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# Feminist Resistance in Contemporary American Women Writers of Color: Unsettling Images of the Veil and the House in Western Culture

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FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS  
OF COLOR: UNSETTLING IMAGES OF THE VEIL AND THE HOUSE IN  
WESTERN CULTURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

August 2009

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Title: Feminist Resistance in Contemporary American Women Writers of Color:  
Unsettling Images of the Veil and the House in Western Culture

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The present dissertation offers a critical study of how two contemporary U.S. women writers critique, resist, dismantle and disrupt the hegemonic discourse that represents U.S. Third World women as a monolithic and homogeneous category. The unsettling of the monolithic image of U.S. Third World women is pursued through providing an analysis of the cultural imagery of gender, in which the focus is specifically on two key images: the veil and the house. In this research, I show how the two writers Mohja Kahf, an Arab-American, and Sandra Cisneros, a Chicana, examine dominant constructions of those two key images of gender and demonstrate the ways those constructions are oppressive distortions that entrap and disempower women. At the same time, I argue that not only are the two writers unsettling these specific constructions, but are also producing new meanings, and thus, new identities through contextualizing the two dehistoricized images.

This argument is developed within broad theoretical context of U.S. Third World Feminism. I explore the counter arguments made by U.S. Third World feminists in resistance to hegemonic Western feminist discourses that reinforce inequality, imperialist dominance, and injustice. Because of the heterogeneity of U.S. Third World women and the false notion of a global sisterhood, I provide a thorough discussion of commonalities and differences between them. I have chosen an Arab-American and Chicana woman

writer as representatives of what are typically regarded as homogenized Third World cultures within the U.S.

In the discussion of Kahf's works I focus on the veil and look at the interconnection of factors of race, ethnicity, religion, colonialism, and imperialism that shape gender identity within a social formation. In Cisneros' works, I examine the image of the house and issues of race, class, and hybridity. In my conclusion, I argue that through an understanding of commonalities and differences between Western and U.S. Third World feminist thinking, a dynamic form of feminism emerges that can actually assist women around the world in their endeavor to gain equality and justice because it addresses the pressing issues pertaining to each particular culture on its own, while remaining open to building unity.

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and resistance to hegemony. She has been a great source of knowledge, inspiration, and encouragement. I would also like to thank Dr. David Downing who believed in me and was always there for advice and support, and who first introduced me to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which influenced my thoughts and view of the world. Dr. Downing's work on the recent issue of *Works and Days* on Academic Freedom and Intellectual Activism was also a source of encouragement to continue in our path to academic freedom and decolonizing minds in spite of the obstacles and various efforts made to stifle critical thinking.

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dominant voices in the academy. I also wanted to thank my brother Tariq and my sister Janna who have a great sense of humor. They constantly showed their love and support and added to my strength and positive outlook on life. All these people in my life helped make this success possible. Thank you to all.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Today it is ten days, last night Bush waged war on a man once  
Openly funded by the CIA. I do not know who is responsible ...  
But I know for sure who will pay  
In the world, it will be women, mostly colored and poor. Women will  
Have to bury children, and support themselves through grief.  
“either you are with us, or with the terrorists”  
Meaning keep your people under control and your resistance censored (101).  
-- Suheir Hammad, “First Writing Since”

It is this hegemonic rhetoric of “us” and “them,” the terrorists, referred to by Suheir Hammad, that Arab- American feminists resist and try to overturn. In resistance to their “otherization” by hegemonic and imperialist discourses, Arab- American and Islamic feminists have worked towards constructing a counter- hegemonic discourse that brings activists together from the mainstream and the margins to build solidarities amongst them, resist subordination, and bring about social transformation. Arab- American and Chicana activists and feminists have separately resisted the homogenized image of U.S. Third World women created by hegemonic discourses that have been imposed through cultural and intellectual dominance and colonization and the language of power. These two types of feminisms have continuously strived to resist and subvert the hegemonic and patriarchal dominance over women, but their efforts need to be united in this struggle to achieve the common goal of social and political justice, equality, and transformation. As a Chicana feminist, Elizabeth Martinez calls for unity and building alliances among women of color in her article, “Unite and Rebel”:

Silences can feed the cancer of unaddressed conflict, and this has destroyed more than one project, ... or organization ... Today, as reactionary forces work to aggravate rather than diminish racism in this society, the times call for courage

more than ever. Let us create a stubborn, imaginative, honest, powerful insurgency. Let us counter the enemy forces of divide and conquer with our strategy of unite and rebel! (195)

Martinez advocates breaking the silence and addressing conflicts within feminist movements so women activists are able to unite in their resistance to that “us” and “them,” and “divide and conquer” rhetoric that pervades Western hegemonic discourses.

One of the key conflicts I explore in my examination of the works of the Arab-American feminist, Mohja Kahf, and Chicana feminist, Sandra Cisneros, is the conflict between feminism and community affiliations for both writers. Both protagonists, Khadra and Esperanza, struggle to find a feminist space in which they are not restricted by the cultural and patriarchal norms set by the hegemonic culture nor their own U.S. Third World cultures. They are torn between their ambitions as empowered feminists and their cultural affiliations which they respect and wish to maintain. They strive to shape their own feminist identities that are independent yet strongly connected to their cultural origins.

In the discussion of Arab- American and Chicana feminists, and in applying the “Third World” term to these U.S. women writers of color, I argue that these women, besides being minority women, are perceived in the U.S. through their connection to the Third World and are united in oppositional activity against imperialism and colonization. Chela Sandoval who has coined the term “U.S. Third World feminism” explains that this type of feminism “provides access to a different way of conceptualizing not only U.S. feminist consciousness but oppositional activity in general; it comprises a formulation capable of aligning such movements for social justice with what have been identified as

world- wide movements of decolonization” (1). Sandoval goes on to note that U.S. third world feminism “arose out of the matrix of the very discourses denying, permitting, and producing difference” (1). U.S. Third World feminists have generated a common speech and share a lived experience of difference and a commitment to oppositional consciousness. U.S. Third World feminism presents a “consciousness in opposition to the dominant social order” and hegemonic ideologies and “histories of consciousness” (Sandoval 11). In my argument, I deal with the Arab- American writer Mohja Kahf and the Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros as U.S. Third World feminists who are engaged, through their writings, in oppositional activity and resistance to hegemony, colonization, and imperialism.

In this dissertation, I bring together two falsely homogenized Third World cultures existing in the U.S., the Arab- American and the Chicano culture, in an examination of female resistance to patriarchal and hegemonic structures of dominance. These cultures are represented through the works of Mohja Kahf and Sandra Cisneros who are both feminist writers and activists within their cultures. What ties the works of these two contemporary American writers to each other is their resistance to various forms of oppression and female entrapment caused by the various interrelated factors of economy, society, patriarchy, ideology, colonization, and pervasive imperialist and historical influences. Two of the specific imperialist, capitalist, and patriarchal constructions through which these U.S. Third World women are oppressed are the veil and the house. The veil, as it is explored in Kahf, has been manipulated as an oppressive tool to keep the Arab/ Muslim woman entrapped, inferior, Eastern, read as backward,

traditional, and in need of liberation. Likewise, the house, in Cisneros, is used “to other” the Chicana woman, to subordinate, restrict, and immobilize her.

The veil and the house, cultural images significant to the native cultures under discussion, have been manipulated by capitalism, patriarchy, and the overarching imperialist mind- set of those in control who represent Western hegemony. Hegemony has managed to create major alterations in the meanings of the veil and the house so as to fit the hegemonic agenda. The veil and the house within U.S. Third World cultures have been completely taken out of their complex historical and cultural contexts, and negative connotations and derogatory traits have been attached to them. This process of demotion or relegation and othering of minorities and their cultures and traditional values is necessary to set Western hegemonic concepts and standards as the ideal and the universal, that is, the norm to be followed by inferior and underdeveloped societies. In an article entitled “Universalism, Eurocentrism, and Ideological Bias in Development Studies: From Modernization to Neoliberalism,” John Brohman asserts that the neoliberal framework “...employs universalistic (ideal) theoretical constructs that are based on unrealistic assumptions and exclude much of the variability of Third World social formations”(126). In this neoliberal and hegemonic discourse, Third World and U.S. Third World cultures are flattened, homogenized, and pictured as uncivilized and non- progressive and in need of democratization and liberalization of their women justifying their subordination and the exploitation of their cultures’ resources.

It seems through the neoliberal lens, the entire Third World is incompatible with the neoliberal state, but serves its capitalist interest and helps perpetuate the elite’s dominance and status at the expense of the poor. Brohman claims that much of

neoliberalism adopts Eurocentric principles that view one's own ethnic group and social standards as superior (127). In this antagonistic neoliberal atmosphere, Arabs/ Muslims and Chicanos/as are perceived as inferior races who are backward and, thus, need liberation from their oppressive and traditional societies that do not live up to Western standards of globalization and the free market.

In this era of globalization, the Arab/ Muslim woman's struggle involves the resistance to negative interpretations of the veil and Islam created by the imperial West, starting from British colonization and continuing with the American empire. The Chicana woman, however, strives to resist the hegemonic discourse that views her as submissive, subordinate, and male dominated, and thus needs to be liberated from the shackles of the oppressive Chicano patriarchy. In both cases, the hegemonic West is set as the powerful superior and all-knowing center that will rearrange and amend inferior structures of societies living in the periphery.

In this dissertation, forms of Arab-American and Chicana resistance to Western imperialist and patriarchal dominance are explored. These two U.S. Third World cultures are viewed through a progressive feminist lens that is incompatible with the currently prevalent neoliberalist and imperialist discourse. The present dissertation provides an analysis of the cultural imagery of gender, focusing on the dominant images of the veil and the house. In addition to Kahf's and Cisneros' examination and resistance to the dominant constructions of the image of the house and the veil, there is a demonstration of the ways those dominant constructions are oppressive distortions that entrap and disempower women.

In the analysis of the two key images of veil and house, V.N. Volosinov's discussion of sign sets an appropriate framework through which these images can be explored. In his article, "Concerning the Relationship of the Basis and Superstructures," Volosinov analyzes the concept of sign, perceiving it as "A construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction. Therefore, the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction. When these forms change, so does sign"(65). Volosinov's discussion and theorization of the sign allows us to study the origin and development of any given sign or image to understand its significance. Such a study requires an examination of the ideological, historical, political, and socio-economic factors shaping that specific sign, in this case, the signs under study are the veil and the house. Volosinov explains that every ideological sign "... in coming about through the process of social intercourse, is defined by the social purview of the given time period and the given social group"(65). The question that must be addressed at this stage is what is it that enables certain items and not others to enter the social purview? In response to this question, Volosinov confirms:

In order for any item, from whatever domain of reality it may come, to enter the social purview of the group and elicit ideological semiotic reaction, it must be associated with the vital socio-economic prerequisites of the particular group's existence; it must somehow, even if only obliquely, make contact with the bases of the group's material life (65).

Through the perspective Volosinov introduces in his analysis of any sign, the meanings of the veil and the "ideological semiotic reaction" it elicits can be understood within the

context of empire and cultural colonization that controls the socio- economic conditions of the Middle East that in turn impacts the U.S. capitalist system. In other words, it is crucial for the capitalist system of the U.S. empire and the uplifting of its economy to exploit the Middle East's natural resources and oil. This is done through the U.S. military existence in the Middle East, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan which are justified through the rhetoric of "democracy," "civilization," and "women's liberation," and the "noble mission" of the war on terror. Within these socio- economic terms, the veil is used as a sign of the Muslim woman's oppression that needs to be lifted by U.S. democracy to "free" the Muslim woman. It is obvious that when these socio- economic conditions change, and the Middle East runs out of oil, the need for the veil to symbolize oppression will no longer exist, and nor will U.S. presence in the Middle East be necessary.

Through the application of Volosinov's thoughts on the sign, the construction of the two key images of the veil and the house are studied within the dominant discourse with reference to the dominant ideologies in the West that shaped such signs and attached certain meanings and significances to them. After exposing the oppressive ideologies and histories shaping the two signs under discussion, the dissertation then works towards the unsettling of these constructions and their meanings, giving them new meanings and interpretations. This unsettling of veil and house takes place in Kahf's and Cisneros' literary works and within their own cultural and historical contexts.

I examine the conflicting meanings and complex constructions of the veil within Kahf's works and also within larger historical, cultural and political contexts. The predominant image of the veil in the Middle East and the Muslim Arab-American community is discussed in depth since it defines the Muslim woman's identity culturally,

socially, religiously, and geopolitically. I use for my discussion of the veil Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Samaa Abdurraqib's "Hijab Scenes: Muslim Women, Migration, and Hijab in Immigrant Muslim Literature," Arlene MacLeod's "Hegemonic Relations and Gender Resistance: The New Veiling as Accommodating Protest in Cairo," Barbara Stowasser's *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* and Jen'Nan Read's and John Bartkowski's "To Veil or Not to Veil? A Case Study of Identity Negotiation among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas."

