

from *E-mails from Scheherazad*, by [Mohja Kahf](#), 2003

Hijab Scene #1

“You dress strange,” said a tenth-grade boy with bright blue hair
to the new Muslim girl with the headscarf in homeroom,
his tongue-rings clicking on the “tr” in “strange”.

*

Hijab Scene #2

“You people have such restrictive dress for women,”
she said, hobbling away in three-inch heels and panty hose
to finish out another pink-collar temp pool day.

*

Hijab Scene #3

“Would you like to join the PTA?” she asked,
tapping her clipboard with her pen,
“I would,” I said, but it was no good,
she wasn't seeing me.
“Would you like to join the PTA?” she repeated,
“I would,” I said,
but I could've been antimatter.
A regular American mother next to me
shrugged and shook her head,
“I would, I would,” I sent up flares,
beat on drums, wave navy flags,
tried smoke signals, American Sign Language,
Morse code, Western Union, telex, fax,
Lt. Uhura tried hailing her
for me on another frequency.
“Dammit, Jim, I'm a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!”
– but the positronic force field of hijab
jammed all her cosmic coordinates.
Can we save the ship we're both on,
can we save
the dilithium crystals?

*

Affirmative Action Sonnet

So you think I play the multicultural card
and sign up for affirmative action verse,
slide into print with poetry that's worse?
So you think I get excused from being good

by throwing in Third-World saffron and some veils?
Now is the summer of minority malcontent
They have no Idea of Order in the West –
but I do not insist on difference. Difference pales

beside the horrors facing our race
the human one: hunger, HIV, genocide,
the uncoscionable global marketplace
Where is the salve? We write. We recognize
– we must – each other in millennial glow
or we will die from what we do not know

That's all these smoke-and-mirror poems do
I came across the world to write for you

*

from *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, by Mohja Kahf, 1999

Chapter One. Introduction

A distinct narrative representing the Muslim woman abides in Western culture today. This narrative has formed a central part of Western discourse on Islam ever since the eighteenth century. The expository tenets of the narrative are "that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies" (Ahmed, 152). The core narrative itself, whittled to one sentence for working purposes, is this: the Muslim woman is being victimized. There are variations on the narrative: the woman may be a willing accomplice, or she may be escaping her victimization. But "the Muslim woman is being victimized" is the common axis undergirding a wide variety of Western representations.

The narrative about the Muslim woman is so diffuse as to be part of conventional wisdom in the Western world. A corporate advertiser can appeal to this received image in producing advertising copy precisely because the narrative operates at almost all levels of culture, from high to low. Not only can a television cartoon program churn out a *Heathcliff the Cat*-level, children's version of the stereotype, but a university professor or an article in a major metropolitan newspaper can refer to the basic elements of this narrative without finding it necessary to substantiate them. This narrative is so ubiquitous as to be invisible, except when crises cause it to be deployed in a direct fashion, as during Operation Desert Storm, when the narrative of the Muslim woman was activated to round out the story of the need for a civilizing American presence in the Gulf.

[...]

