

The Indication of Hijab in Kahf "Hijab Scene #7" and Nawwab's "The Hidden Layers": A Comparative Study

Suhair Nafie Abdulaziz Al-Shaia
College of Education for Humanities, University of Anbar, Ramadi, Iraq
*ed.suhair.nafie@uoanbar.edu.iq

KEYWORDS: Hijab, Culture, Identity, Cultural Identity, Muslim Women, Mohja Kahf, Nimah Ismail Nawwab.



<https://doi.org/10.51345/v34i3.819.g398>

ABSTRACT:

This paper highlights the representation of *hijab* to Mohja Kahf (1967) an immigrant Muslim woman in the United States of America and Nimah Ismail Nawwab (1966) a Muslim woman living in Saudi Arabia. The study displays the difference between the dominant understandings of the West to *hijab* as a symbol of the subjugation of Muslim women; and the self-expressed sense of Muslim women that wearing *hijab* has an affirmative experience in their lives. As being Muslim women poets, Kahf and Nawwab embrace certain Islamic duties to be the speaker and educator on behalf of Muslim women. The study tackles Kahf's poem "Hijab Scene #7" from her volume of poetry *E-Mails from Scheherazade* (2003) and Nawwab's poem "The Hidden Layers" from her collected poems *The Unfurling* (2004). The aim of this study is to argue that the concept of *hijab* is not only a religious issue, but it embodies the cultural identity of its wearers as well as to explore how Kahf deals with the concept of *hijab* as a symbol of difference to the migrant Muslim woman in Western society and Nawwab's portrayal of Muslim women wearing *hijab/niqab/abaya* and living in the Arabic/Muslim world. Through their poems, the two poets refute all the harmful assumptions towards the *hijab* of Muslim women and show that *hijab* is a metaphor for their positive experiences. The study will rely on the concept of *hijab* by providing its diverse definitions and shapes through history. To illustrate the correlation between the terms of culture and identity a clarification is given which helps to form the cultural identity theory. Then, Hall's theory of cultural identity is applied in order to frame the analysis of the poems and the most effective theorists and critics who developed it.

REFERENCES:

- Abdurraqib, S. (2006). Hijab Scenes: Muslim Women, Migration, and Hijab in Immigrant Muslim Literature. *Melus*, 31(4), 55-70.
- Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Alghadeer, H. A. (2013). Cultural Representations of Muslim Women in Contemporary Arab Anglophone Poetry: A Study of Nimah Nawwab's *The Unfurling*. *Arab World English Journal*.1, 16-29.
- Al-Karawi, Susan Taha and Bahar, Ida Baizura. (2014). Negotiating the Veil and Identity in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. *GEMA Journal of Language Studies*.14(3), 255-268.
- Almahasheer, M. B. (2019) *Winds of Change: Heterotopias in Nimah Nawwab's The Unfurling*. *GEMA Journal of Language Studies*. 19(2), 70-81.
- Bhugra, D. (2004). *Culture and self-harm* (Maudsley Monograph no. 46). Hove and New York: Psychology press.
- Collins English Dictionary. Retrieved 4 February, 2023 from, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/the-world-is-your-oyster>
- Deng, F. M. 1995. *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan*. Washington, DC. Booking.
- El Guindi, F. (1999) *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*. New York: Oxford.
- Fadda-Conrey, C. (2014) *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Configurations of Citizenship and Belonging*. New York: New York UP.
- Haddad, Y. Y., Smith, J. and Moore, K. (2006). *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (222–37). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hoodfar, H. (1993) *The Veil in their Minds and on our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women's*. Resources for Feminist Research. 22 3/4,5-18.
- Jenkins, R. (1996). *Social Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Joseph, J. E. (2013). Cultural Identity. In C. A. Chapelle (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* (1-5). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Kahf, M. (2003). *E-Mails from Scheherazad*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Katzenstein, P., ed. (1996). *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kluckhohn, C. (1951). The study of culture. In D. Lerner & H. D. Lasswell (Eds.), *The policy sciences* (86–101). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lane, W. E. (1984). *Arabic–English lexicon*. Cambridge, England: The Islamic Texts Society.
- Moghissi, H. (1994) *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women's Struggle in a Male-defined Revolutionary Movement*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Nawwab, N. I. (2004). *The Unfurling*. Istanbul: Selwa Press.
- Shahidian, H. (2002) *Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Sinno, N. (2017). Dammit, Jim, I'm a Muslim Woman, Not a Klingon!: Mediating the Immigrant Body in Mohja Kahf's Poetry. MELUS, 42(1),116–138.
- Yegenoglu, M. (1998). *Colonial Fantasies: Towards A Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Introduction:

"Clothing is probably the most silent of expressions used by human societies to demarcate social boundaries and to distinguish "self" from "other" at both collective and individual levels." (Hoodfar, 1993, P.3)

The epigraph indicates that every culture has its own pattern of clothing which differentiates it from other cultures. Dressing style reflects the differences between the "self" which is the wearer's culture and that of the spectator/"other". The type of dressing can decide the traditions, habits, and philosophy of life and relations of that culture. Sometimes the clothing code of a society has a religious type that denotes to the constant development come to pass at social and cultural levels. Wearing clothes denotes to the appearance of a society "while simultaneously delineating individual features of the wearer such as gender, geographical origin, religion, ethnicity, profession, class orientation and life cycle" (Hoodfar, 1993, p.4). *Hijab* is one of the dress codes worn by Muslim women that embodied all these features. As wearing *hijab* is a mandatory practice in Islam, *hijab* has an immense value as a religious necessity for Arab/Muslim women.

