy's departure from Syria has opened up a new vista on the issue of gender and the cultural and social laws regulating men and women leading to a changing view of the self and world, which can be traced in her writing. From political and social issues in *24 Street North* that reflect her national awareness linked to the 1940s, we move beyond borders to transnational human awareness concerned with issues of integration and the need to open up and speak to others, as reflected in *Book of Shadows* and *Ladder to Heaven* which are set after 2011. Tracy's experience of diaspora frames stories about women across generations, in which the suffering and rituals from a past Syria provide the framework for a renewed contemporary Syria.

*24 Street North* is an intergenerational novel, which documents the history of the city of Latakia through the style of oral history narrative delivered by Wedad, a grandmother, capturing its local neighbourhoods and society through the familial relationships between Wedad and her granddaughter of the same name. Through a process of shared storytelling, Wedad and her granddaughter narrate the rich history of the family, starting with the birth of her grandmother in the early twentieth century, through to decolonial nationalist movements against the French in the 1940s, and on to the revolution and war of 2011, we move with them between different places and times in Syria and Turkey. Covering almost a century, the novel incorporates key political events and the shifts in imperial entanglements from the Ottoman regime, impacts of WWI, through to the French

<sup>59</sup>Ibtisam Tracy, *الشارع 24 شم ال* [*Street North*] (Beirut: Difaf Publishing, 2017).

<sup>60</sup>Ibtisam Tracy, *س ل م إلى السماء* [*Ladder to Heaven*] (Doha: Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press, 2019).

<sup>61</sup>Ibtisam Tracy, *عين الشمس* [*The Eye of the Sun*] (Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2010).



mandate and the nationalist governments of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Through the stories of her grandmother, the young Wedad understands the history of Latakia as a city that has experienced great loss. At the beginning of the French Mandate in Syria in the 1940s, the city was empty of men. The women become 'Queens of the beehive',<sup>62</sup> resulting in a growing level of female engagement with public, political events and their rising levels of education.

*24 Street North* works to the premise that the personal is political and explores emergent subjectivities of women through personal and inter-familial stories. The formal complexity of Tracy's storytelling modes is found in the often overlapping narrative voices in her novels, which transport readers between times and places. In *24 Street North*, the narrative voice slips across time frames between past and present. Sometimes in the same paragraph there might be three people speaking from different generations. Through these narrative techniques, the novel documents the emergence of female agency in the absence of men; the women of the neighbourhood lost their husbands and then their male children in successive wars such that they become and perform all gendered roles, where they struggle resiliently in solidarity. In this all-female space, they gather together at each other's homes to exchange stories of pain, capture their lived experiences, give each other advice, reminisce about food, perform rituals revering 'the spirit of the dead', exchange clothes and past joyful times overwhelmed with laughter as a means of healing.

A key example of this is when a group of women who lived in the eponymous street 24 gather in the home of Ruqayya, an elder to whom the women look up and call grandmother. Here Umm Muhammad, a wise spokeswoman of the community, shares a story by turning the tragedies of the neighbourhood into a source of humour, leading to laughter between the women as they discuss the property they acquired in the absence of men. Laughing, Ruqayya, says: 'We are all queens'. In response Umm Muhammed affirms Ruqayya's comment: 'May your mouth remain healthy, although the queens kill the bees', they end up on 'a hill of wax', suggesting that the women are weak and vulnerable and their homes without men are fragile.<sup>63</sup> There is a bittersweet sentiment here as the group lament the loss of the men while relishing their new-found sovereignty.

In another gathering Wedad and her granddaughter are displaced in Idlib. They stay with their friend Kifaya and here they perform a Hasana, a religious 'good deed' ritual based on offering food to the spirit of the dead through Rashta.<sup>64</sup> The grandmother, Wedad, reminisces:

Do you remember the last time my grandmother Ruqayya cooked 'Rashta' for us as "Hasana" for the spirit of all the dead? After distributing food to the homes, we sat down to eat, Umm Bashir sat under the pomegranate, and after eating two bites, she said: You know, Umm Mustafa? People of Aleppo call this dish "the legs of the dead." Some of the women laughed, whilst another young woman vomited in disgust; this made all the women excited that she was pregnant.<sup>65</sup>

As well as demonstrating the slippage in temporal and spatial frames, this passage highlights the significance of naming dishes, illustrating that Aleppo and Idlib have

---

<sup>62</sup>Tracy, *24 Street North*, 188.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid, 188.