While feminist views of Qasim Amin may vary, Ahmed deals with Amin's westernized views of the veil and the influence of colonization on his attitude towards it. Ahmed points out that Amin believed the veil was the source of the nation's backwardness and constituted "A huge barrier between woman and her elevation, and consequently a barrier between the nation and its advance"(Qtd in Ahmed 160). Ahmed argues that his attack on the veil represented the "internalization and replication of the colonialist perception"(160). She asserts that Amin's book, *Tahrir Al- Mar'a* (*The Liberation of Woman*), served as the "colonial narrative of women and Islam" in which the veil epitomized Islamic inferiority in mainstream Arabic discourse. Similarly, the opposition it generated marked the emergence of an "Arabic narrative developed in resistance to the colonial narrative"(163). She further explains that the veil came to symbolize in the resistance narrative "...not the inferiority of the culture and the need to cast aside its customs in favor of those of the West, but, on the contrary, the dignity and validity of all native customs, and in particular those customs coming under fiercest

colonial attack- the customs relating to women- and the need to tenaciously affirm them as a means of resistance to Western domination”(164).

The veil is viewed as oppressive and backward by some writers such as Amin. Others, however, have dealt with it as a liberator. Jen’Nan Read and John Bartkowski, in “To Veil or Not to Veil?”, deal with this controversy and analyze the various motivations of the Muslim woman for veiling and the different interpretations of the veil. One interpretation Read and Bartkowski present is that veiling is “legitimated as an anti-imperialist statement of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness”(399). They state that many of the respondents in their case study argue that the practice of wearing hijab actually “liberates them from men’s untamed, potentially explosive sexuality and makes possible for them various sorts of public- sphere pursuits.” In their eyes the veil is a “great equalizer” that enables women to work alongside of men (405). This analysis has shown how the veil can function in some contexts as a liberating tool for the Muslim woman that emancipated her from the male gaze, which I go into further detail later on in my research. Nevertheless, there are other socio-economic and geopolitical contexts in which the veil can be part of an oppressive patriarchal system. On the other hand, Macleod’s research indicates that the recent practice of veiling in Cairo, for instance, takes place “not as a remnant of traditional culture or a reactionary return to traditional patterns, but as a form of hegemonic politics in a modernizing environment, making its meaning relevant to women in other such settings as well- settings in which... power and resistance both reveal themselves in transformed and ever more subtle arrangements”(536).

While it is the veil in Kahf's works, the image of the house is a recurrent image in Cisneros' work. The house defines the social forces that impact and shape the characters' identity and their attitude towards themselves and the world outside the home. It affects their decisions and relations with the past, present and future. A good illustration of this is Esperanza's dream of a future house where she can be herself, an autonomous woman, and develop her former self that was shaped in the past, in and by her father's house on Mango street.

The image of the house has taken on multiple meanings and interpretations throughout history. Linda McDowell, in "Unsettling Naturalisms," views the home or the domestic "as a building, a style, a form of representation, an ideology, a material object, a symbolic representation..."(815). The present dissertation aims to analyze the representations the home/ house offers and the ideologies and history that constitute such representations. McDowell's article introduces the various significances and meanings of the home from Anthony King's perspective. King's analysis goes beyond the material reality of the house to consider the economic, social, political, cultural and emotional significances attached to it:

At the simplest level, economically, buildings provide for investment, store capital, create work, house activities, occupy land, provide opportunities for rent; socially, they support relationships, provide shelter, express social divisions, permit hierarchies, house institutions, enable the expression of status and authority, embody property relations; spatially, they establish, place, define distance, enclose space, differentiate area; culturally, they store sentiment, symbolize meaning, express identity; politically, they symbolize power, represent

authority, become an arena for conflict, or a political resource.

(Qtd. in McDowell 816)

King's interpretations of the home are a useful tool through which the house and the domestic are explored in Cisneros. Through the analysis of the house, the present dissertation unravels and addresses the cultural and political issues relevant to each culture and affecting the characters' lives, identity, and their social formation. McDowell sheds light on the social formations of middle class women in contrast with working-class women and women of color within the context of domesticity or the public/ private binary, emphasizing that:

The domestic ideal was a classed and raced discourse. While middle-class women might have been characterized as "domestic angels," working-class women and women of color who were present in the public or outer world of the streets and work places were constructed as a threat, as active, sexualized, and dangerous women. In the same way the middle-class women in the industrializing societies were constructed as inferior to men through a set of dichotomous comparisons, so too, were working-class women and women of color constructed as the inferior "other"(819).

According to this "domestic ideal" one understands the discrepancies between the different experiences middle-class women have as opposed to the experiences working-class and women of color have with domesticity. Kahf's and Cisneros' literary works are analyzed to show the characters' relationship with domesticity, a site of struggle, acceptance and resistance, particularly, for the female protagonists, Khadra in *The Girl in*

*the Tangerine Scarf* and Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street*, who are representatives of U.S. women of color.

Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti provide multiple readings of the house and of the domestic space in their article, "Reading the House: A Literary Perspective." Mezei and Briganti support Tamara Hareven's view of the home:

The concept of home as a private retreat first emerged in the lives of bourgeois families in eighteenth century France and England, and in the United States among urban, middle class families in the early part of the nineteenth century. Its development was closely linked to the new ideals of domesticity and privacy that were associated with the characteristics of the modern family- a family that was child-centered, private, and in which the roles of husband and wife were segregated into public and domestic spheres, respectively (838-9).

Mezei and Briganti make a connection between the house image and the intimacy of this private space with the individual's internal being and internal feelings. "Our imagination, our consciousness, needs to locate itself in a particular space, to find a home, to articulate its homelessness, its longing for home, its sickness for home (nostalgia)," suggest Mezei and Briganti (839). Cisneros' works are discussed within this context in which an exploration is carried out of the characters' relationship with the home and family, on the one hand, and their relationship with themselves and their identity and the world outside themselves, on the other hand. Mezei and Briganti have established an insightful link between the house and the novel; both provide a space in which individuals grow and express themselves: "...Novels and houses furnish a dwelling place- a spatial construct-

that invites the exploration and expression of private and intimate relations and thoughts”(839).

Mezei and Briganti agree with Marilyn Chandler that in both canonical and popular novels the house goes beyond providing a mere setting to constitute “... a unifying symbolic structure that represents and defines the relationship of the central characters to one another, to themselves, to the world”(840). The house in this sense will help analyze identity formations and the factors that come together in the construction of Cisneros’ protagonists’ identity, and the social and personal dilemmas and struggles with(in) their cultures.

### *Concepts and Terms*

#### *The Terms “Arab- American” and “Chicano”*

As I explore constructions of new identities by Kahf and Cisneros, I also analyze the historically complex constructions of race, ethnicity, and class in the U.S. The term Arab-American is referred to frequently in this dissertation, since I am dealing with the construction of this identity in Kahf’s works, and thus, it must be highlighted. The term has been problematic because it refers to a diverse community that is represented as a monolith in North American media images. The term has caused great confusion in the West, as Nadine Naber claims, because it is used to refer to both Muslims and Christians; Middle Easterners, a category that includes non-Arabs such as those from Iran and Turkey; and some Arabs who are viewed as North Africans. The fact that Arab-Americans are simultaneously “racialized as whites and as non-whites” is also a paradox according to Naber (37). Naber explains that there is a pre-1960s generation, who tended

to lose their Arab identity to Americanization, while the post-1960s have struggled to define their ethnic identity as Arab-Americans. Naber states:

The post 1960s' unification according to the pan-ethnic label 'Arab American' can be understood as a political response to the process by which the state and the media came to group such a geographically, culturally and religiously diverse persons according to a singular label 'Arab,' while attaching to it mythological, derogatory meanings. By building coalition around the label 'Arab American,' activists redefined the term 'Arab' on their own terms and deployed their racial/ethnic identity as a political strategy for claiming their rights (41).

It is Naber's belief that the non-random or irrational confluences of the categories of Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim are products of the systemic process of neocolonialism. It is a process by which media images "erase differences among Arabs, Middle Easterners and Muslims," and, as defined by Derek Beuscher and Kent Ono, a process in which contemporary ideological or economic strategies are employed "to ignore, displace, unravel, justify, uphold and explain racism, genocide, sexism, gender inequality... colonialism and imperialism, as needed" (Qtd. In Naber 43-4). There have been many negative representations of Arabs or Muslims in the media that reinforce the imperialist attitude towards the Middle East. The women have been portrayed as oppressed victims or highly sexualized belly dancers, while Arab men are portrayed as terrorists, or wealthy sheiks, or oppressive wife beaters or highly sexual beings driven by sexual desire. These distorted images of Arabs or Muslims in America and signs of racism and discrimination against them can be found in many American movies such as

the Disney movie *Aladdin*, *The Siege*, *Syriana*, *Death of the President*, *The Kingdom* and many others.

After 9/11 the U.S. Department of State addressed the issue of anti-Arab and Muslim attitudes and acts of racism against them in America. In a conference on “Human Rights and the Fight Against Terrorism,” Timothy Keefer of the Department of Homeland Security office for Civil Rights made a statement on freedom and security and the prevention of discrimination. Keefer declared, “We believe that people should be viewed as individuals, based on the content of their character, on what they do, not on their race or ethnicity or religious beliefs”(Department of State). Keefer added that the Muslim-American and Arab-American communities have been part of the fabric of the country, in academia, in military service, the medical profession, industry and in government service, and thus, “Like all Americans, Muslim-Americans and Arab-Americans suffered on September 11, 2001.” He believes it is contrary to America’s founding principles and counterproductive to condemn all members of any particular religious or ethnic group for the actions of some and calls for more communication with the Muslim/ Arab- American community to ensure their civil rights and protect their freedoms.

A further discussion of Western representations and stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims and the handling of this minority group is carried out in this dissertation using Joanna Kadi’s *Food for our Grandmothers* which includes Lisa Majaj’s “Boundaries: Arab/ American,” Marsha Hamilton’s “The Image of Arabs in Sources of U.S. Culture,” and Michelle Sharif’s “Global Sisterhood: Where Do We Fit In?” The racial visibility and invisibility of Arab-Americans and classifying Arab-American citizenship are

addressed later using Keith Feldman's argument in "The (Il)legible Arab Body and the Fantasy of National Democracy."

In the discussion of Arab-American and Chicano identities, they are dealt with as border-crossing, fluid, and unfixd. The Chicano identity has also faced difficulties and threats of erasure just as much as the Arab-American identity. Chicanos have experienced a long history of discrimination, harassment, and humiliation. In an article entitled "Hispanic Diaspora and Chicano Identity in the United States," Ramon Gutierrez delves into the two historically dominant stereotypes that have been used to describe the Mexican immigrant in America. They have been perceived as Gutierrez suggests:

As a 'problem' threatening the racial, hygienic, and economic basis of American life or an 'asset' contributing to U.S. prosperity both by performing indispensable tasks at wages that citizen workers will not accept and by paying taxes from which they rarely benefit (210).

Racial mixing has occurred among many Mexicans and the indigenous people in America creating new races, as well as fluid and hybrid identities. Gutierrez explains the formation of various identities through the mixture of different races. He states that the mixture of a Spaniard and an Indian produced a "mestizo," while a Spaniard and a mestizo produced a "castizo," and a Spaniard and an African begot a "mulato" (208). Mexicans of mestizo origins referred to themselves as Spanish-Americans rejecting "Mexican-American" viewing it as a derogatory label. What mattered the most to this group is to remain connected to Spain's culture and history (214). Gutierrez confirms that Mexican-Americans, on the other hand, began to call themselves Chicanos during the 1960s "in protest over their marginality in the United States." The word "Chicanos" is

derived from Nahuatl, the Aztec language, and thus “allying them in hemispheric terms with the oppressed indigenous nations of the Americas” (214). In the present dissertation, I use the term Chicanos to refer to Mexican-Americans unless I am analyzing the significance of hyphenated identities and issues of hybridity, I use the term Mexican-American.

In my examination of the Chicano identity and the multiplicity and plurality it involves, I utilize Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderland* and Cristina Beltran’s article “Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies and the Challenge of Mestizaje.” I focus on the fragmented identity of Chicanas and their life within the “borderland.” The “borderland” functions in this context as an in-between space for the hybridized identities of Chicanas in which they are able to transform, develop and create new selves and categories as suggested by Beltran (596).

#### *The Term “Third World” and “U.S. Third World”*

As Kahf’s and Cisneros’ works are discussed and contextualized within the theoretical framework of U.S. Third World Feminism, it also seems reasonable to analyze the term “Third World” and explore its multiple meanings. Cheryl Johnson-Odim explains that “The term Third World is frequently applied in two ways: to refer to “underdeveloped”/ overexploited geopolitical entities, i.e., countries, regions, and even continents; and to refer to oppressed nationalities from these world areas who are now resident in “developed” First World countries”(314). It is the second type this dissertation deals with, the marginalized within the “developed” First World.

Chandra Mohanty addresses the term “Third World women” in “Cartographies of Struggle.” Mohanty explains that a number of scholars have written about the definition of the term “women of color” that is often used interchangeably with “Third World Women” (49). She defines it as a term that “designates a political constituency, not a biological or even sociological one”(49). She goes on to note that it is “a sociopolitical designation for people of African, Caribbean, Asian, and Latin American descent, and native peoples of the United States. It also refers to “new immigrants” to the United States in the last three decades: Arab, Korean, Thai, Laotian, and so on” (49). “Women of color” or “Third World Women,” as Mohanty defines them, are women who participate in “oppositional alliance” in “a common context of struggles rather than color or racial identifications” (49). What constitutes their potential commonality is Third World women’s consciousness of and political opposition to racist, sexist, and imperialist structures of oppression which, in other words, is the “common context of struggles against specific exploitative structures and systems that determines [their] potential political alliances” (Mohanty 49). For the purpose of the study and to avoid any confusion about Third World feminists who actually reside in the Third World, I refer to those minority women or “women of color” who carry the American citizenship and reside in the United States as “U.S. Third World Women,” a category that includes Arab-American and Chicana feminists.