The paper tackles Kahf's (1967) poem "Hijab Scene #7" from her volume of poetry *E-Mails from Scheherazade* (2003) and Nawwab's (1966) poem "The Hidden Layers" from her collected poems *The Unfurling* (2004). While *hijab* represents the Islamic dress for women in Islamic world, it is the most visible indicator of cultural difference amongst veiled Arab/Muslim women and the unveiled Western world. *Hijab* to Western eyes is the sign of both oppression and degradation of women as Ahmed (1992) states that to the West the Muslim woman is victimized and "Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression and these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies"(152). Therefore, *hijab* with its diverse shapes has become a topic of debate in the West to symbolize the inferiority of Muslim culture. Muslim woman wearing *hijab* in America faced a negative misconception about their veil; they are identified as quiet, oppressed and unskillful in talking

and using the English language because of their *hijab*. To non- Muslims in America, *hijab* possesses the characteristic of being the most stereotypical indicator of oppression and subordination of Muslim women.

Kahf and Nawwab create amazing portraits in their poems to depict the Arab/Muslim women behind the *hijab*; these images are greatly linked to the Arab/Muslim culture. As being Muslim women poets, Kahf and Nawwab hold the responsibility to enlighten the non-Muslims and challenge the oppressors of Arab/Muslim females. Each poet confronts the prevailing understanding of the West to the *hijab* of Arab/Muslim women as a symbol of their oppression and restriction.

The Concept of Hijab:

The word *hijab* is also known as the veil which means 'cover' to include the concept of concealment. *Hijab* is a piece of cloth worn over the head as a headscarf, and/or long coat to cover the shoulders and the whole body of woman as cloak/*abayas*, and sometimes to cover her face *niqab*. In this paper, the researcher will not change the word veil when cited; the term veil is interchangeably utilized with the Arabic word *hijab*. *Hijab* is synonymously used with the veil, headscarf, cloak/*abayas* and mask/*niqab* because that is the way in which Kahf and Nawwab utilized in their poems "*Hijab Scene #7*" from *E-Mails from Scheherazade* (2003) and "*The Hidden Layers*" from *The Unfurling* (2004), respectively.

The Arabic term *hijab* has diverse classical denotation which means an object or a thing that prevents, hinders, covers, hides, protects, veils, or conceals its wearer from seeing (Lane1984). The legacy of wearing *hijab* is not a substantially Islamic practice; it is not even originated or established by Arabs and Muslims. The tradition of *hijab* precedes Islam in various cultures as El Guindi (1999) writes:

As far as is presently known, Islam did not invent nor introduce the custom of veiling. Veiling for men and women had existed in the region prior to Islam- in Hellenic, Judaic, Byzantine cultures. Whether by adoption, reinvention or independent invention, veiling in Arab social systems has evolved a distinct function and characteristic meaning from that in the Northern Mediterranean regions. (p.149)

The history of veiling has extended to European, Asian, and African cultures. Veiling has been of various shapes in [Judaism](#), [Christianity](#), and [Islam](#); it is particularly linked with women and holy objects to have a religious implication. In a similar vein, Shahidian (2002) states that the "*chador*" is an Iranian invention, predating the advent of Islam" (p.190); thus, *hijab* is authentically existed centuries before the commence of Islam in several parts of the ancient world, such as the Romans, Assyrian reign, ancient Persia, ancient Greece, the Balkans, Byzantium and pre-Islamic Arabia. Dressing *hijab* was only allowed for the high rank status to indicate protection and honor to distinguish noble women from commoners, prostitutes, and slaves who were disallowed to wear *hijab* (Shahidian, 2002).

Wearing *hijab* differs from one culture to another; its shape and appearance are obviously denoting to the diversity in culture amongst communities to reflect preference. For instance, in Iran sooner than the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the *chador* had a range of colors and flowers, but after the revolution the color turns into black without flora. In Saudi Arabia women wear *niqab* and black cloak/*abayas* while typically white *haiks* are worn in Algeria

and North Africa. Southeast Asian women, who dwell in Malaysia and Indonesia dress embroidered colorful beads which are called *tudung*, whereas South Asian Pakistani and Indian females wear long scarves known as *dupattas*. In most of Islamic and European communities Muslim women wear a headscarf as a cover for head indicating to the *hijab* (Al-Karawi & Bahar, 2014).

Theoretical Framework:

The term of cultural identity is applied in order to frame the analysis of Kahf "Hijab Scene #7" and Nawwab's "The Hidden Layers" poems. Cultural identity plays a vital role in the ongoing debate about Arab/Muslim women clothing especially the *hijab*. As this paper is not concern with the study of culture or identity, yet the concepts of culture and identity are highlighted as they are directly correlated with the shaping of cultural identity theory.

Culture impacts everything made/produced by people in their communities as holding certain ideas, values, attitudes, and behavior which reflect their lifestyle. Culture affects the way of understanding and behaving of people in any place. It is neither inherited, nor lonely exists; it is always shared by a group of people living in a specific community. Culture points to the shared knowledge and features of a particular group of people, like values, traditions, religion, language, and customs. Culture consists of gained behavior that delivered through symbols to compose varied attainments of people. Culture may appear in our literature, religious practices, dressing, food habits, and customs that characterized as cultural traditions. In view of that, Kluckhohn (1951) asserts:

Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values (p. 86).

Generally, culture can be defined as the knowledge, ideas, customs, and art of a particular group of people that advanced from one generation to the other. Hence, culture stands for the environment that involves the people's production that inherited from predecessors, it is called cultural heritage. Cultural heritage involves all the acquired values of culture delivered to people through ancestors to be protected and maintained from one generation to the other. Each explanation contributes to figure the cultural identity of the communities.