<sup>64</sup>Tracy, *24 Street North*, 72.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid 73.

a different name and narrative for the dish that is based on a common ritual of eating food. Through this discussion of Hasana with focus on 'legs of the dead' and the possibility of pregnancy, Tracy demonstrates a body politics of convivial connection and consumption between the women in a place emptied of men and full of death, yet with hope for birth and new life that will stand strong and resilient.

As well as food, clothing also becomes an important convivial and healing trope in Tracy's writing, indicating the richness of shared lives without men. In particular, the grandmother, Wedad's story is imbricated with the symbolism of clothing. The grandmother describes her own forced marriage after her jealous stepmother, Nisreen, convinces her father Wedad should be married and thus removed from the household. In preparation for the wedding, Wedad recycles her half sister's wedding dress and with it, she describes her own horror at the impending marriage: 'I could not stand the face of the bridegroom or hearing his biography'. She goes on: 'I could convert these ugly second hand clothes to beauty, but I could not convert my Agha's [Father] feelings towards me. I could not process the feelings of the Agha [Father] towards me'.<sup>66</sup> Yet the process of recycling and repurposing the clothes gives Wedad a sense of agency: 'My friends would say they look like trendy clothes from fashion houses in Paris'.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, among the pain, the idea of recycling clothing becomes a point of connection between the women in the narrative and in sharing the clothes, they try on one another's lives, indicating an empathetic connection between the women.

Although Tracy deals with painful experiences for women, which are manifested in loss and suffering from political and social conditions led by men, we can see the writer's insistence on overcoming the pain and finding a way out of it through convivial relationships and storytelling. Grandmother Wedad's stories demonstrate the foundations of this move towards friendship, connection and reconciliation between women throughout the novel, which begins with the painful life story of her childhood friend Hayat:

I see that both of us - as in the popular expression - came down from the bottom of one basket of bitterness. Here our necks suffered from the tightness of the straw net to the point of suffocation. In spite of this suffocation, we invented a second life with stories that coloured our reality with dreams. Our two houses across the street transformed into one house; we stretched our hands outside holding a long stick to connect and laughed the big laugh of victory because we manipulated and cancelled out the distance between the house of "Asim Agha" on the right and the house of grandmother "Ruqaiya" on the left! Their history begins at the beginning of the century . . . before I was born thirty-plus years ago.<sup>68</sup>

In this moment of childhood entrapment, prohibition and pain in the mid-twentieth century, we see the emergence of resistance and resilience between two girls who are not allowed to leave their houses. In spite of this, they connect against both the patriarchal political orders of Wedad's father and the matriarchal orders of Hayat's grandmother. From this moment in the turn of the century through to the war of the twenty-first century, we encounter stories of girls and women connecting in solidarity and resilience, able to transform and overcome binaries between inside and outside, private

---

<sup>66</sup>Tracy, *24 Street North*, 144.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid, 140.

<sup>68</sup>Tracy, *24 Street North*, 84.

and public life, and between left and the right—all with political undertones that enable them to have a stronger voice that is heard.

In the novel, we see numerous examples of such political encounter, engagement and consciousness, and one of the earliest examples of this is from the twentieth century linked to three generations—the elder Ruqayya, her daughter Hager and granddaughter Hayat. Conflict on the issue of electoral corruption causes tension when it is discovered that Hager has sold her vote. When confronted by Abu Hassan, the trusted coachman, the women express bewilderment at the levels of corruption and Hager experiences deep shame for having bought luxury clothing for her daughter Hayat with the proceeds from selling her vote. Here we see the dynamics between three generations of women, politics and the ways men manipulate the ignorance of women. They are furious with Abu Shafiq for manipulating them and with the political system in which they find themselves. Hager regrets her actions and begins to see the complexity of the political sphere. Tracy is documenting a crucial moment in the emergent political consciousness of women as they grasp the nuances of political manoeuvrings.