Shu- Yun Ma discusses the formation of the Third World and the emergence of the term in her article, “Third World Studies, Development Studies and Post-Communist Studies: Definitions, Distance and Dynamism.” Ma states that “the notion of the Third World is not itself an indigenous Third World idea, but a European concept” (340). It has

been used to set the West apart from the rest of the world. Ma further explains that in 1952 the French demographer Alfred Sauvy coined the term 'Third World,' from the term 'third estate,' which before the French Revolution, had "economic ('poor'), political ('powerless'), and social ('marginalized') connotations"(340). Ma bases her argument on L. S. Stavrianos' *Global Rift: The Third World Comes of Age*, whose central thesis is that "the 'underdevelopment' of the Third World is the result of the economic exploitation of the 'periphery' by the 'center,' rather than of any internal impediments to modernisation and development" and thus Stavrianos' definition of the Third World is "those countries or regions that participated on unequal terms in what eventually became the global market economy"(341). Perhaps the analysis of the term "Third World" will help to understand the political and socio- economic circumstances from which Third World and U.S. Third World feminisms have emerged.

In my discussion of U.S. Third World feminism, I incorporate Mohanty's argument in her article, "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles," in which she revisits the issue of Third World feminists and women in relation to the various forms of Western feminism. In the article, she deals with the notion of "common differences" between these women that in her opinion can form the basis of solidarity and unite them instead of building a schism between all the various groups (225). I plan to carry out a comparative project because I strongly agree with Mohanty's belief, which I will incorporate in my argument, that "In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more

accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully”(226). In other words, to build a bridge and solidarity between Western feminists and Third World feminists within and out of the U.S. in order to serve the interests of women all over the world, an understanding of difference is essential. It is crucial not for the purpose of the colonial othering of others nor the reinforcement of the binary of “us” and “them” but to avoid the dangerous theorization and generalization about differences that prevent potential possibilities for solidarity and change. In addition, to support my adoption of a comparative project, between two U.S. Third World women writers, for my argument I quote Mohanty:

I suggest that a “comparative feminist studies” or “feminist solidarity” model is the most useful and productive pedagogical strategy for feminist cross-cultural work. It is this particular model that provides a way to theorize a complex relational understanding of experience, location, and history such that feminist cross-cultural work moves through the specific context to construct a real notion of universal and of democratization rather than colonization. It is through this model that we can put into practice the idea of “common differences” as the basis for deeper solidarity across differences and unequal power relations (238).

### *Feminist Resistance*

In the present dissertation, difference is celebrated and dealt with from Mary DeShazer’s perspective as a source of insight and collective consciousness that will bring First World and Third World women together. In her book, *A Poetics of Resistance: Women Writing in El Salvador, South Africa, and the United States*, DeShazer deals with

writing as a tool for survival and consciousness raising and a form of activism. It brings together many voices of resistance by Third World women and United States First World and Third World women. These women writers assert their identities, celebrate their difference while they search for common grounds with each other and with other Western feminists. DeShazer argues that they challenge “polarized forms of thought, to “unsettle every definition of otherness arrived at” and that women’s resistance poetry “helps with this unsettling”(23). I argue that a similar unsettling of hegemonic perceptions and thoughts can be achieved not only through resistance poetry but also through other forms of resistance writings such as Kahf’s novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, and Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* and other selected literary works. In this dissertation, resistance in the form of consciousness raising is explored in various literary genres represented by the works of Kahf and Cisneros.

Kahf and Cisneros are examined as writers and intellectual activists resisting typical definitions of otherness and traditional structures of power relations across gender constructions and ethnic, religious and cultural borders. Their writings work towards change and the unsettling of constructions of otherness and the commonly stereotyped United States Third World female “Other” mainly represented by the Muslim/ Arab-American woman in Kahf and the Chicana woman in Cisneros. The unsettling of these constructions is achieved through various narrative techniques that counter oppressive, often dehistoricized, and decontextualized images and identities. I believe Kahf’s and Cisneros’s narratives are literary attempts of resistance to currently constructed histories of their cultures. I believe Harriet Jacobs’ narrative and others have paved the way for other narratives and writings of resistance and social activism such as Kahf’s and

Cisneros's. The two writers seem to share with Harriet Jacobs a deep frustration with the common representations of their culture and people and the determination to write their own (hi)stories as she did in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In *Women Writing Resistance* Gloria Anzaldua addresses Third World women writers in a letter in which she states:

I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve autonomy ... To show that I *can* and that I *will* write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary. And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing (84).

In the discussion of resistance and the formation and recreation of new identities of U.S. Third World women that I apply to Kahf and Cisneros, I shed light on the idea of cultural hybridity from Heidi Safia Mirza's perspective. Mirza believes that women of color view cultural hybridity as a profound and empowering effect of diasporic experience. She writes, "Cultural hybridity, the fusion of cultures and coming together of difference, the 'border crossing' that marks diasporic survival, signifies change, hope of newness, and space for creativity"(16). This notion of cultural hybridity and border crossing can challenge the existing hegemonic hierarchies through difference and the creation of new spaces from which the new identities speak. This challenging and resistance of binary oppositions and boundaries by U.S. women of color is important to my research, and thus I use, (Said) in addition to DeShazer, Anzaldua's works: *Making*

*Face, Making Soul. Haciendo Caras. Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color and Borderlands: La Frontera and This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* to support my argument. In *Making Face, Making Soul* Anzaldua asserts that:

Theorists- of- color are in the process of trying to formulate ‘marginal’ theories that are partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference (if that is possible), theories that overlap many ‘worlds.’ We are articulating a new position in these ‘in-between,’ Borderland worlds of ethnic communities and academies, feminist and job worlds... In our mestizaje theories we create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of the existing ones... And we simultaneously combat the tokenization and appropriation of our literatures and our writers/ artists (xxvi).

U.S. Third World Feminists recognize the crucial impact of colonization and hegemonic and imperial powers on colonized cultures and their women, and so share the common goal of resistance and liberation with postcolonial theorists. It seems logical in the discussion of U.S. Third World feminism to consider the role and relevance of postcolonial theories and anti-imperialist discourses. Robert Young focuses on the connection between feminist movements and anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism in his book, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Young’s analysis is useful to my research because he explains how resistance operates from below rather than from above in non-western societies, and this is due to the oppression that women of lower class face within their societies (368). He points out that many women in Africa, for example, played a vital role as activists in anti-colonial movements. They have argued that they

were equal before the colonial era but have been deprived of their economic and agricultural roles under colonialism by European assumptions about male and female roles (368). An analogy can be made here between the African women who were made subordinate by the colonial rule of the West and Arab/Muslim women who were made marginal in society due to the British colonization and feminization of their men and the power of the element of fear, the fear of rape and abuse of the women in a colonial era.

Young also introduces a type of resistance and contestation of colonization in India that took the form of affirmation of the indigenous culture and the promotion of the worth of the native people in their culture (375). This insistence on the preservation of the native culture and using it as a tool for resistance informs the research by many U.S. Third World feminists like African- American and Arab- American women writers. The Muslim woman's veiling has also been used as a strategy by Muslim feminists to defy Western ideals and control and reassert their cultural identity. Through their insistence on the veil, they resist the Eurocentric and colonial discourse that devalues such a dominant cultural norm and religious practice. But if Muslim women's veiling is merely practiced in submission to dominant patriarchal discourses within Muslim societies controlled by dictatorships, it can hardly be used as a strategy of resistance. However, when and if the veil is used as a method of resistance and defiance against colonial oppression, it reflects the Muslim woman's empowerment and subverts colonial interpretations of it as oppressive and backward. I deal with this issue in my discussion of *Mohja Kahf* whose protagonist fluctuates between her Western and Arab/Muslim identity as she is struggling with the concept of the veil.

### *Why a Comparative Study?*

This study addresses several significant gaps. While extensive research has been conducted on Western feminism and Third World Feminism, not much has been written about Arab and Islamic feminism from the perspective of an insider's point of view of a practicing Muslim feminist. There have been publications in the West of Arab feminists, secular or non-practicing Muslim feminists, and Christian Arab feminists who have incorporated the principles of Islam in their argument, sometimes agreeing, other times disagreeing, and other times misinterpreting such principles. I believe there is a gap in the body of research available on all the nuances of the movement and portraying Arab and Muslim feminists accurately and from a Muslim and Middle Eastern feminist perspective.

I have found prolific scholarship and research done about women of color in the United States, whether African-American, Asian-American, Indian-American, and Chicanos but not much has been written about Arab-American women in comparison with other minority groups. This group of minority women has been mostly ignored by scholars for a long time. They did not appear in anthologies or class syllabi until after the tragic event of 9/11. Not only were Arab-American women's issues forgotten in discussions of American minority literature, but hardly any connections were made between them and other women of color within feminist theory. Not until 9/11 did they have a significant presence in the scholarship, although more frequently than not it has been a negative presence due to continuous misrepresentations of them and misreadings of their lives and faith.

In the present dissertation, I aim at establishing a connection between the literary works of an Arab- American female writer, Kahf, with those of a Chicana female writer, Cisneros. I have chosen the works of Kahf and Cisneros for several reasons. One of the reasons is that they are both contemporary pieces written by U.S. Third World women. They both represent the Third World within the United States of America, but at the same time they cannot be homogenized into a single category since the women of each of these cultures face different problems and their identities are constructed differently.

Fadwa El Guindi argues in her article, “Gendered Resistance, Feminist Veiling, Islamic Feminism,” that feminism itself is highly grounded in culture, and that “feminists from any society or any particular cultural tradition hold and internalize premises and assumptions stemming out of their culture that shape their orientation to feminist issues” (53). She explains further that “any feminist model, paradigm or framework is largely informed by the framer’s culture” (53). Therefore, the American- based feminist thought obviously speaks to issues of concern for American women. Thus, the historical false vision of a global sisterhood, that concentrates on similarities and ignores differences, cannot prevail since the social, political, and economic conditions affecting women’s lives vary from one culture to another. In this sense, it is no surprise that various types of feminisms stem from these different cultures, the Arab-American and Chicano. While there are differences between the two selected U.S. Third World feminisms, on the one hand, and Western feminisms on the other, some commonalities bring them all together in their struggle against oppression and injustice.

In addition, both of the authors have written contemporary novels and poetry that can be compared to each other since they both analyze gender issues with the

interconnected forces of race, marginalization and hyphenated or hybrid identities, which is the focus of my dissertation. Kahf and Cisneros also employ young female protagonists and narrators and through their eyes readers explore and experience their multiple worlds of hope and despair.

In the next chapter, I discuss the variations of Arab and Islamic feminism and its relation to U.S. Third World feminism and Western feminism. I place emphasis on the commonalities between Islam as a religion and the Arab culture and how they both influence each other and the lifestyle of its people. I also explain how feminism and Islam may work towards a similar goal, which is achieving justice and equality for women around the world. I argue that the principles of the Islamic faith do not contradict with those of feminism. On the contrary, they compliment each other.

In this chapter I make use of Leila Ahmed's discussion of women in Islam and the veil within colonial feminist contexts in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Ahmed explains how feminism was historically used against other cultures in the service of colonialism. Ahmed points out that within the colonial discourse Islam was viewed as "innately and immutably oppressive to women, [and] 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." Veiling became the symbol of the oppression of women to Western eyes and it became the target of colonial attack on Muslim societies (152). The veil and false claim of the Muslim women's oppression was used to justify the colonization of Muslim nations and the women's need for liberation by their European superiors.

Shahnaz Khan's "Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space" is also useful to my argument since it reflects the nature of the Arab/ Muslim woman's life and her complicated situation that is not necessarily due to the oppression of the Arab/ Muslim man of her, but to the lack of a nation's resources, her financial status, education and lack of opportunities. These types of hardships are common to both men and women in the Middle East, and thus, posing a threat to both genders. In this chapter, I show how colonialism and imperialism are important factors that contribute to the disempowerment of the Arab/ Muslim men and women in the Middle East. Nevertheless, I argue that both Middle Eastern men and women have attempted to free themselves and their nations of Western dominance and exploitation, and worked side by side to achieve such a goal for the good of all people. This is used as a background from which Arab-American women activism has originated proving that it is no surprise that Arab American-women and men have often collaborated together to defy the stereotypes surrounding them and to improve their image in North America and the West at large. This is not to say that there had always been solidarity among men and women since history has shown various moments of oppression and injustice, but there is considerable literature written in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century by Arab- American men in support of the Arab- American identity and in defiance of stereotypical images of them. Examples of such contributions are:

*Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* and *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* by Edward Said, *The Uncultured Wars: Arabs, Muslims, and the Poverty of Liberal Thought* and *Anti- Arab Racism in the USA: Where it Comes from and What it Means for Politics* by Steven Salaita, *How Does it Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America* by Moustafa Bayoumi, and

*Stereotypes and Arab American Muslim High School Students: a Misunderstood Group* by Nader Ayish, and *The War on Terror and Democracy: An Arab American Perspective* by Neal Abunab among many other works.