Accordingly, the identity of a person or place is a possessed characteristic that differentiate them from others. Identities are apparent in people's language, the ways of speaking and behaving to indicate their belonging to share culture with other people. Thus, every individual has a set of various identities of "national, ethnic, religious, generational, and gender identities, together with those relating to social class" (Joseph, 2013, p.1). In a similar vein, Deng (1995) denotes that identity is used to "describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture"(p.1). Consequently, identity can be explained as a combination of behaviors, emotions, and thoughts that distinguish an individual; identity can be formed through ethnicity, race, culture and religious beliefs.

To assert their Arab/Muslim identity, both Kahf and Nawwab create a counter discourse utilizing English language to refute the oppressive stereotypes imposed by the Westerns. Both

poets challenge the passive vision of Arab/Muslim women by inserting Arabic and Islamic concepts into English through transliteration to familiarize the non-Muslim readers with idioms and terms like, *hijab*, *niqab* and *abayas*. Thus, by using these terms, Kahf and Nawwab grant their poetic language Arab/Muslim identity through voicing Arab/Muslim women and find new vocabularies to depict their experiences in searching for Islamic identity. They confirm themselves as Muslims then as women; they request *hijab*, *niqab* and *abayas* as an indicator of Islamic modesty and piety against the Western misrepresentation.

The two concepts of culture and identity cannot be separated; culture as Joseph (2013) affirms is basically constituted from "beliefs, values, inclinations, tastes, practices and texts" as they all "serve an identity function for those who participate in the culture" (p.1). Beliefs and values are mental and rational reflections which cannot be directly viewed; whereas inclinations and tastes are the physical components of cultural identity. Only practices and texts can be seen by others, as a result cultures are composed of practices and texts. People's practices contain food preparation, clothing style, marriage customs, family agreements, and religious rituals. All these practices are determined with texts either written or mostly orally spread through heritage. (Joseph, 2013)

Cultural identity is the sense of belonging to certain group of people based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality and religion. Cultural identity is shaped and preserved via communicative practices for instance, language, traditions, customs, heritage ... etc. Cultural identity is the participation of cultural experiences and historical ancestors amongst groups. The term of cultural identity is largely applied on multicultural communities and modern colonized Western societies such as UK and USA after the annunciation of the civil rights movement in 1960s.

Stuart Hall (1932- 2014) is a Jamaican-British outstanding writer who discussed the worldwide topic of "cultural identity" and its representation in his seminal article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990). By situating the main point of culture through identity, Hall observes identity as a manifestation of cultural issues; it is impossible for people to comprehend and clarify identity without probing strongly inside culture. Hall (1990) thinks that cultural identity reveals the original ethnic culture as well as linguistic and religious culture. He continues to add that race and nationality are two vital characteristics of cultural identity. For Hall communities are "distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined". It is through "allowing us to see and recognise the different parts and histories of ourselves, to construct those points of identification, those positionalities we call in retrospect our 'cultural identities'" (p. 237).

Trying to clarify the issue of "cultural identity", Hall relies on two concepts of similarities and differences to construct his investigation of cultural identity. Firstly, the "oneness" is the core of "a people" through which the essentialist highlights the similarities existed among feminist, anti-racist, and anti- colonial, yet the colonial's distress cannot be understood. Whereas the second definition as Hall points out is helpful in comprehending the trauma of colonialism to confirm the communication of similarities as well as the differences amongst people. The similarities locate in the long shared history and ancestries of a group as well as the cultural traditions that hold the customs and manners of a certain group mostly connected with the religious practices to distinguish the group. So, the eliminated similarities of cultural identity are investigated by Hall's theory from a historical point of view; the colonial's intention is to resist the important features of the cultural identity characterized by race and nationality and

recreate a new cultural identity with dominant relations. Different people will have different cultures even if they dwell in the same country with similar geographical site; moreover, the people's racial differences produce differences that cannot be disregarded. For Hall, the most reasonable of cultural identity is the differences which indicate to the difference between the "other" and the difference of "continuity". Therefore, cultural identity is constructed through the familiar mixture of similarity, difference, homology and instability. The core of Hall's cultural identity is to deconstruct the old pattern of ethnic diaspora and build a combination of new and diverse ethnic population where people recognized with their culture and personal identity. (Hall, 1990)

Cultural identity is essential for Arab/Muslim women's sense of "self" and communication with the "other". Through cultural identity Arab/Muslim women can be identified with their particular culture "Muslim" which grants them the feeling of protection and belonging as well as provide them with support and values. Bhugra (2004) explains that cultural identity exists in the process of cultural interaction amongst people; people's identity can alter when the individual's culture /home of living is changed or encountered with another culture in a particular period in his/her life. Bhugra (2004) goes on to illustrate some of the components of cultural identity are religion, religious rituals, language, family, habits, and marriage rituals.

There is cultural barricade to show the diversity of acceptable and discard cultural characteristics to differentiate between the Western and Muslim cultures. In the twenty-first century, Islamic cultural identity has faced Western culture which looks for ways to alter the Islamic traditional values. Islamic culture has confronted the Western culture (particularly the American) affected by modernity to add certain Western principles into Islam. Muslim women attire *hijab* is one of the challenges that face the Islamic cultural identity by the West; Abdurraqib, (2006) asserts that:

Dress maintains cultural difference and this maintenance generally falls on the shoulders of women because women reproduce culture. The veil thus becomes the visual repository for the Muslim identity that is being preserved, and veiling shifts from being construed as somewhat normal behavior into an action that proclaims identity and (sometimes) allegiances" (p.59).