Such political awareness of women is developed further by women's births being mapped onto pivotal political and nationalizing moments shaped by men, echoing the novelist Sahar Khalife's concept of the meeting between the political and personal for women in her 2018 autobiography *روايتي لروايتي* *My Narrative for my Novel*.<sup>69</sup> Wedad understands history through her grandmother's memory of births, and asks her grandmother about the year her grandmother was born. Wedad the grandmother replies:

You, Hayat, Fatima Ziada, Laila Al-Ajeel, Afra Sari, and Daad Bint Munifa, were born in the year of disasters; that year, my dear, the Syrian delegation went to Paris to sign the treaty, returning after six months of negotiations, and the sixtieth strike took place. King Fouad died and King Farouk ascended the throne, but the most important event that year was the Qassam Revolution, Greater Palestine Revolution. Your sister Samia got engaged in the early forties, at that time we had painted the windows of our homes blue for fear of the Allie's raids. The enemy of your enemy is your friend.<sup>70</sup>

The 'year of disasters' discussed here is 1936, the failed decolonial moment against the French colonial powers. Here also the grandmother connects the union/marriage to World War II in 1945, the enemy here refers to the French colonizers and is referring to the anti-colonial resistance of the Syrians.

*A Ladder to Heaven* was written after Tracy left Syria in 2019, and it operates through national, political and transnational awareness of the Syrian war more broadly, and her own lived experiences when she journeyed together with Syrian refugee women. It is significant that in this novel, the protagonist's name is written in transliterated English as 'Heaven', suggesting an awareness on Tracy's part of a growing transnational readership. Again, it is centred on women without men, particularly focusing on shared experiences between Syrian women of losing men and taking responsibility for themselves and their families. Here again a fictionalized oral history is captured through stories of resilience and survival experienced by displaced women in Turkey and beyond. Through a female protagonist and narrator, Heaven, Tracy captures the painful experiences of women and a journey of transformation, moving between borders, events and times disrupting the

<sup>69</sup>Sahar Khalife's *روايتي لروايتي* [My Narrative for my Novel] (Beirut: Dar Al Adab, 2018), 209.

<sup>70</sup>Tracy, *24 Street North*, 183.

traditional standards of thinking and acting. In this novel we see a woman transform into a rebel against social and patriarchal control thanks to a move between national to transnational borders, struggling to survive against the authority of the family and her husband's violence, cruelty and jealousy. Just as in *Street 24 North*, resilience is built by the characters in the novel through storytelling between women, generational solidarity between grandmother and nieces, and the power of creativity.

The novel crosses multiple borders as the characters move between Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Greece and other European locations, and at various geographic points the displaced women share their stories, developing a new creative energy that brings about resilience and survival. Early on in the novel, Heaven is forced to go to Saudi Arabia to marry her violent brother-in-law, after the death of her sister, so as to protect her niece from the domination of a step-mother. In this marriage, Heaven is subjected to immense violence and torture, yet is able to be resilient and survive through her talent for painting, and the bond she forges with her grandmother and her niece. In this novel we see women move beyond the traditional domestic performance and an entry into creativity and education with a cultured and delicate sense of being. Heaven's world is the world of colours and sense, influenced by her grandmother who makes perfume. She recalls in exile in Europe the image of her grandmother making perfumes and distilling rose water while in Idlib. Inspired by her grandmother's creativity, Heaven paints through the bruises and torture. Heaven's husband responds ambiguously to her artistic talent. Sometimes he buys her painting kits, encouraging her to paint to sell her paintings and taking their costs, and at other times he becomes jealous of her success and destroys her paintings, after which Heaven uses only the colour blue.

Subjected to this marriage and the husband's violence for 20 years, she takes care of her niece who sees the horrors and, after leaving to study in America, accuses Heaven of being a 'fragile and weak person' in a letter. Heaven is haunted by the niece's question: 'how will you become free?'<sup>71</sup> and having been left with only the colour blue by her abusive husband, she leaves and crosses another border to cross the blue sea. After the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, Heaven meets her childhood friend, Badr, and takes a route to Europe. Here we see a distinct narrative construction of journeys and places, such as crossing borders between territories and the sea, pausing in detention and reception centres, and experiencing enclosures in filthy camps. We simultaneously experience a new body politics, where Heaven's body—subjected to sexual assault at the Syria/Turkey border, yet released from her husband's abuse—writes back to repression and compliance experienced by women over the centuries. As Heaven is leaving Syria at the Syria/Turkey border, she meets a woman, Um-badr, and hears painful stories and experiences of arrest, detention, being raped, pregnant and fleeing the country to give birth in a far place:

They left me tied up in a narrow room built in haste, and made a centre for the checkpoint soldiers. I saw their knives dripping blood when they came back and the bombardment was in full force, and I heard their laughter with victory. I saw them slam open the door . . . They dragged me into a room that smelled of smoke and sweat, which I knew was their commander's room. . . . my family was slaughtered by the hands of those who once ate our bread.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup>Ibtisam Tracy, سلم إلى السماء [Ladder to Heaven] (Doha: Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press, 2019), 162.