In Chapter Three, I explore the conflicting meanings of the veil in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* through the incorporation of Volosinov's theory of sign that provides an understanding of the development of such a concept. Volosinov's theory exposes the ideological, historical, cultural, and socio-economic forces that shape the various meanings and significances of the concept of the veil. I also examine the artistic ways the novel recontextualizes the veil and various Muslim women's experiences of veiling and unveiling. In this chapter, I also apply theories of Arab/ Islamic feminism, Third World feminism, and postcolonial theories to Kahf's work. I examine issues of gender identity and how the protagonist renegotiates her position within the Muslim community as well as her American surroundings. This chapter explains the nature of the protagonist's relation to religion, Islam, the veil, and the Arab culture along with her American identity. It shows the path the protagonist decides to take and the space she has created for herself in which she strives to find peace with herself and her heritage. It is also a reinvented space, in which boundaries of private and public are broken, where she is liberated and her Arab and Muslim heritage do not conflict with her Americanness and allegiance to the West.

In my analysis of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* I draw on Mohanty's and Moghadam's argument about the heterogeneity of the Arab and Muslim world, for there are many Muslim voices from various backgrounds in the novel whose practices and views are far from identical. In addition, I use Leila Ahmed's work on gender in Islam

and Fawzia Afzal Khan's *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* in my interpretation of the veil, the status and dilemma of the Arab/ Muslim woman in Islam and in the West. I mostly focus on my own reading of the novel and the veil in relation to the Muslim woman's gender identity. I conclude that the protagonist, Khadra, attempts to reconcile the two conflicting worlds she belongs to, and in the end almost comes to terms with herself and identity, although the inner peace she has achieved comes at the expense of the hijab, a basic Muslim practice within the Islamic faith. Obviously, the novel portrays the Muslim/ Arab-American's fear of assimilation and the renouncement of the Islamic set of beliefs and principles. This fear causes many parents to place great pressure on their children, e.g. Khadra, to preserve their culture and Islamic heritage. Khadra's decision to give up on the hijab and to treat it merely as a symbol of the Arab culture is an indication of the difficulty facing Muslim Arab-Americans in their attempt to preserve their Islamic identity within the Western society especially during the post 9/11 period.

In chapter Four, constructions of the house and its relation to gender identity are emphasized in the examination of the Chicano culture and the dilemma of its women. The discussions going on within the Chicana feminist movement and the departures made are highlighted in this chapter. I focus on social formations and how they are dealt with by Chicana feminists and theorists. I show how Chicana feminists have tried to find a place for themselves within the dominant discourse, in which they are not required to meet the expectations of the dominant white society. On the contrary, they intend to write literature in resistance to such an oppressive discourse. They want their works to be read in difference. In other words, they do not want their works to be read in comparison with works of the dominant forms of feminisms, nor do they seek their acceptance or want

them to be measured against the standards set by these dominant forms. They try to find new forms of expression for the silenced voices in the Chicana culture. In fact, they have created a space for themselves in which they can articulate the needs they see best as reflecting the needs of Chicanas. In this chapter, I explore the Chicana feminists' claim of being discriminated against based on gender, class and ethnicity. One of the main writers in the field that discusses issues of gender and ethnic identity is Gloria Anzaldua whose argument I incorporate in my analysis of the Chicano/a culture and identity. I emphasize the issue of hybridity and how many Chicanas have sought to create a third space for themselves in between the two cultures they belong to and adopt certain values taken from each culture, the Mexican and American culture. This model also reflects the struggle of Arab-American woman writers as well, a commonality between the two cultures to be dealt with in the course of this study.

This chapter represents the Chicana feminists' attitude towards domesticity, the house, assimilation and Western feminists and the points on which they agree or disagree. It also delves into the significance of color in the dominant white society, and the issue of white privilege, and what it means not to have such a privilege from the insider's point of view within the Chicano culture and the outsider's.

Chapter Five deals with the concept of the house and the multiple interpretations of this particular constructed space. Volosinov's theory of sign is used again in this chapter to analyze the cultural, political, socio-economic forces shaping the dominant image of the house and its various significances in Cisneros' work. The chapter includes a discussion of the complexities of a Chicana woman's identity and life in America. Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and selected literary works are utilized to

explore the image of the house, and the dynamics of the othering of the Chicana within her local community, and outside her community where she does not belong. In this chapter, I delve into the Chicana girl's relationship with male figures in the house, and in her life, and how she deals with such relations. I place emphasis on issues of silence and invisibility of the Chicana women within the patriarchal social system they try to challenge.

Cisneros' protagonist, Esperanza, is in search of a new home where she can house an identity that she has chosen for herself different from that of the women in her Mexican culture and different from that of the typical white women in American society. Esperanza is on a quest for self-discovery. She tries to find comfort in her dreams of a better life where she is not looked down upon for her low class nor her gender. It is important to note that Esperanza resists being a silent marginalized figure in her society. Her narrative is a narrative of resistance and defiance of the common position assigned to Chicana women in her society. She resists confinement and invisibility that is usually passed down to women from one generation to the other. She refuses to be like the other women she is exposed to. Through this exposure, she realizes that what she wants for herself cannot be found within the typical Chicano culture that is dominated by the males in her society. Therefore, it is her belief that leaving such an environment is her only salvation. At the same time, she does not forget her connections to the culture that brings her into this world.

In this chapter, I discuss the source of the Chicana woman's oppression. In the case of *The House on Mango Street*, it is not only patriarchy that causes women to suffer but race and class. Esperanza has always had dreams of a better house that her father had

promised the family, but was not able to provide for them. Although she plans to leave Mango Street and the house where she felt she did not belong, she does not condemn her father for their poverty, maltreatment or their situation, for he himself is a victim of class discrimination. In addition, she does not have any desire to shed her Mexicaness by leaving her home. On the contrary, Esperanza states that she plans to leave only to come back, and to support those she left behind. She only leaves to find herself and to come back as a strong unified self that is no longer longing for unfulfilled dreams. A great part of her suffering comes from her poor social status that deprives her of opportunities that nourish her mind and soul, help her grow, and develop her artistic and creative abilities.

Chapter Six concludes with a comparative analysis of Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and selected poetry and Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and selected poetry. Through the analysis of the cultural imagery of gender, specifically, images of the veil and the house and their various significances in these works, I focus on the commonalities between them as feminist works by Third World women in the United States of America. At the same time, I highlight the areas where they may diverge due to social, religious, and cultural differences.

Through the exploration of the works of the two authors, my intention is to find out whether or not the construction of a unified theory of U.S. Third World feminism that could serve both cultures, the Arab-American and Chicano, is possible, and whether or not a unified theory that fulfills the needs of its women is possible. I expect that a single feminist theory would still remain too broad to include the particularities of the distinctive situation of women within the two cultures. Although the assumption is that the concept of the "U.S. Third World" is comprehensive enough to include all minority

groups within the United States, there are vast differences between the cultures, languages, political systems and set of values and the multiple worlds grouped together under the umbrella of the “U.S. Third World.” A mistake is also committed when the false assumption is made that immigrants of Third World origins in their diasporic cultures in the West and Third World societies have identical problems, interests, and concerns because of their ancestral relationship with the Third World. With the change of the social and physical environment, new lifestyles and problems emerge. The question to be raised is: how is it possible to theorize for two highly distinctive cultures, one grounded in the Arab-American culture and the other in the Chicano culture, as if they were one, and yet do them justice and serve their women?

In this chapter, I discuss the pressing issues for Muslim/ Arab- American women and Chicana women in the narratives and selected works and how they vary from one culture to another. I believe in Kahf’s works among the major issues is the veil and religion, and how the protagonist is to be accepted into the American society as an Arab and Muslim woman, with the hijab or without it. In contrast, in Cisneros’ works, there seems to be more emphasis on class issues, education, and the invisibility of the Chicana woman. Although both protagonists, Khadra and Esperanza, are frustrated with their situations and want to break free from the restrictions imposed by their communities, they are both proud to belong to the culture they come from and have strong connections to the family and heritage. They are both feminists, but not necessarily in the typical Western sense of the word, rather in a way that allows them to be feminist and still able to hold on to their culture and beliefs without any feelings of guilt or betrayal.

CHAPTER 2  
ARAB- AMERICAN FEMINISTS CARVING A SPACE OF THEIR OWN AMIDST  
THE INTELLECTUAL JAM

People who live at the margins of categories provide an especially  
valuable starting point for exploring all the ways that identity can be  
deconstructed or reconstructed.

-- Mary Coombs

*Introduction*

This chapter revisits the tension and the troubled relationship between Arab-Americans and the Western hegemonic culture and its discourses. It explores the emerging voices of Arab- American and Arab/ Islamic feminists who are trying to carve an autonomous space through which they redefine themselves and their identities. Through this space, they unsettle hegemonic perceptions of Arabs and Muslims in an attempt to resist Western domination and right the records about their lives and histories. In this chapter the sign of the veil is utilized to subvert the hegemonic and patriarchal discourse by exposing its multiple interpretations and complex layers of meanings frequently ignored in Western cultures. The concerns and tensions within the Arab/ Islamic feminist movement are also examined in an attempt to reflect the heterogeneity of the various Arab and Muslim cultures and dismantle the reductive monolithic image of them.

With the rise of Islamophobia and racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims in America since 9/11, the Arab- American presence and voice has gained more importance since their invisibility has denied them a space from which they can speak and articulate their own concerns. Their invisibility within the public sphere has prevented productive communication and engagement with the mainstream. Perhaps this realization has created a sense of urgency for Arab- Americans to reclaim both their Arabness and a position in

society as American citizens of Arab ancestry. Joanna Kadi, an Arab- American and editor of the feminist anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers*, coins a phrase to describe her Arab- American community as “The Most Invisible of the Invisibles”(xix). Kadi believes that Arab- Americans are not only made invisible by white Americans but also by people of color, Latinos, Africans, Asians, Natives (xx). Invisibility and absence have characterized many Arab- American and Muslim women in the West before and after 9/11. Therese Saliba, an Arab- American scholar, discusses the Western representation of Arab women as “captive or absent” subjects in her article “Military Presences and Absences: Arab Women and the Persian Gulf War”(125). Saliba asserts that by the “absent” Arab woman she means two major forms of absence:

The first, a literal absence, when the Arab woman is not present or is entirely missing from the scene; the second, a symbolic absence, when she is present but only for the purpose of representing her invisibility or silence in order to serve as a subordinate to the Western subject of the scene. She is also granted moments of presence when her actions and speech are manipulated and exploited to serve the interests of her Western interpreters. In all these instances, the *absent* Arab woman is objectified and contrasted to the ‘liberated’ Western woman, who often serves as a representative for Arab women. The white woman is granted agency to speak for Arab women, usually on behalf of their liberation (126).

This continuous state of absence and invisibility within the dominant culture and women’s movements, and the constant attack on Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 has generated the need to locate and create a space through which Arab- American feminists can speak. In resistance to invisibility and silence, many Arab- Americans and Arab/

Islamic feminists have forged their own space from which they have become their own definers and transmitted their own personal experiences. The space they now belong to is an in-between space outside both the dominant American culture and the traditional Arab culture. They created this space in which they live on the borders of the Western and Muslim/ Middle Eastern culture. In this space, they now define and experience a continually evolving hybrid identity. Arab/ Islamic feminists are also negotiating a space between Western feminists on the one hand, and practicing Muslim feminists and non-practicing Muslim born secular feminists, on the other hand. Arab/ Islamic feminists have struggled to have a voice within Western feminist movements not as an “inferior other” but as respected feminist scholars. This has been a challenge for many Arab- American feminists and a core issue in their discussions.

Azizah Al-Hibri, an Arab- American intellectual and critic, is critical of the Arab- American woman’s situation within a Western feminist movement. Al- Hibri illustrates in her article “Tear Off your Western Veil!” the Arab- American woman’s invisibility in public forums by quoting from a speech she gave at the National Women’s Studies Association. She observes that:

To be an Arab- American in the women’s movement is to be an inferior “Other.” The notion did not originate from within the movement, but it certainly does permeate the movement. It manifests itself in a variety of ways, not the least of which is the fact that the suffering of Arab women, somehow, does not seem worthy of your attention. “What do you mean?” you object. “The women’s movement has dedicated a substantial amount of energy discussing issues like ‘the veil’ and ‘clitoridectomy’.” But that is precisely the point. The white middle-

class women's movement has bestowed upon itself the right to tell us Arab and Arab- American women what are the most serious issues for us- over our own objections (162-163).

Clearly, Al- Hibri is upset with the fact that the Arab- American woman holds the position of an "inferior other" in the women's movement. She believes that the movement has no interest in the suffering of Arab women. Al-Hibri's dialogue with women from the movement reveals the discrepancy in their understanding of the way Arab women's issues are handled. White middle- class women believe they have made serious efforts to address issues like the veil and clitoridectomy which they think are important. Al- Hibri, however, feels that these efforts have denied Arab- American women agency because they have no say about their own concerns, such as economic injustice, and are told about which issues should matter.

Arab- American and Muslim women in the West have been denied significant roles in feminist movements because they have been unable to find an autonomous space for themselves within public forums. Islamic feminists are now creating a space of their own, different from Virginia Woolf's, as they emerge from the margins into representation. Miriam Cooke, a critic of Islamic Feminism, writes in "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies" that Muslim women are today becoming "publicly visible and audible" in ways they never were in the past (93). In the period of post 9/11, Islamic feminists and Arab- American women, such as Lisa Suhair Majaj among others, have recognized the need to reclaim their Arab/ Muslim identity and make their voices heard because with "passing" as white or mainstream women came silence and invisibility and no sense of peace (79). Out of necessity, they engaged in the

disruption of the hegemonic discourse and sought to dismantle patriarchal structures of thinking producing new spaces and new knowledge about themselves. Arab- American women writers have become part of the cultural revolution Stuart Hall discusses through which marginalized voices emerge into representation. They now occupy the powerful space of marginality from which “new subjects, new genders, new ethnicities,” and new voices have emerged and acquired ways to articulate their thoughts and views (183). In an essay that addresses this issue, the Caribbean-British cultural critic Stuart Hall writes that:

The most profound cultural revolution in this part of the twentieth century has come about as a consequence of the margins coming into representation—in art, in painting, in film, in music, in literature, in the modern arts everywhere, in politics, and in social life generally. . . . Paradoxically, marginality has become a powerful space. . . . New subjects, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, and new communities—all hitherto excluded as decentered or subaltern—have emerged and have acquired through struggle, sometimes in very marginalized ways, the means to speak for themselves for the first time. And the discourses of power in our society, the discourses of the dominant regimes, have been certainly threatened by this decentered cultural empowerment of the marginal and the local (183).