The Westerns consider Arab/Muslim women who dress *hijab* represent the "other" as well as they offer to civilize, modernize and liberate Arab/Muslim women from the backwardness of *hijab*; thinking that the absence of freedom and progress are the core of Islam. The presentation of backwardness of the "other" placed Arab/Muslim religion and culture/tradition out of history. Accordingly, the issue of Arab/Muslim women's *hijab* has occupied a focal place in the Western discourses to criticize the Islamic culture/traditions. Consequently, Kahf's "Hijab Scene #7" from her volume of poetry *E-Mails from Scheherazade* (2003) and Nawwab's poem "The Hidden Layers" from her collected poems *The Unfurling* (2004) are very vivid examples to refute misrepresentation of Muslims cultural identity.

Kahf and the Hijab:

Mohja Kahf (born 1967) in Syria, she is an Arab-American Muslim feminist poet; the immigration of her family to the United States in 1971 made her struggle between two conflicting cultures. Her poetry is a mixture of both Arab/Syrian and American influences. Growing up in the United States framed her perception of the world which is forged by the differences and similarities between the culture of her homeland and that of her adopted

country. In her works, Kahf designates Islam as a main indicator to identity; she enhances her Islamic identity to found a space for Islamic feminism. Thus, she confronts the West misrepresentation of Arab/Muslim women of being oppressed and exotic. Like Nawwab, Kahf recognizes Arab/Muslim women's value and freedom; her feminism cannot be defined in opposition to a particular culture. Kahf's poetry is stimulated by American colloquialism, Qur'an, Arabic oral tradition and poetry. Her aim is to make the Arab/Muslim woman visibly and audibly identifiable in the West as well as possessing agency which means having a choice and being independent.

Being a Muslim poet dwelt in the United States has a mission to rupture the prevalent image of patriarchal oppression to Muslim women and Islamic backwardness. Kahf portrays her discussion of *hijab* through reviving the mythic figure of Shahrazad in her first book of poetry *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003) to refute the tenacity of the non-Muslim Americans belief of Arab/Muslim women stereotypes who attire *hijab*. Wearing *hijab* has made life uncomfortable for Arab/Muslim women in the West because of the increased hostility towards Muslims based on the doctrine that Islam considers Muslim women as second/"other" class citizen. Islam becomes the religion of the "other" in America; since Islam is considered foreign to American community. Kahf experiences discrimination on Arab/Muslim women in the United States have been translated and developed into poetry to form a feminist attitude towards the stereotypes. In *E-Mails from Scheherazade* (2003), Kahf displays a group of poems under the title of *hijab* represented by a headscarf or veil dressed by Arab/Muslim women in the United States. By reviving the cultural figure of Shahrazad to defy the allegation related to Arab/Muslim affiliations to the new home as American citizens. Kahf explores the debate about *hijab* and rewrites the old narrative of Shahrazad reflecting the civilized and modern experiences of Arab/Muslim women in the United States. Kahf's "Hijab Scenes" poems are seven randomly arranged in the collection of *E-Mails from Scheherazade* (2003) to depict the challenges faced Arab/Muslim women dressing *hijab*.

Kahf's "Hijab Scene #7":

With this view represented by the *hijab* of Arab/Muslim women, Kahf's "Hijab Scene #7" aims to deconstruct the Western portrayal of Arab/Muslim women and introduce a new meaning to show the difference between the two cultures and negotiate the cultural identity of Arab/Muslim women. The title of "Hijab Scene #7" holds the Arabic word "*Hijab*"; Kahf intentionally utilizes the Arabic expression to assert Arab/Muslim identity as well as challenge all the American assumptions about Arab/Muslim women behind the *hijab*. Accordingly, "Hijab Scene #7" poem is given a number instead of title which has double meanings: the first is to assert the great number of the experiences of Arab/Muslim women who wear *hijab*; whereas the second is the contradictory understanding of *hijab* by the West as a symbol of coercion and oppression in Arab/Islamic heritage.

"Hijab Scene #7" is the most poignant poem because it characterizes an encounter between Arab/Muslim female wears *hijab* and anonymous adversary. Kahf ironically addresses the passive views that behold harmful stereotypes of harassment and discrimination to Arab/Muslim women attire *hijab*; it corresponds with Hall (1990) who makes clear about the West that the scene from "the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire" (p.233). To provide the audience with an idea about the dissimilarity between the two cultures "self"/"other", Kahf employs dramatic monologue where the speaker is "I" and the listener/addressee is "you" intending to concentrate

upon the misperceptions of the addressee towards the "scarf"/*hijab*. The speaker is a young Muslim-American female wearing *hijab* suggesting the difference between her Islamic culture and that of the addressee. Both "I" and "you" go through an imaginary dialogue; it is "[t]he dialogue of power and resistance, of refusal and recognition, with and against *Presence Europeenne*" which is a difficult one. With the situation of "popular cultural life, it is nowhere to be found in its pure, pristine state. It is always-already fused, syncretised, with other cultural elements." (Hall, 1990, p.233)

Confidently, Kahf gives voice to the young woman who attire *hijab* to confront her non-Muslim counterpart who thinks her 'bald': "No, I'm not bald under the scarf" (Kahf, 2003, p.39). Forwarding the attention to Muslim women, the speaker repeats the pronouns "I", "I'm" and "my" to affirm the agency of Arab/Muslim woman that wearing *hijab* made her different from the "other" and to assert her Muslim identity. From the opening lines the speaker is no more silent and patient towards the questions from anonymous adversary who "bombard [the speaker] with a series clichéd questions regarding her headscarf, country of origin, and command of English" (Sinno, 2017, p.120). These questions have been frequently heard from non-Muslim Americans as in the 1st, 2nd, and 4th lines by means of anaphora by repeating the rejection phrase: "No, I'm not" to state the persona's refusal of all the misperception connected to Arab/Muslim women who attire *hijab* indicating her Muslim identity. In this incident Fadda-Conrey (2007) denotes that "[t]he [Muslim woman's] repetition of 'no' and 'yes' suggests that these answers are tiredly offered in response to a set of hackneyed questions reminiscent of cross-examinations rather than constructive dialogue, with the end result being to instill difference instead of overcoming it" (p.168). By so doing Kahf highlights the experiences of American Muslim women clothing *hijab*, and displays the speaker's anger and frustration towards invasive questions from the interlocutor.