<sup>72</sup>Tracy, *A Ladder to Heaven*, 172.

Whilst journeying to Europe with Badr she loses him in the middle sea. Arriving in Greece, she sees a clash between border guards and refugees:

Death by suffocation is what I was afraid of at that moment when hands, necks and chests were piled up on top of my head, and I saw them as human body parts randomly installed on each other, a brown hand on a white body, blond hair on a negrohead, and eyes staring at the void in terror. The train, drenched in a puddle of sweat, my body burning with a fever.<sup>73</sup>

After losing Badr, she continues her journey to Europe, but then returns to Idlib: choosing to live in a secluded place in the mountains, the very mountains that were the refuge of Ibrahim Hanano, the revolutionary and fighter against the French occupation: 'the spirit of a leader surrounds the mountains with an aura of safety'.<sup>74</sup>

In this powerful novel we see the Syrian woman transform from traditional submissive women subjected to a culture in the nationalizing moment to a rebellious woman who incorporates aspects of other cultures in her move across national borders. The narration presents a group of rebellious women who lose confidence and belief in the old cultural and national frameworks that restricted the female to the margins, as subservient to the man. These old frameworks collapse during the revolution, and they enter new transnational frameworks. This transformation is commensurate with stages of the revolution, which revolves around the transformation of women between national and transnational borders. A move that struggles and strives fully against the idea of a marginalized and helpless female, who does not object to social custom, deprived of exercising her rights to education, work, and expression of opinion. These novels capture the resilience and survival of women across generations, whose storytelling and creative energy give them the freedom to create a new self and Syria, which is centred on a diasporic positioning between national and transnational borders.

## Conclusion

Looking at the work of Tracy and Kahf through a postcolonial and transnational frame, this essay seeks to offer a platform for divergent voices relevant to the concerns of contemporary Syrian women. These writers do not just speak for the Syrian context but must be considered as contributors to women's writing and transnational literature more broadly conceived. Within the last few decades, Syrian women increasingly refuse to be ignored. Kahf and Tracy might be considered contemporary Syrian 'Scheherazads', and 'Ishtars' given their compulsion to tell Syrian women's stories. As agents of change, Kahf and Tracy use their writing to decolonize historically constructed storytelling hegemonies that systematically silence women's voices and exclude them from inclusion within international and transnational literary canons. We want to hear the stories of the female protagonists of these women's narratives in an attempt to break the silence of History. Their writing reveals the unlimited power of literature in reclaiming identity, asserting memory, and resisting the patriarchal system.

Kahf's and Tracy's divergent diasporic experiences are reflected in their work and enact a kind of crossing in their literary sensibilities. Where Kahf moves from an interest in diasporic and Middle-Eastern identities to a deeper exploration of her 'Syrian-ness', Tracy

<sup>73</sup>Tracy, *A Ladder to Heaven*, 91.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid, 182.

looks away from Syria as she moves as a result of the revolution and displacement from the war—and her work begins to explore twenty-first-century diasporic identities. In their different ways, both these authors contribute to a new, distinct kind of Syrian positioning, one that operates across borders. To a certain extent, these writers are filling the ‘silences’ that Khaf identified in her discussion of contemporary Syrian literature under conditions of repression. From outside the borders of the nation, these voices begin to give expression to Syrian women’s experiences since the beginning of the twentieth century. One question this raises is the extent to which this can be called a national literature, and whether it is still useful to think in these terms.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors are grateful to Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics), for supporting this research. We would like to thank our anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive criticism.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **Funding**

This work was supported by the Cara (the Council for At-Risk Academics) Syria Programme [# Aug20URN13T8a]; This work was supported by Cara (the Council for At-Risk Academics) Syria Programme under Grant # Aug20URN13T8a. [# Aug20URN13T8a]; Cara (the Council for At-Risk Academics) [# Aug20URN13T8a].

### **ORCID**

Bahriye Kemal  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9754-305X>