Hall brings to one’s attention that although these emerging voices he describes are marginal, they have impacted discourses of power which have been “threatened by this decentered cultural empowerment of the marginal and the local” (183). These marginal voices and Arab- American voices are essential in disrupting hegemonic discourses and

questioning their authority, and challenging their domination over the “other.” Through their significant contributions, Arab- American feminists have certainly ruptured the reproduction of hegemonic narratives of Arabs and Muslims and biased knowledge by creating their own narratives.

In this chapter, I provide my readers with an insider’s view of the Arab/ Islamic feminist movement. I explore the various issues that are important to the contemporary Arab/ Muslim woman’s life and that pertain to her religious, political, cultural, national and gender identity. I argue that in order to resist the powerful negative image of the highly homogenized Arab/ Muslim woman in the East and the West alike, it is necessary to produce alternative knowledge that allows for the heterogeneity of this group of people to become more visible. The goal of this chapter is to explore the dominant images, portrayals, representations and misrepresentations of the Arab/ Muslim woman within the dominant discourse in an attempt to create a counter- hegemonic image that defies stereotypical representations of them and simultaneously represents the heterogeneity among them.

In order to provide a systematic analysis, this chapter is broken into several sections: 1) Hegemonic misrepresentations of Arabs, Muslims and Arab- American women, 2) History of Arab/ Islamic Feminist Theory, 3) New Spaces and new knowledge, 4) Unsettling hegemonic and patriarchal structures of the veil. First, I present the various common representations of Arabs in general and the Arab/ Muslim woman specifically in the media and literary scholarship within the hegemonic discourse to demonstrate the importance of addressing such an issue. Second, I offer a brief history of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> century of the Arab/ Islamic feminist theory founded by Middle

Eastern and Western Muslim and non- Muslim feminists. Third, I present contemporary responses and forms of resistance by Arab/ Muslim feminists who try to forge an autonomous identity and space from which they can write their own stories and histories, ones that subvert narratives and accounts written about them by imperialist and hegemonic voices. Fourth, I examine the veil, its symbolic meanings and the controversy around it within the dominant discourse. In the discussion of the veil, I shed light on the impact of imperialism and colonization on the formation of the Muslim women's identity and their various decisions about the veil in modern times. I also show how they have helped Arab/ Islamic feminists define their movement, activism, and resistance.

*Hegemonic Misrepresentations of Arabs, Muslims, and*

*Arab- American Women*

*Misrepresentations of Arab Muslims in General*

Many Arab- Americans do not perceive themselves merely as an unrecognized U.S. minority whose only goal is to be heard of in mainstream society. After 9/11, particularly, they have come to perceive themselves as victims of the hegemonic system and racial discrimination that has been legitimated by the dominant rhetoric of terrorism and national security. Discrimination against Arab/ Muslim Americans and racial profiling has become a widely accepted phenomenon at a time when racism against any other group is unacceptable. Nada Elia, a professor in Comparative literature and co-founder of RAWAN (the Radical Arab Women's Activist Network) who has served on the national steering committee of *Incite! Women of Color Against Violence*, highlights

the issue of the racial profiling of Arab- Americans. Elia confirms that the racial profiling of males with Middle Eastern features, even if they are not Arabs, is not only legal today, but fully embraced by many Americans as an "acceptable price to pay for security" (156). Middle Eastern features are conflated with the Muslim religion that is falsely associated with terrorism and violence. Therefore, immediately after 9/11, thousands of Arab- American men were "rounded up, arrested, deported, or otherwise disappeared" (Elia 157).

Arab- Americans have been rejected by the dominant and hegemonic culture through their systematic erasure from "American" consciousness. In the media, whenever images of Muslims and Arab- Americans are represented, they usually appear in the role of the villain, and always as "foreigners- Arabs, not Arab- Americans"(Elia 156). They are unjustly accused, as Muslims, of always being hostile to democracy, and the common biased rhetoric used against them by the media that blurs the American public's vision and judgment stresses the false claim that "they hate us because they hate freedom" (Elia 156). While Muslim and Arab- American men are portrayed as violent, women have been viewed from a different perspective.

#### *Misrepresentations of Arab Muslim Women*

Muslim women in general and those who are of Arab origins in particular are represented in popular culture from a Western perspective as docile, silenced, secluded, veiled, male dominated as indicated by Suha Sabbagh in her introduction of *Arab Women between Defiance and Restraint*. Sabbagh, an Arab- American scholar, comments that this stereotypical image of Arab women has very little to do with the lives of real Arab

women (11). Sabbagh and Ahmed make a reference to the roots of the stereotype of Arab women in the accounts of the male Orientalists who visited the Middle East and wrote about Arabs in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (11). In fact, the male Orientalists had no access to Arab women but to prostitutes and so the knowledge they brought back to the West is a distortion of the true lives of women in the Arab world. Ironically, this knowledge manufactured by Orientalists is often perceived as truth.

Stereotypes of Arab women have undergone some changes with the passage of history and changes in hegemonic structures. Perhaps it is because stereotypes and images need to be updated as hegemonic systems renew themselves. While Arab women in past stereotypes of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century lived only for sensual pleasure, in contemporary stereotypes, their lives are described as being devoid of even the simple pleasures and achievements. They are cast as “quintessential victims of the beastliness and backwardness of Arab men”(Sabbagh 12). Images of Middle Eastern women can be found in many forms of popular culture in the U.S. including film, literature, documentary films, magazines and media, all reinforce the same few negative images. In the anthology *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab Canadian feminists*, Marsha Hamilton examines the image of the Arab woman in U.S. popular culture. In her article “The Arab Woman in U.S. Popular Culture: Sex and Stereotype,” Hamilton notes that the stereotype of Arabs as “billionaires, belly dancers, and bombers” has been previously discussed and documented by Jack Shaheen in *The TV Arab* (173). Clearly, the misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims in American media and popular culture is one of the issues that has disturbed both Arab- American men and women equally and urged them to reproduce a more objective image that reflects their

real lives uncontaminated by Orientalist and imperialist views. There are many instances of the images of Middle Eastern men and women presented in film. For example, in *The Siege*, *The Kingdom*, *Syriana*, *Flight 93*, *Munich*, *Lions for Lambs*, *The Traitor* among many others, Arabs/ Muslims are used as metaphors for the existent terrorism in the world. They are usually portrayed as primitive, evil, and violent people who fund terrorist acts with the infinite wealth they undeservingly possess. However, in the film *The Battle of Algiers*, the image of the Algerians under the French occupation challenges the stereotypical image of the oppressed, silenced, and passive veiled Muslim woman. This film shows how Arab/ Muslim women were active participants in the nationalist movement against the French rule. It does not portray these women as oppressed through the veil, nor subordinate, nor in need of male protection, but rather as strong, independent, free thinkers capable of change and reform.

Muslim/ Arab- American women have not only been victimized by the reductive and oppressive images of them in U.S. popular culture and the media, but have also been marginalized by many Western feminists who are controlled by imperialist thoughts and the colonial discourse. It is ironic though that these feminists have imprisoned Muslim and Arab women through their discourse of freedom. Leila Ahmed explains in her book *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* how certain strands of feminism were historically used against other cultures in the service of colonialism. Ahmed points out that within the colonial discourse Islam was viewed as “innately and immutably oppressive to women, [and] 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”(152). Veiling became the symbol of

the oppression of women to Western eyes and it became the target of colonial attack on Muslim societies (152). The veil and false claim of the Muslim women's oppression, which in some contexts of dictatorships can be true, was used in the past and continues to be used in the present to justify the colonization of Muslim nations and the women's need for liberation by their present American and past European superiors.

The issue of the Muslim woman's veil received great attention by some Western feminists and theorists because in their eyes it only signified extreme oppression and submission. Many feminists do not realize that the veil has taken on such a negative meaning mostly by Westerners during periods of colonization and Western imperialism but held an entirely different significance in many native cultures prior to their colonization. These types of misinterpretations of cultural norms and the situation of Third World women necessitate the formation of feminisms that can attend to the needs of the women of that particular culture, feminisms that take into consideration various elements such as culture, history, social values, religion, and geopolitical contexts. Co-opted feminisms adopting the colonial discourse also fail with Arab/ Muslim women and cultures because feminist thoughts are being enforced through continuous attacks on the Muslim religion and the demonization of the Arab culture and the condemnation of its men who are the fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons of these women. When these women find every aspect of their culture and religion that defines who they are devalued, criticized and rejected by feminists, they become very unwilling to adopt any thoughts advocated by such a group even if it means to live and remain in dissatisfactory conditions. In their eyes, they at least have their beliefs and cultural heritage to hold on to and to give them strength and pride. It is my belief that by accepting an imperialist

feminist based agenda, Third World women contribute to the reproduction of their own subordination to Western dominance and to the colonial and hegemonic discourse that situates them in a state of perpetual otherness and inferiority.

### *The Dilemma of Arab- American Feminists*

Arab- American and Muslim men in the West have struggled tremendously due to misrepresentation and racial discrimination but women have had to deal with a different type of dilemma which is the double standards of Western discourse. Ironically, in this hostile climate of Islamophobia and rejection of Arab- Americans, various social and political U.S. circles have opened up to Muslim and Arab- American women. These women are now favored by the mainstream culture over their husbands, brother, fathers and sons and are not seen as a threat to American society, but rather as "powerless victims of their own religion"(Elia 155). Elia believes that this phenomenon must be understood as "a contemporary manifestation of colonialist patriarchal racism, which views 'other' women as powerless victims of their own culture, while casting the men as threats that must be kept at bay" (155). Feminism is not new to Muslims and Arab- Americans, but many refuse to engage in the feminist dialogue while their basic needs and rights for equality and freedom have not been met within the U.S. hegemonic culture and "land of freedom." In other words, they are not ignorant of feminism and advanced Western thought, but as Elia puts it, "many Arab women are delaying addressing critical gender issues, as they deal with the imprisonment, deportation, and 'disappearing' of their male kin," a priority that supersedes any other at this time (155).

In the midst of such injustice and uncontested discrimination against Arab-American men, the women have gradually become more visible as the hegemonic culture sought to "liberate" them from their oppressors (Elia 157). Muslim/ Arab- American women are now more vocal since their male relatives have been silenced, ostracized and imprisoned. Elia points out that these women are forced to deal with "the double standards that view their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons, as terrorists who must be indefinitely imprisoned, kept at bay, deported or otherwise eliminated from the American scene, while it views Arab- American women as potentially productive, 'assimilated,' 'free' American women"(158). This is just one example of the many obstacles Arab-American women face within the dominant U.S. culture. Another difficulty Arab-American women often experience is the continuous attack on Arabs, Muslims, and Islam and its treatment of women which compels them to present a rosy picture of Arabs and Muslims, hence, hindering any possibility for self- critique, or transformation.

The prominent Arab/ Islamic feminist scholar Leila Ahmed provides insight into the various representations of Muslim women in public forums. Ahmed writes about a panel of Arab women who had presented a very positive and rosy picture of women in Islam (521). She believes that one is compelled to take that stand if one is of Arabic or Islamic origins in America. In fact, the inaccurate assumption many Americans hold of Muslims as backward and uncivilized people "totally incapable of rational conduct" is what compels a Muslim not to offer a critique of his/ her culture and religion but present a rosy picture (522). This reaction also stems from the fact that Muslim women are perceived as terribly oppressed and degraded because many Americans believe that "Islam monstrously oppresses women" (522). Arab- American women are forced to

present positive aspects of their culture and heritage no matter how faulty it is in order to restore their dignity and identity that is always under attack by the dominant culture. Before women immigrants of Arab descent can be critical of themselves and their culture, they first have to deal with the many complicated issues that arise from their diasporic experience such as identity, exile, cultural hybridity. This does not mean that their original culture is rosy in any way or that the status of women ideal for if it had been, they would not have migrated, but in order for them to overcome their own subjective experiences and to start engaging in dialogues about gender issues and women in Islam, their existence can no longer be threatened. Being rejected by mainstream society and faced with an abundance of misconceptions and reductive images of Arabs and Muslims on daily basis compels a stronger identification with their Arab culture. The ongoing marginalization of these U.S. minority groups and continuous reminder that they are foreigners and different in a culture where difference is not a privilege and conformity is expected only leads many to hold on to their original cultures prior to their immigration. The many misconceptions and distorted truths presented about them is what makes American women of Arab descent constantly yearn for new narratives about themselves, narratives that they write and are not being written about them by others, and for new readings of the Arab culture.