Being an immigrant indicates double conceptions; her cultural identity as a Muslim while the other is an American citizen "No, I'm not from that country" (Kahf, 2003, p.39). Accordingly, Abedurraqib (2006) explains that "the narrator must emphatically assert her American status despite her interlocutor's insistence on aligning her with a foreign (presumably Muslim) country" (p.66). Although the two interlocutors living in the same place and they have to be "one people" there is still the sense of difference between the 'self' and 'other'. In a resembling incident, Hall (1990) affirms that 'oneness' is essential to all the other and "cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (p.223). Kahf exposes the ignorance of the addressee who thinks Arab/Muslim women come from a 'country' bans women from driving cars "Where women can't drive cars" (Kahf, 2003, p.39). The speaker states that *hijab* is a matter of choice rather than being a symbol of her deskilling or imperfection. Moreover, Haddad, Smith and Moore (2006) emphasize that the majority of Muslim women who wear *hijab* in its various patterns in America do not symbolize oppression, constriction; *hijab* does not involve force, but it is a matter of choice to express the Muslim identity through their attire. Therefore, Kahf challenges all the allegations towards the *hijab* of Arab/Muslim women who live in America and draws the attention to their unending experiences. The female speaker does not want to be deficient "No, I would not like to defect" (Kahf, 2003, p.39) because she is before now a Muslim citizen, "I'm already American" (Kahf, 2003, p.39). In this occasion Abedurraqib (2006) denotes that *hijab* "[f]or immigrant Muslims, visible markers both stabilize their identity as Muslim while simultaneously destabilizing their identity by constantly calling into question the degree to which they have become 'American'" (p.58).

The speaker sarcastically asks her interrogator if he/she has questions "What else do you need to know"(Kahf, 2003, p.39), beholding that dressing *hijab* intervenes with all her dealings with non-Muslim American. Then, the speaker exposes as simple as about her daily activities of having a policy and an account and booking an airplane ticket like any non-Muslim American woman:

relevant to my buying insurance

opening a bank account,

reserving a seat on a flight? (Kahf, 2003, p.39)

According to this encounter Sinno (2017) emphasizes that "[b]y lashing out against her opponent's loaded questions, Kahf's speaker holds her fellow Americans to higher standards of tolerance" (p.122). The speaker points to the resemblance as the two are Americans and confirming herself as a Muslim American woman; dressing *hijab* does not impose restrictions on her mobility or limit her freedom. Relating back to the incident of anaphora and rejection, the speaker of "Hijab Scene #7" affirms her answer via being skilful and fluent in English:

Yes, I speak English

Yes, I carry explosives

They're called words (Kahf, 2003, p.39)

Repeating the pronoun "I" emphasizes the voice of Muslim female attires *hijab* in America; whereas the doubling of the adverb "yes" is to affirm the response for questions asked by the unidentified opponent for many times. Kahf, here successfully reinforces the cultural identity of the Muslim woman behind *hijab*. The speaker announces that her words are explosives in order to confront the opponent "assumptions" towards the Muslim women wearing *hijab*. The speaker who is so angry and frustrated threatens the addressee that if he/she does not end hypotheses of misperception "Off your assumptions/ They're going to blow you away" (Kahf, 2003, p.39), her arsenal which is made up of "words" not bombs will explode in his face and derive him away. Thus, to the West *hijab* is turned into an extremely powerful, pervasive symbol of Muslim women's identity.

To sum up, dressing *hijab* in the presentation of "self" is understood as an indication of difference according to Hall's theory of cultural identity; it is publicly a new cultural practice within Western culture because it challenges the prevailing identity in a country such as America. The portrayal of the speaker as Muslim woman dressing *hijab* is subverted by the adversary ignorance demonstrating the deep rooted stereotypes of Muslim woman in the United States. Kahf shows how the American culture perceives the *hijab* of Arab/Muslim women living with them. *Hijab* is the speaker's indicator telling about her Islamic cultural identity, as it is assumed that culturally, people in groups supposed to be in harmony with each other.

Nawwab and the Hijab:

Nimah Nawwab (1966) is an outstanding Saudi Arabian woman poet and the first Saudi female to write and publish poetry in English in America. In her first collection of English poetry *The*

Unfurling (2004), Nawwab portrays Arab/Muslim women in Saudi Arabia behind the *hijab* to upend the misrepresentation of the West by weakening the argument on which their understanding is constructed. She displays a new thoughts relating to Saudi Arabian women's religion, history, culture and experiences to challenge the Western stereotypes. Wearing *hijab* to these women reflects their Arab/Muslim cultural traditions as Almahasheer (2019) confirms that "Nawwab's poetry exemplifies the sociocultural condition of women in Saudi Arabia in its insistence on defining the experience from a lived perspective while retaining all reverence and respect of religious and cultural traditions" (p.70). Nawwab's poetry is derived from the Middle Eastern and Muslim culture to situate the modern Arab/Muslim women in the right center, as well as suitable status to preserve the large inherited culture free from repression. Being a female poet enriching her poetry to shatter the stereotypes of Arabian and Middle Eastern women; her poetry can be perceived through two connotations: the postmodern operates with full-size freedom and the long-standing heritage of Arabian poetry in respect of traditions to show the great constructive changes that happened to Saudi Arabian women after 2002. Thus, Nawwab's poetry is an interpretation to keep on cultural tradition including veiling and concurrently producing a local and global change to end the misrepresentation of Arab/Muslim women.