Arab- American women's need to construct their own narrative and history originates from their reflection over what is written about them by certain Western feminists and the widely distributed critical essays that misrepresent Arab women which Suha Sabbagh, an Arab- American intellectual, sums up in her introduction of *Arab Women between Defiance and Restraint*:

The result of such articles is not to form bonds of sisterhood across cultures, nor to depict the happy and unhappy realities of women's lives, nor to liberate Arab women, but rather to establish the superiority of Western women's lives and, through them, Western culture. This body of literature is clearly about establishing Western domination and not about liberating Muslim women (xiii).

This realization has become the main basis on which Arab/ Islamic feminism is founded. It has become crucial to these feminists to create new writings that contest the prolific literature that is based on extensive misrepresentations of their lives and cultures.

Sabbagh asserts that there is a general consensus among Arab- American women in the academy that there is something "fundamentally wrong with the logic of those American writers who see no conflict between perpetrating these oppressive views of Arab women produced by the dominant male culture while simultaneously fighting against the dominant culture's biased perception of women in general" (11). This approach may not necessarily be contradictory if one realizes that it is the rights of First World women that are being defended and not the women of the colonized because even in the call for justice by the hegemonic forces, there is a hierarchical structure of dominance that determines where and in what form this justice is to be applied. The same can be said about the contradictions of an imperialist democracy, for the democracy that is cherished in the West is not the same "democracy" that is being imposed on Third World nations and the Middle East. It is a form of democracy that the West allows others to practice on its own terms. Many Arab- American/ Islamic feminists have strived to resist such domination and subordination by the hegemonic culture, while other feminists have fallen prey to Western imperialist discourses of "modernization," "liberation," and

“progress.” While these concepts of democracy and progressiveness are valuable in principle, they have been abused by the oppressive regime led by George W. Bush. For instance, the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq were supposedly about bringing “freedom” to “oppressed” peoples. Ironically, thousands of people have died, but it has been claimed that “This war is about peace” in which missiles have been depicted as “instruments of liberation” (qtd. in Carvalho 16). For the purpose of the argument and as part of creating a counter- hegemonic narrative that reflects the heterogeneity within the Islamic/ Arab- American intellectual movement and community, I examine the history of the Arab/ Islamic feminist theory and the co-opted voices by Western imperialist thought that have appeared within the movement.

### *The History of Arab/ Islamic Feminist Theory*

In the discussion of the history of Arab/ Islamic feminism, it is crucial to study the British and imperialist influence on Arab/ Muslim societies during their period of colonization and their role in shaping certain feminist thinking. The colonial and imperial feminist discourse has succeeded in developing a sense of internalized inferiority within the colonized Arab and Muslim societies. The British colonizer has built its own supporters and collaborators within the colonized Arab nations to ensure the perpetuation of its colonialist ideologies and Western dominance. Arab women who had feminist tendencies were easy prey. These women were given attention and support by the British ruling system that only enforced further oppression of subordinate women of a lower

social class. They were welcomed by hegemonic forces and encouraged to speak against native cultural norms in the name of modernization and progress.

*Colonial Arab Feminism or “Co-opted” Arab Feminism*

In this counter-hegemonic narrative, Arab-American and Islamic feminists are trying to create in resistance to patriarchy and hegemonic oppression, co-opted feminist voices present a serious challenge in the process. Adam Morton in his analysis of hegemony argues that “The struggle to establish a ‘counter’ hegemony could ... be particularly weakened by absorbing or co-opting the active elements of opposition involved ...” (98). In the works of Qasim Amin (1899), Nawal El Saadawi (1977), and Fatima Mernissi (1987), the Arab/Islamic feminist movement has witnessed the co-opting of “the active elements of opposition” by Western colonialist feminist discourses.

In the discussion of colonial or co-opted Arab feminism, I focus on the various feminist views presented by Amin, El Saadawi, and Mernissi. The question to be raised at this point is to what extent have voices for women’s rights been co-opted by the West? Co-opted feminisms should be read within the context of the long history of “colonial” feminism. Qasim Amin, although considered one of the founders of the feminist movement in the Arab world, presents a rather patriarchal and colonial feminist attitude towards women in the Middle East. His views paralleled those of the British imperialists that used the discourse of modernization and civilization to legitimate the unfair distribution of power, and their patriarchal and oppressive presence in the Middle East. In Ahmed’s discussion of the discourse of the veil, she examines Amin’s important and debatable book *Tahrir AL-Mar’a (The Liberation of Women)* published in 1899. Ahmed draws her readers’ attention to the fact that Amin’s work has traditionally been regarded

as “marking the beginning of feminism in Arab culture”(145). She explains that its publication, and the debate it presents, constitute a crucial moment in the history of Arab women. The battle of the veil provoked many people’s anger and resistance. The battle allowed a new discourse to appear in which the veil came to be pregnant with significations far broader than merely the position of women. Ahmed rightly thinks that its connotations now “encompassed issues of class and culture- widening the cultural gulf between the different classes in society and the interconnected conflict between the culture of the colonizers and that of the colonized”(145). Under the British occupation beginning in 1882, Egypt served as the supplier of raw materials for British factories. During the period of British colonization, European capitalism brought about some prosperity and economic, social and political benefits upon some classes but declining conditions upon others. Those who gained from the British occupation and European capitalism were the European residents of Egypt, the native Egyptian upper classes, and the middle class of “rural notables” and men educated in Western- type secular schools who became the intellectual elite. Traditional knowledge was devalued and viewed as backward by these Westerners and by Egyptians trained in the West or in the Western-type institutions established in Egypt (Ahmed 146). The elite and upper classes whose economic gain from British colonization had largely increased had a very different experience and attitude toward British colonial domination from the poor and lower classes that saw exploitation and various injustices inflicted upon them by the British ruling system.

The British colonizer, as a hegemonic and imperialist force, had to disrupt the people’s world and deepen its influence in the consciousness of the people to ensure its

domination over them. This was done by questioning the status of women in Islam and the practice of veiling claiming that it was the obstacle standing in the way of development and establishing a modern Egypt. Ahmed is critical of the rationale and inaccurate claims made by the British imperialist Lord Cromer to justify British interference in the Muslim society and the colonial discourse used against Muslim men and women in Egypt. Cromer states that:

It was essential that Egyptians ‘be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of Western civilization’ and to achieve this, it was essential to change the position of women in Islam, for it was Islam’s degradation of women, expressed in the practices of veiling and seclusion, that was ‘the fatal obstacle’ to the Egyptian’s ‘attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilization;’ only by abandoning those practices might they attain ‘the mental and moral development which he [Cromer] desired for them’”( Qtd. In Ahmed 153).

It is clear that Amin's emphasis on changing the women when he argues that “To make Muslim society abandon its backward ways and follow the Western path to success and civilization required changing the women” only comes from the hegemonic and imperialist discourse he has adopted and embraced and not from a genuine concern for women (Qtd in Ahmed 156). His call for the changing of women in the Muslim society can be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation is that Amin realizes the importance of the role of the Muslim woman in Arab society and the impact she has on the family and society in general, and thus believes in the change her transformation and advancement can bring about. The second one would view his call for changing only the

women in society as a patriarchal and sexist approach that assumes any backwardness and faultiness in society is attributed to the female sex and not that the men needed to be involved in any type of change as well.

Ahmed emphasizes Amin's vital role in perpetuating the Western colonial discourse that condemns the veil. Amin wrote "The veil constituted a huge barrier between woman and her elevation, and consequently a barrier between the nation and its advance" (Qtd in Ahmed 160). Amin's assault on the veil was not the result of reasoned reflection and analysis but rather represented the "internalization and replication of the colonial perception"(Ahmed 160). Ahmed argues that "In calling for women's liberation the thoroughly patriarchal Amin was in fact calling for the transformation of Muslim society along the lines of the Western model and for the substitution of the garb of Islamic- style male dominance for that of Western- style male dominance"(161). Under the name of liberation for women, he actually reproduced the colonizer's attack on native culture and society (161). Ahmed asserts that Amin's book merely called for the replacement of Islamic- style male dominance with Western- style male dominance. It is ironic that Amin is known for his vital role in Arab feminism although he did not necessarily support women. Ahmed maintains that "Far from being the father of Arab feminism, ... Amin might more aptly be described as the son of Cromer and colonialism"(163).

The hegemonic and imperialist discourse has produced other elitist and loyal servants in the Middle East that recycle its principles and ideologies to fit the indigenous culture. Among those whose interests were advanced by their affiliation with Western culture besides Amin is Nawal Sadaawi who has become widely acknowledged in the

Western world as an Arab feminist. Sadaawi is viewed by Western eyes as a prominent figure in the Arab feminist movement that has seriously defended the rights of Arab women. Paradoxically, in the eyes of many Arab Islamic feminists, Sadaawi is perceived as an activist who could have fought more aggressively for the Arab woman's cause, but has been somewhat influenced by Western discourses and thus her voice of resistance to hegemonic forces has been slightly tamed and weakened. Amal Amireh, an Arab feminist scholar, argues that "although she makes some efforts to resist the West's misrepresentation of her, El Saadawi, . . . , also invites it in some ways, allowing her works to be used to confirm prevailing prejudices about Arab and Muslim culture" (228). It is important though to acknowledge El Saadawi's role in advocating social justice and equal rights for women as for men. Nevertheless, her voice has been co-opted to a certain extent by the imperialist and patriarchal structure of thinking she is trying to resist and challenge.

Saadawi's interests have, unfortunately, been advanced and her publications have become well known due to the accommodations she has been willing to make to meet the needs of her western audience. Amireh illustrates this as she states that El Saadawi has made alterations to her published book *The Hidden Face of Eve* after the responses she got about the British edition. To improve the reception of her American audience, Amireh declares that one of the adjustments she has made to the newer edition, perhaps under the pressure of Western publishers, is doing without the anti-imperialist rhetoric and the celebration of the Iranian Revolution (223). Furthermore, in her discussion of the veil and western representations of Islam, Saadawi's tone is more subdued and "less militant" in this version (224). She also eliminates passages in which she asserts that

Arab women are ahead of American and European women in demanding equality and celebrate the progress Arab women have made (224). These are just examples that reflect the dilemma of the Arab/ Islamic feminist movement and mark the engagement with and entrance of many important figures of Arab/ Islamic feminism into the hegemonic and imperialist discourse of the West.

The Arab feminist Fatima Mernissi is one of the figures whose voice and views have been crystallized and widely publicized by the British hegemonic discourse only to reiterate its own aspirations. In *The Veil and The Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1987), Mernissi provides Westernized and Eurocentric interpretations of the position of women in Islam to illustrate their suppression and confinement within the supposedly “oppressive” religion. On several occasions, she takes incidents from the history of Islam and Quranic statements out of context that enable certain meanings and interpretations to be twisted in order to fit the feminist agenda she supports. It is this type of representation or misrepresentation of Islamic principles that takes on the assumption that Islam and feminism are very incompatible and extremely polarized forces that cannot communicate or dialogue with one another. For example, in her discussion of Muslim women’s rights, Mernissi explains that there are conditions required of a woman that enable her to carry out pilgrimage, hajj, to Mecca. One of the conditions is that she must be free. According to Mernissi’s interpretation, “the woman slave is thus automatically deprived of making the hajj” and so this makes Islam an unjust religion that discriminates against slaves (98). What this interpretation misses is that through this condition Islam attempts to gradually overturn the pre-Islamic system of slavery. The rationale behind allowing only free women to do hajj is that first, the hajj

being one of the five major pillars of Islam, it cannot and should not be practiced through coercion but through personal choice which a slave may not have at the time. Secondly, this mandate encourages Muslims to free the slaves to enable them to carry out such a sacred mission because there is great emphasis on equality and freedom and by associating the emancipation of a slave with the pilgrimage to God, freedom is given an enormous value which otherwise would not have been emphasized as much, and thus allowed for slavery to continue not to mention that all people become equal during pilgrimage for the hierarchy of masters and slaves is dropped just as that of the wealthy and the poor. The other condition that can be misinterpreted is that a Muslim woman must be wealthy to carry out the pilgrimage which in Mernissi's eyes translates into class discrimination privileging the rich over the poor. The Quran states in chapter Al Imran verse 97 that whoever can afford to do hajj, who is physically and mentally and financially able to go, must perform it at least once in a lifetime (62). Hence, a Muslim has to be economically able to make the trip. If a woman does not have the financial capacity to go to Mecca, she is excused from this obligation. The condition to be wealthy does not indicate Islam's unjust treatment of the poor; on the contrary, it excuses those who cannot afford to travel to Mecca, and thus frees them from the burden and guilt felt by those who are unable to fulfill this requirement, and so it is meant to make the religion easier and accessible to all and not only to people of a certain social class.

Misinterpretations such as the ones just referred to are unfortunately common and widely manipulated by many Muslim, non- Muslim/ Arab and Western critics and feminists to portray Islam as oppressive and to justify the Muslim woman's need for liberation.