Nawwab's "The Hidden Layers":

"The Hidden Layers" is from *The Unfurling* (2004) collection consists of five stanzas; Nawwab provides her readers with the character of a woman to construct her Muslim identity and represent all Saudi Arabian women. Being a female, the persona is assertively associated with the public choosing to wear *hijab*/black *abayas* and *niqab* as an indicator to her Islamic cultural identity.

Starting with the title, Nawwab commences "The Hidden Layers" ironically as the word "Hidden" means to hide, set apart, repressed and fled away from the public of male's community under *hijab*. In contrast to Kahf, Nawwab's opening line "Some think I am hiding" (Nawwab, 2004, p. 5) is initiated with the affirmative pronoun "some" denoting to the number of Western people who believe that Saudi Arabian woman dressing *hijab*/cloak "Underneath my long black cloak" (Nawwab, 2004, p. 5) is put out of the sight of people. Like Kahf's persona, the speaker is a female whom her "'oneness', underlying all the other" trying to refute the Western stereotypes about Saudi women and referring to people by "some" and "wondering" who see her differently "more superficial differences" (Hall, 1990, p.223). The misrepresentation of the West toward Saudi Arabia is largely viewed as a stereotype and veiled women.

Furthermore, the decision of attiring *hijab* "*abaya*/cloak and *niqab*/mask" is parallel to Kahf's which is made by Arab/Muslim woman as an expression of modesty according to Muslim/Saudi Arabia culture: "Cloaked in mystery, medieval modesty/ Wondering, what is going on behind the mask?"(Nawwab, 2004, p.5). *Hijab* liberates and provides Muslim woman with freedom to move easily and protects her body from male's gaze. In other words, *hijab* is not an indicator to the oppression of patriarchy for the speaker/Muslim female; it is deeply rooted attire in the Saudi Arabia traditions. In accordance with Kahf, Nawwab is voicing persona/female to express her views freely; she is the only speaking persona using the pronoun "I" to emphasize her choice and culture "medieval modesty" about wearing *hijab*. Hall makes it clear about "the 'I' who writes here must also be thought of as, itself, 'enunciated'. We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is

specific"(p.222). As Kahf, Nawwab repeats the pronouns "I, am, me, mine, and my" over the entire poem pointing to the decision making and also granting Arab/Muslim woman agency. Agency is when a person/female has the ability to make decisions and effective choices about her own life to influence change; agency empowered woman's achievement and to identify herself. Agency is the source of strength and pride for the persona/Muslim woman against the negative stereotypes established by the Westerns.

Consequently, Nawwab confirms her female's cultural identity by being "proud" Arab/Muslim to represent cultural difference,

Proud of my identity,

Proud of my femininity,

Proud of my spirit,

My faith,

My mind, not just my body,

Proud of my heritage, culture, long-entrenched traditions. (Nawwab, 2004, p. 5)

Her pride of "femininity" and "mind" as well as "identity", "faith", "heritage", "culture", and "traditions" agree with Hall's concept of difference that "this is no mere difference of topography or climate. It is a profound difference of culture and history. [...]. Moreover, the boundaries of difference are continually repositioned in relation to different points of reference."(Hall, 1990, p.227)

Similar to Kahf, confronting the misrepresentation of the West is the core of the two poets, Nawwab lets her female repeat the adjective "proud" four times to call the attention to the speaker's overconfident of faith and religion characterized by wearing "black cloak" as an indicator to her Islamic cultural identity. So, this Arab/Muslim woman is neither oppressed by men nor her religion being an instrument to repress; it has a resonance to the "other" that *hijab* is no more seen as a symbol of ignorance to Saudi women (Alghadeer 2013).

Unlike Kahf, Nawwab turns to explain Arab/Muslim woman's modesty in "dress", "demeanor", and "expectations"; the adjective "modest" is also repeated to come as an answer to the adjective "proud". *Hijab* offers Muslim woman respect and protection; it is a measurement for her security that men do not treat her like a sexual object. *Hijab* is not only denoting to the cover of the head, it indicates the modest behavior of its wearer:

But modest in my dress

Modest in my demeanor

Modest in my expectations (Nawwab, 2004, p. 5)

Hijab stands for the prevalent identity of devoted Arab/Muslim woman and the only indicator apprising universe about her Islamic cultural identity; it is a symbol of the Islamic values and beliefs. Moreover, modesty is not opposite to the Arab/Muslim female's education and

learning. Being "curiosity and a thirst to learn"(Nawwab 2004, p. 5) let Saudi woman participate in the workforce to conduct business, education and driving cars equally as well as their counterparts in the wide world. On so doing, Saudi woman respects the tradition represented by the *hijab*/modest, concurrently keeps on modernity; it is the feeling of great satisfaction of Saudi Arabian women's achievements. Nawwab here echoes Hall's combination of the past and the change of future to construct the cultural identity of Arab/Muslim women which is constantly changing.

Like Kahf, the female persona asks non-Muslims about the *hijab*: the "cloak"/*abayas* and "masked"/*niqab* that have been for a "long" time observed as sign of oppression and ignorance to isolate/ "Barricade" the Saudi/Muslim woman universally:

Does my cloak, my masked visage

Long viewed by outsiders with pity,

Barricade me from the world? (Nawwab 2004, p.5)

The Westerns associate unveiling of *hijab* with progress and modernity "unveiling and thereby modernizing the women of the Orient signified the transformation of the Orient itself"; the West demand unveiling of Arab/Muslim women pretending that veiling indicates "the incompatibility of Islam with Western modernity"(Yegenoglu, 1998, p. 99). Thus, the Islamic dress code/ *hijab* has been understood as a barrier to modernism in the twenty-first century America. The short questions of "Does my cloak" and "does it open up" have two folds: the first typically refers to religious obligation while the second is about opening new gates of knowledge at all levels to Saudi/Muslim women who dress *abayas* and *niqab* which is unlike Kahf's persona.

Forwarding the attention towards the verb "open up" which is repeated three times; Nawaab's repetition is purposely done to affirm the great transformation happened to the Saudi/Muslim woman under the guardian of the government for a moderate religion to confront the Western misrepresentation and to open modern gates of change in "education, lifestyle, employment opportunities, national and international contributions" (Almahasheer; 2019, p.73). Saudi women are dramatically changed no more gender limitations posed upon them,

Or does it open up vistas of wonder,

Open up doors for exploration into the unseen,

Open up the world through a different hidden sharp lens?" (Nawwab 2004, p.5)

Nawwab uncovers the great change of Saudi/Muslim women whereas maintain their rich culture. Consequently, cultural identity as Hall asserts "[i]t belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation"(p. 225). This change also occurs in accordance with Moghissi's (1996) notable words which signify "women's determination and their enormous efforts to escape the prisons of the femininity and sex-roles.... Women are jumping over the fences. They are moved by the irresistible forces of social change." (p.183) Relating back to the occasion of the assertion, repeating the pronoun "my" sixteen times all

over the poem: firstly, affirming that the speaker is a Muslim woman dressing *hijab* and having agency to delineate herself for the universe. Secondly, the speaker draws the attention to the powerful persona/female that has voice to rupture the stereotypes of oppressed Saudi/Muslim women in *hijab*. Here, Nawwab refute the Western hypotheses concerning the construction of Arab/Muslim woman as a figure burdened by a black *abaya* and face covered/*niqab* and voiceless. Muslim women globally confirm on the significance of their Islamic cultural identity. The noun "cloak" is repeated two times in the first stanza (1.2): "Underneath my long black cloak" (Nawwab 2004, p.5), and the fourth stanza (1.20): "Does my cloak, my masked visage" (Nawwab 2004, p.5) to assert that *hijab*/ cloak of Saudi/Muslim female is concord with the traditions of the day to reveal her cultural identity.

Different from Kahf, Nawwab ends the final stanza coining a phrase from Shakespeare's comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1602) "the world's mine oyster"; it is widely utilized to assert that anybody has countless choices in his/her life and can do whatever and wherever he/she wants (*Collins English Dictionary*). Nawwab denotes to the Arab/Muslim woman who wears *hijab*/cloak has many amazing opportunities to fulfill; Nawwab compares her with the closed oyster which holds a precious pearl inside like the cloaked Muslim woman whose body cannot be seen by other people: "My world is my oyster, as it is for my unveiled sisters" (Nawwab 2004, p.5). It is her/"mine" choice to wear *hijab*/cloak to indicate cultural identity; so *hijab* is a matter of the freedom/choice: "Their choices are made as are mine". Whereas Nawwab refers to western women as "unveiled" and "uncloaked" with the pronouns "Their" and "they": "I remain cloaked, they remain uncloaked" (Nawwab 2004, p.5) to show preference and diversity between cultures. To assert and compare the persona's choice of veiling "mine" with "Their" preference of unveiling Nawwab utilizes and repeats the similarity adverb "as" in the 1st and 2nd lines of the last stanza to construct the whole stanza on the likeness amongst Muslim and non-Muslim women that veiling and unveiling is an affair of choice showing cultural difference. *Hijab* to non-Muslims becomes an indicator to distinguish Muslim identity as Jenkins (1996) clarifies that identity "refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities" (p.4). *Hijab* constructs Arab/Muslim women's cultural identity as an indicator to show the difference between Arab/Muslim women "other" and the Westerns "self" as deep and significant difference asserting their cultural identity. Ultimately, the speaker is pleased and not oppressed with her tradition of dressing *hijab*, yet she is seen by the non-Muslims differently; unlike Kahf's speaker who is angry and frustrated with the addressee. In the last line, Nawwab addresses Western females as "sisters" who share several points of similarity to represent what they in reality are. The persona shares the same global experiences with Western women who are "All united by unbreakable bonds of sisterhood" (Nawwab 2004, p.5). Being like sisters and having similar histories of struggle to obtain feminists rights in their communities. These histories are "*something* - not a mere trick of the imagination. [...] histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us." (Hall, 1990, p.226)

To sum up, Saudi Arab/Muslim women do not have the desire to be identified with the West. As these women want to emphasize their Arab/Muslim cultural identity by embracing their traditional dress; they intend to wear the *hijab* not only because they have to dress traditionally, they adopt the *hijab* as an indicator of their Islamic cultural identity. Only the *hijab* is asserting their identity; thus, they are immediately recognized as Muslims. Nawwab brings to light the difference in cultural identity.