### *Revolutionary Arab/ Islamic Feminisms*

After having exposed the impact of the hegemonic and colonialist discourse on Arab feminist views and its infiltration into their value system and consciousness, it seems appropriate at this stage to examine the history of Arab/ Islamic feminism and the feminists' contributions in challenging the over- simplified perception of the West of Arab/ Muslim women in general, and as voiceless disempowered women in particular. I refer to several feminist journals, organizations, and Arab feminist social and political activities in countries such as Syria, Palestine, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Egypt to reflect the rich history of Arab feminist movements in the region. Mino Moallem, a Muslim feminist, asserts in her article “Am I a Muslim Woman? Nationalist Reactions and Postcolonial Transactions” that it should not be hard to understand that neither the religion of Islam nor Muslims as a community are unified and homogeneous categories. She explains that there are many other major components that constitute these societies such as their political, economic and cultural structures of which religion is only one element (53). In addition, the imperialist and Western colonialist discourse is highly responsible for the extensive misinterpretations of Islam and the veil that freeze this religion in particular and its people outside history. Moallem refers to one of the common portrayals of Muslims and the way they are perceived by many outsiders as “... a world of unchanging traditions, immoral and perverse sexualities, and the irrational bonding of barbaric men and obedient women in need of Western civilizational disciplining” (53). Clearly, Muslims are often dealt with as having remained in the pre-modern era that does not actually reflect their reality in today’s world, nor the period post 9/11 significant to their contemporary history. During the Iraqi war they have continued to be portrayed as

living in the past and in an outdated age that is incompatible with the postmodern and contemporary world that has taken over our lives.

Bouthaina Sha'aban, an Arab/ Islamic feminist, explores the history of Arab feminism in the Middle East to bring certain facts under the spotlight. Sha'aban asserts that during the period between 1892 and 1940 there were several journals printed by Arab women writers. In 1892, for instance, the Syrian Hind Nawfal started her first journal entitled *AL-Fatat*. She also reports that before World War I there was already more than 25 Arab feminist journals owned and published by women. Among these journals are *Shajarat AL-Durr*, *Fatat- Al-Niyl* and *Fatat Lubnan* (250). Articles in these journals established a link between the appearance of political movements for national independence and the awakening of a feminist consciousness in the Middle East arguing that "no country can be truly free so long as its women remain shackled"(Sha'aban 251). Ironically, Arab women's writing showed no indication of their marginalization or having lived on the periphery of political life (Sha'aban.251). On the contrary, many scholars have discussed the Palestinian woman's active role for instance in the nationalist movement against occupation; other examples are Lebanese and Algerian women as well.

The hegemonic discourse, unfortunately, impacts the production of knowledge and its dissemination in the West, and so it does not come as a surprise when voices like Nawal Sa'adawi and Fatima Mernissi are foregrounded, while other important voices are undermined such as Labiba Shamu'n's. In 1898 Shamu'n wrote:

I can't see how a woman writer or poet could be of any harm to her husband and children. In fact, I see the exact opposite: her knowledge and education will reflect positively on her family and children... Neither male art nor creativity has

ever been considered as a misfortune to the family, or an impediment to the love and care a father may bestow upon his children. The man who sees in a learned woman his rival is incompetent: he who believes that his knowledge is sufficient is mean, and the man who believes that women's creativity harms him or her is ignorant (Sha'aban 252).

Fadwa El Guindi also states that the 1900s and the following few decades have witnessed an Islamic reawakening throughout the Middle East with a strong presence of women's activism (159). It has witnessed the Islamic Revolution in Iran and nationalist activism and solidarity in Palestinian territories (El Guindi 161). El Guindi argues that many non-Western feminist struggles tend to be grounded in nationalistic and anti-colonialist movements. In the Middle East, for instance, there are movements against foreign domination in which women participate in the process of liberating systems along with the men. A good illustration of this is what is happening now among Palestinians under occupation (159). It is important to remember that many Arab/ Muslim women in the Middle East engage in feminist and political activism without belonging to a feminist organization. It is also crucial to recognize the fact that the Palestinian women's freedom, for instance, her right to vote and pursue an education and a better life is denied them not by Arab men and the patriarchal system but by occupation and persecution. The most serious challenge they are currently faced with along with Iraqi women is survival which is naturally a major concern that supercedes any other. Ironically, Arab women's status and their liberation has become America's concern. Elia draws our attention to the reluctance of many imperial feminists to acknowledge the fact that Iraqi women's circumstances before the war were the most enviable in the Arab world but have

enormously deteriorated after America's occupation of Iraq. Furthermore, female literacy in Iraq under Saddam's regime was the highest in the region, and Iraqi women were among the most professional and highly educated in the Arab world (157).

Therese Saliba, who has written extensively about Arab feminism, contends that although many Western feminists believe that nationalism is incompatible with feminism, a nationalist struggle for the Palestinians fighting for their survival has been a necessity (1089). Saliba explains that the rise of Islamic women's movements in the Arab world has further defied and questioned the secular, liberalizing assumptions of feminism by mainly focusing on "progressive readings of Islamic texts to argue for a more egalitarian Islamic tradition that enhances women's rights"(1090). In her analysis of the scholarship of Arab and Arab- American women writers that sought to dismantle misconceptions about Muslim women, Saliba concludes that:

Perhaps the greatest contributions of Arab Feminism at the millennium have been expanding methods of feminist analysis and exploding the constraining categories- whether Orientalist, Islamic, nationalist, multicultural, or even feminist- whose often colonizing tendencies have bound Arab women (1091).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before and after the revolution, Iran has witnessed a growth in the number of women's organizations and institutes, as well as in the publication of women's journals (Ahmadi 37). During the period 1920s- 1960s, women's NGOs were active in Iran and the first women's press was established (Dolatshahi). The Afghani feminist journal *Payam- e Zan (Women's Message)* (1977) and the women's magazine *Farzaneh* (1990s) have also worked towards promoting the status of women and reconciling the religious with secular feminists (Ahmadi 45). *Zanan*, as the International

Women's Media Foundation indicates, founded by Shahla Sherkat in 1991, was "the first independent journal to focus on women's issues after the 1979 Iranian Revolution."

*Zanan* and other journals present themselves as feminist oriented and have embarked on a project of "thorough and radical interpretations of Islamic sources about women's rights"(37). Through women's writings published in *Zanan*, Iranian feminists have made possible dialogues between secular and religious voices on women's issues and tried to build bridges between Western and Islamic feminisms (Ahmadi 44). Fereshteh Ahmadi notes that these feminists have called for collaborative efforts among feminist activists to resist women's oppression around the world and deal with it as a global problem that needs to be addressed (44).

Arab/ Islamic feminists continue to advocate democratizing traditions and interpretations of sacred texts to keep up with modern times and develop a modern Islam that is compatible with the various advancements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Islamic feminists in Iran, for instance, have struggled to develop a new discourse on feminism and Islam. In the article "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context," Ahmadi states that Iranian Islamic feminists are actually "opening the doors of interpretation of sacred texts and debates on women's issues to groups other than Muslims" (33). Ahmadi explains that twenty- five years after the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), they have witnessed the flourishing of feminist rereadings of sacred texts which has been declared by scholars to be a radical shift that "has no counterpart in the rest of the Muslim world"(36-7). Ahmadi explains that Islamic feminists in Iran have adopted postmodern ideas in their discussion of women's issues and the rethinking of gender in Islam (47). In

their reinterpretation of sacred texts, Islamic feminists have employed “postmodern feminist critiques” especially in their handling of the Arabic language (48).

Muslim women around the world have worked towards their advancement. In 2003, Florence Denmark notes, that the Iranian activist Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her significant efforts for human rights and democracy (368). She specifically focuses on the struggle for women’s and children’s rights (Denmark 368). Denmark points out that women in Saudi Arabia have also made progress in this century (368). Saudi Women for the first time were allowed to speak and lead discussions in the annual Jeddah Economic Forum in 2004 (Denmark 368). Although they wore the head-to-toe garment, this was the first time Saudi women took the stage in public (Denmark 368).

#### *Iraqi Women’s Magazines and Journals (1923-1940s)*

Recent research has shown progressive feminist contributions in Iraq especially in the “awakening stage” as Noga Efrati calls it. One of the features of the “awakening stage” besides the emergence of intellectual debates about women, as Efrati states, is the evolution of a woman’s press (158). The woman’s press in Iraq played a great role in the growth of feminist journals and magazines. The first women’s magazine *Layla* was published in 1923 and other women’s magazines appeared in the 1930s and 1940s such as: *al- Mara al- Haditha (The Modern Woman)* (1936), *Fatat al- Iraq (The Girl of Iraq)* (1936), *Fatat al- Arab (The Arab’s Girl)* (1937), *Sawt al- Mara (The Woman’s Voice)* (1943), *al- Rihab* (1946), *al-Umm wa- l- Tifl (The Mother and the Child)* (1946), *Tahrir*

*al- Mara (Liberating the Woman)* (1947), *Bint al- Rashid* (1948), and *al- Ittihad al- Nisai (The Women's Union)* (1949) (Efrati 158).

*Iraqi Women's Organizations and Social and Political Activities (20<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup> century)*

The first women's organization, The Women's Awakening Club (Nadi al- Nahda al- Nisaiyya), that appeared in Iraq after World War 1 worked towards social reform. It focused on enhancing self improvement and awareness in women and it sought to improve women's education and opened classes of literacy, economics, hygiene, and childcare for women (Efrati 159). Efrati notes that the Iraqi Women's Awakening Club and the Egyptian Feminist Union (al- Ittihad al- Nisai al- Misri) were established the same year (161). As Egyptian women had participated in the nationalist struggle in 1919, Iraqi women had participated in their nationalist struggle for independence that helped the changing of gender roles and the nationalist discourse of patriotism (Efrati 163-4). Iraqi women activists had participated in the revolt against the British occupation in 1920 (Efrati 164). These female activists, that were veiled, shouted "nationalist slogans against British imperialism and the in the countryside, women joined fighting men "carrying equipment, providing supplies and urging them to fight with poems and cries of encouragement (Efrati 164). Women's involvement in the revolt showed their commitment to the nation's independence and drew attention to the importance of women's education for the nation's progress and thus helped the recognition of women's democratic rights in Iraq (Efrati 164).

It is beyond the scope of this study to examine how progressive the efforts of these female activists were, but it is obvious that Iraqi women activists took part in the

political and social reform in the country. Iraqi feminists established secular and religious charitable organizations to support women such as the woman's branch of the Red Crescent Society in 1933, and the Women's Temperance and Social Welfare Society in 1937 (Efrati 165-6). In 1936 the women's branch "organized a series of lectures for women on the topics of first-aid and childcare, given by a nurse sent to Iraq by the Red Cross" and the branch "operated a clinic with the aims of providing medical care and guidance for mothers and training women to work in clinics" to be opened (Efrati 166). A religious Christian organization called the Sisters of Charity for the Poor was founded in 1945 to provide assistance to the poor in education, medical care and professional training, and support Iraqi soldiers sent to fight in Palestine in 1948 (Efrati 167). Iraqi women also participated in opposition activities against the British control of their country, for example, they participated in demonstrations and strikes in the 1948 uprising that followed the signing of the Portsmouth Agreement "which aimed at prolonging the Anglo- Iraqi Treaty" (170). Efrati refers to two organizations that were established in the 1940s but were more political and feminist in nature than the Sisters of Charity: the Women's League Against Nazism and Fascism (Jamiyyat Mukafahat al- Naziyya wal- Fashiyya) and the Iraqi Women's Union (168). The League against Nazism and Fascism was founded to support democratic ideals and resist Nazi and Fascist ideas, and was concerned with "raising women's cultural level and social awareness through discussions, lectures, plays and articles in the newspapers (Efrati 168).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and during the Iraqi war, the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq was established to "build up a qualified base of women activists that can promote and lead democratization processes towards achieving women's human rights."

The staff and volunteers of the OWFI centers “reach out to schools, universities and workplaces and conduct gatherings and meetings to feed and inform communities about the possibilities of a new Iraq. The OWFI media outlets provide exposure to women’s rights information on a national scale.” These Arab/ Islamic feminist organizations and writings have been significant in transforming the Arab and Muslim woman’s situation around the world and resisting the various oppressions she has encountered by patriarchal and hegemonic forces.

### *Contemporary Arab- American Feminist Voices and Contributions*

Arab- American and Islamic feminists write to reach out to Arabs, Muslims, and women around the world whether in the East or West to resist oppression caused by local or foreign hegemonic governments. They try to form solidarity with other women through engaging in dialogues with multi- ethnic women and Western feminists in order to achieve social justice. They also work towards raising consciousness about issues that concern all women and those of other nations and cultures because they aim at social justice within local and global contexts. Arab- American feminists have been activists who continuously dedicate their work to social reform and call for action to achieve justice and equality. Kahf’s poetry, for instance, deals with issues of gender and inequality, whereas, Suheir Hammad’s focuses more on social and political issues like race and class discrimination, displacement, and injustices in the world. In her poem “Men Kill Me,” Kahf is critical of the inequality between men and women:

Men kill me

How they think the earth of green and gold and God

Is all for them

How they feel generous in leaving one small spot

Between four walls for all the women of the world (61).

Kahf is unhappy with patriarchy's unjust distribution of power and self-centered interests that are often at the expense of women. She aims at highlighting the social issue of gender inequality in the hope both men and women will gain an awareness of the situation and try to change the status quo.

Kahf's feminist efforts to encourage women to embrace themselves, appreciate themselves away from male admiration, and create change is demonstrated in her poem "The Woman Dear to Herself":

The woman dear to herself loves

For another what she loves for herself...

The woman dear to herself

Gives herself breast exams and running shoes

And eats well and washes her face in the river

And cherishes the beauty in other women as in her self (55).

In this poem, Kahf educates women how to develop self-love and not lose themselves to any man or marriage relationship. She expects women to show more interest in themselves and their own health and situation and not just sacrifice their lives to others.

In the poem "The Marvelous Women," Kahf presents a positive image of empowered women who have rich heterogeneous experiences from which she draws pride and topics for her poetry:

My marvelous friends, these women

Who are elegant and fix engines,  
Who teach gynecology and literacy,  
And work in jails and sing and sculpt ...  
It is from you I fashion poetry (51).