Conclusion:

Hijab is an essential and positive symbol of Arab/Muslim identity, *hijab* is not a patriarchal instrument used to suppress women; it denotes to the cultural identity of Muslim women. Hall's theory of cultural identity highlights the similarities as well as the differences amongst communities. The similarities situate in the cultural traditions as well as history of groups; cultural traditions embrace customs and manners of society usually associated with the religious rituals to differentiate people. The combination of similarities and ethnic differences with the different living environment amongst groups compose the cultural identity. Both Kahf and Nawwab utilize *hijab* as an indicator to their Islamic cultural identity. Their poetry is deeply rooted in Arab/Muslim traditions to present a new Islamic cultural change; Kahf dwells in the United States while Nawwab is in Saudi Arabia. Both poets highlight their cultural identity through the concepts of similarity and difference; Kahf's "Hijab Scene #7" and Nawwab's "The Hidden Layers" give emphasis to the concept of difference rather than similarity. Kahf's "Hijab Scene #7" denotes to the only similarity which is of place as the personas share the same "country" commencing the poem while Nawwab's "The Hidden Layers" refers to similarity amongst all women "sisters" at the end of the poem.

According to the titles of the two poems, Kahf's holds the name of *hijab* while Nawwab's holds the meaning of *hijab*. The speakers of the two poems are Muslim females wearing *hijab*; in both poems the speakers are already constructed as the "other" due to their appearance indicating Hall's concept of difference to represent their Arab/Muslim identity. Unlike Nawwab, Kahf utilizes the technique of dramatic monologue where in a dialogue the speaker is "I"/Muslim women countering an imaginary listener/addressee "you"/non-Muslim. Each poet confirms the agency and voice of the personas to confront the stereotypes and challenge the misrepresentation towards Arab/Muslim women. For the two poets, *hijab* displays a contradiction presenting certain freedoms and comfort to Muslim women but concurrently being a matter of aggravation and discrimination. Kahf's persona does not develop through the poem she is already confirming her Muslim identity; she focuses on her experiences while Nawwab's develops through the poem to be open minded of knowledge to the whole global. Kahf's speaker is angry and frustrated towards the questions of the interlocutor whereas, Nawwab's persona quietly addresses the world in an intercultural dialogue. Dressing *hijab* for the two poets is a matter of choice; it is a protector of their cultures as it is thought that women are responsible for chaste societies. *Hijab* empowers women to confirm their Muslim identities, provide them with sense of belonging, control their lives and award them with a respectable status inside the Muslim and Western communities. As a result, through applying the concepts of difference and similarity both Kahf and Nawwab assert their cultural identity.

دلالة الحجاب في قصيدة قحف "مشهد الحجاب #7" وقصيدة نواب "الطبقات المخفية": دراسة مقارنة

أ.م.د. سهير نافع عبدالعزيز الشايح

قسم اللغة الانجليزية، كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية، جامعة الانبار، الرمادي، العراق

ed.suhair.nafie@uoanbar.edu.iq

الكلمات المفتاحية | الثقافة، الهوية، الحجاب، الهوية الثقافية، المرأة المسلمة، مهجة قحف، نعمة إسماعيل النواب.



<https://doi.org/10.51345/v34i3.819.g398>

ملخص البحث:

يسلط هذا البحث، الضوء على تمثيل الحجاب للشاعرة مهجة قحف (1967) كإمرأة عربية/مسلمة مهاجرة الى الولايات المتحدة الاميركية وللشاعرة نعمة إسماعيل النواب (1966) كإمرأة مسلمة تعيش في المملكة العربية السعودية. ويعرض البحث الفرق بين المفاهيم السائدة في الغرب للحجاب كرمز لاضطهاد المرأة المسلمة. أن ارتداء الحجاب يعبر عن الشعور بالذات لدى النساء المسلمات المحجبات وهو تجربة إيجابية في حياتهن. ولكوئهما شاعرتان مسلمتان، تتبنى كهف ونواب واجبات إسلامية معينة ليكونا المتحدثين والمعلمين نيابة عن النساء المسلمات. يتناول البحث قصيدة "مشهد الحجاب #7" من مجلد قحف الشعري "رسائل البريد الإلكتروني من شهرزاد" (2003) وقصيدة "الطبقات المخفية" لنعمة النواب من المجموعة الشعرية "المتفتح" (2004). الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو القول بأن مفهوم الحجاب ليس مجرد قضية دينية، ولكنه يجسد الهوية الثقافية لمرتبته وكذلك استكشاف كيفية تعامل قحف مع مفهوم الحجاب كرمز لاختلاف المرأة المسلمة المهاجرة في المجتمع الغربي وتصوير نواب للمرأة المسلمة التي ترتدي الحجاب / النقاب وتعيش في العالم العربي / الإسلامي. الهدف من الدراسة هو استكشاف كيف تعاملت قحف مع مفهوم الحجاب للمرأة المسلمة المهاجرة في المجتمع الغربي وتصوير نعمة النواب للمرأة العربية المسلمة التي ترتدي الحجاب/النقاب/العباية وتعيش في العالم العربي/الإسلامي. تدحض الشاعرتان من خلال قصيديهما كل الافتراضات المعرّضة تجاه حجاب المرأة المسلمة، وتبين أن الحجاب هو استعارة للتجارب الإيجابية للمرأة المسلمة. ستعتمد الدراسة على مفهوم الحجاب من خلال تقديم التعاريف واشكاله المختلفة والخلفية التاريخية وكذلك مصطلحات الثقافة والهوية وتطبيق نظرية هال للهوية الثقافية لتشكيل تحليل القصائد وأكثر المنظرين والنقاد فاعلية الذين ساعدوا في بلورة وتطوير تلك النظرية.