In this poem, Kahf reminds women that they have much to offer to society and how their role is important in the shaping of her poetry. This is also a reminder for society of women's value, great potential, and important roles they play in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Suhier Hammad has also contributed to the Arab- American and Islamic feminist movement by addressing certain issues that concern women in her poetry. In the poem "Of Woman Torn," Hammad questions patriarchy's definition of "loose" woman and control over women's bodies. She considers the man equally responsible for the woman's pregnancy and labeling her "loose," for he escapes punishment while she is beaten and tortured. This is the type of gender discrimination that patriarchy allows and legitimates and feminists try to resist and struggle to change. The speaker in the poem asks:

Where is he now  
Where was he when they found  
The swelling of your belly  
Proof of your humanity  
When they stuck fists up  
Inside you to prove you loose  
When they beat you blue  
Ripped the hair out your head (75-6)

Arab- American feminists have not only shown an interest in social issues but also political and nationalist issues. They continue to write and speak out to educate people about hegemony and imperialism and ways to resist their oppressions encouraging women to become social, political, and nationalist feminist activists. They encourage women to enter the political arena and engage in the struggle for equality and justice. They invite them to participate in the creation of counter- hegemonic narratives and insist on having a presence within feminist dialogues and their resistance to patriarchy. Arab- American feminists also show women that they are able to take on a nationalist and feminist stance at the same time critiquing democracy and patriarchy. For instance, in “A Prayer Band,” Hammad deals with the national crisis during Hurricane Katrina and social issues of poverty, rape, and displacement that citizens from New Orleans experienced after the hurricane:

A New Orleans man pleads  
we have to steal from each other to eat  
another gun in hand says we will protect what we have  
what belongs to us ...  
I have known of women raped by strangers by neighbors  
of a hunger in human  
I have known of promises to return  
to where you come from.

In this poem, Hammad refers to the harsh conditions people had to live through when the hurricane caused great damage and human loss. She shows how violence can result from such conditions, poverty and rape, and the struggle for survival. In addition, Hammad

condemns the class and racial discrimination committed against the citizens of New Orleans whom she believes did not receive the necessary help due to their race and class.

She wonders:

how long before hope begins to eat itself?

how many flags must be waved?

... were the poor people so poor they could not be seen?

were the black people so many they could not be counted?

... and life it seems is constructed

of budgets contracts deployments ...

and gasoline but mostly insurance

and insurance it seems is only bought

and only with what cannot be carried within.

Hammad condemns the government for not taking immediate action to save people from the disaster. She believes their crisis had been ignored because they were poor and black, and in such a capitalist and materialist society, the human value is measured only by wealth which they did not have. This poem can be considered a social commentary on the economic and political atmosphere that has prevailed during the Bush administration.

In another poem, Hammad reflects on the African Americans' suffering due to the hurricane and how all people are the same when they struggle from a certain injustice. She wants her readers to acknowledge the suffering of other nations as well, and see how the hurricane victims are like those in Haiti, Bosnia, and Rwanda, all victims to hegemonic forces. She calls for solidarity to resist such oppressions and injustices and to bring upon social transformation. In "Of Refuge and Language," Hammad states:

Before the hurricane  
No tents were prepared for the fleeing  
Because Americans do not live in tents  
Tents are for Haiti for Bosnia for Rwanda  
Refugees are the rest of the world ...  
The rest of the world can now see  
What I have seen  
Do not look away  
The rest of the world lives here too  
In America.

Hammad's poem calls for the world's attention to look at the suffering of others and for America to consider the situation of other nations and how any of them can suddenly become refugees, a status many are punished for. Clearly, Arab- American feminists such as Hammad and Kahf and many others have engaged in feminist dialogues and the creation of a counter- hegemonic discourse. They have contributed to the formation of a new space in which the Arab- American voice is no longer silent and nor is its resistance unrecognized.

*New Space and New Knowledge: Challenges to Constructing Feminist Resistance and Counter- Hegemonic Discourses*

Arab- American and Islamic feminists have continuously resisted any type of subordination by local patriarchies or Western hegemonies. In their new space, where

they have created narratives of their own and rewritten their history, they have challenged the hegemonic and homogenized image of them in Western discourses and have struggled to reinvent themselves in the American consciousness. In responses to many Western and westernized assumptions that Arab/ Muslim women are passive and silenced figures in Middle Eastern societies, Sabbagh confirms that it is precisely because of the difficult living conditions that Arab women are forced to developing strong methods of resistance and fighting for their rights (20). This notion of a resistance against oppression that emerges under harsh circumstances certainly defies any colonizer's or imperialist's depiction of the colonized as idle, non-thinking and non-acting beings. Obviously, there have been activist and feminist movements in the Arab/Muslim world that have resisted injustices by insiders and outsiders. El Guindi, however, addresses the challenge that stands in the way of Arab/ Islamic feminist voices to be heard and the positive images they present of themselves and their culture to be made visible within the dominant and hegemonic discourse. El Guindi emphasizes that:

It is difficult to demonstrate the existence of a discourse, a movement, a consciousness such as Islamic feminism in a climate that assumes the universal supremacy of Western feminism. It is even more difficult to argue for the combination of Islam and feminism in such a climate, which assumes a natural incompatibility between the two (159).

The anti- Islamic atmosphere and the belief in the supremacy of Western feminism has definitely presented a challenge to Islamic feminists because they are still looked at as inferiors to Western feminists and are still attacked because of their faith which has been demonized by the dominant and hegemonic culture. Cultural biases in Western feminisms

have not been uncommon, they continue to exist in spite of the prevalent rhetoric of democracy, solidarity, and liberation within the movement.

### *Cultural Bias of Western Feminism*

Through the discussion of Arab feminism, we realize that Arab feminists have not given up despite the obstacles and voices undermining theirs. Perhaps some Western critics and feminists do not see the feminism that already exists in Arab/ Muslim cultures because it is not the type of feminism they are accustomed to. Its values and fundamental principles do not necessarily fit with Western perceptions because they are ingrained within their own native culture unfamiliar to the West. It is worth noting that what is in common between Western feminism and Arab/Islamic feminism is the fact that they are both grounded in their own thought, ideology, and values, whether Western or Middle Eastern. Each one fits in with the system of beliefs and ideologies of their own particular culture and addresses the issues that pertain specifically to that particular culture. In “Eastern Veiling, Western Freedom?” Nancy Hirschman points out that the error frequently committed by Western feminists is to treat women in different cultures “... as if they were simply variations on a basic theme defined by white Western middle-class experience” (464). Such a mistake may have been committed due to a general ignorance of many indigenous cultures, their native customs and history, and their unfamiliarity with other women's experiences around the world. What is upsetting to Ahmed and other Arab/ Islamic feminists is that they find the West's focus on a piece of cloth, the veil, and the decision that it is a sign of backwardness and regression inappropriate and in contradiction with feminist values especially that “when items of clothing – be it

bloomers or bras- have briefly figured as focuses of contention and symbols of feminist struggle in Western societies"(166). Ahmed is even more disturbed by the fact that it was at least Western feminist women who were responsible for identifying the item in question within the movement as "significant and defining it as a site of struggle and not, as has sadly been the case with respect to the veil for Muslim women," that was declared important to feminist struggle by outsiders: the colonial and patriarchal men like Cromer and Amin (167).

The veil is not a crucial issue for Arab/ Islamic feminists or Muslim women in general, but it has been made an issue by the West and outside its cultural and religious origins and context. The dilemma of Arab/ Islamic feminists is far from being this piece of cloth and should not be reduced to the veil or the question of representation per say. It is the triple oppression and silencing they suffer from in the East and the West because they are Arab, Muslim, and women and in some cases veiled. It is a matter of attaining a peaceful existence for them and exercising the freedom of speech without fear. For them to participate in the mainstream, and be heard and listened to, the audience needs to consciously unlearn an entire history of distorted truths, and combat the undefeatable ideologies they have embraced all along due to their culture's hegemonic dominance, and open up to alternative histories and interpretations. Arab- Americans and Arab/ Islamic feminists, simultaneously, deal with the fact that the very nature of hegemony and its engrained principles in people's subconscious does not allow for this enormous transformation to occur because the shattering of a century's efforts, whether positive or negative, is impossible and yet they continue to have hope for change and a better and

just life. Arab- American and Islamic feminists as subaltern women can speak but more importantly, will the hegemonic ear listen?

### *Subaltern Struggle for Authority*

Arab- American and Islamic feminists have struggled to gain authority because they have been frequently marginalized by the mainstream. They have not even been rendered authorities on their own lives, experiences, and histories because the knowledge they present is not hegemonic knowledge and thus lacks authority. In Peggy Ochoa's discussion of the subaltern in "The Historical Moments of Postcolonial Writing: Beyond Colonialism's Binary," a reference is made to both "silenced" and "silent" subalterns.

Ochoa explains that:

The subaltern speaks as much as any other human being, but not from a subject position recognized as authoritative by a racist and sexist dominant discourse. Those who have the power to give her speech validity or to recognize her as anything other than a subjugated object of colonialism can ignore her speech as irrelevant to the colonizing project (221).

The subalterns within the colonial discourse could question the system and articulate their dissatisfaction through their education but "... either their questions fell on deaf ears or the questioners themselves were silenced by physical force," writes Ochoa (222). This seems to be the major problem Arab- Americans and Islamic feminists are facing nowadays unless what they advocate reflects the hegemonic voice and discourse in the West that is granted many ears to be heard. For the fact is "... Definitions belonged to the definers- not the defined" (Qtd. in Ochoa 222). And therefore, Arab/ Islamic feminists

have made significant efforts to disrupt definitions created by the hegemonic definers and introduce new definitions of their own lives and identities. They are trying to create a space of their own where they become their own definers. Arab- American and Muslim American women have created counter-narratives that resist hegemonic and patriarchal constructions of womanhood. Jasmin Zine notes that Muslim women have been variously contesting "the way their identities have been scripted both within particular Islamic discourses and in Western secular conceptions of feminism" (168). Zine points out that counter- narratives are often posed by third world women or women from the South that attempt to "authorize different understandings of women's identities as subjects engaged in their own processes of identity construction and negotiation within frameworks that differ from those privileged in a Western, secular context"(168). Third World women and U.S. Third World women's attempt to construct counter- narratives and an alternative feminist vision can be attributed to their dissatisfaction with the available Western feminist thoughts that do not reflect their own reality nor address the issues that concern them, but rather reflect the predicament of Western women and ways to address their issues. Typically, and regardless of the good intentions many feminists have, Western feminist theories are meant to find solutions for the Western woman's crisis and end her struggle with injustices and inequality. Arab- Islamic feminists have suffered due to their state of subalternity within the dominant culture and have had to resist such subordination through their counter- hegemonic discourse. In their construction of feminist resistance and such an empowering discourse, they have been challenged by the secular vs. Islamic binary which they address in their feminist writings.

### *Confronting the Secular vs. Islamic Binary*

The issue of secular vs. Islamic has resulted in both fruitful and futile dialogues within the movement. Arab/ Islamic feminists have tried to resist the division caused by this binary through uniting women and focusing on the creation of a counter- hegemonic discourse. They have had to expose women to the impact of hegemonic and imperialist discourses on the way they see each other and how they reinforce polarized binaries as such. Islamic and some secular feminists who have believed in Western and imperialist feminisms should have come to the realization that Muslim women's lives, however, are influenced by certain forces that are different from those influencing Western women. It is interesting how certain Western feminisms actually serve Western women but when some of these feminisms deal with the issues of Muslim women, they turn into oppressors and faithful servants of imperialist discourses and lose sight of the original cause and principle their feminism was founded upon. Zine states that:

The unidimensional construction of Muslim women as being in need of liberation through the casting off of their veils and the adoption of Western, secular sensibilities is a paternal mode of imperialist feminism that denies these women the agency and political maturity to act as subjects of change on their own terms (168).

Arab and Muslim women today are being restricted by the options and feminist frameworks made available to them, and the polarization of the two modes: Islamic and secular which have become the equivalent of the oppressive binary of "us" and "them." In the past the Islamic and the secular were perceived as variations of a life style within the Arab world that are able to coexist and unite under nationalism against a common enemy.

Nowadays a schism is growing between the two and has been reinforced and deepened in Arab and Muslim societies by the imperialist and hegemonic discourse that not only privileges the secular over the Islamic, but demonizes the Islamic to uplift and enforce secularization. It is ironic that the Palestinian authorities that are frequently demonized by the West have been secular all along until very recently. The way hegemony has created this rigid paradigm or dichotomy of the Islamic and the secular, read as the oppressed and the oppressor respectively, does not grant women or allow them a comfortable space where they can construct their own identities without the pressure of the ideologies they hold. That is, many Arab women are caught in between the Islamic and the secular and choose to lead a life in which they draw principles from both combined together. The available Western feminisms, however, are incompatible with the type of life many of these women lead in that in-between space they occupy characterized by moderation and a mixture of the Islamic and the secular. In this new space, Arab/ Islamic feminists have worked towards creating new knowledge and asserting new subjectivities that reflect their own thoughts and visions.

### *Asserting New Subjectivities*

Islamic feminists have been searching for new ways to form their new subjectivities away from patriarchal and hegemonic influences. They have resisted patriarchies that have monopolized Islam, and used it to serve their own ends and maintain dominance over women. Arab- American and Islamic feminists have been trying to deal with this current situation by resisting traditional interpretations of Islam that are "male-centered" and that cast women "in subservient roles that are inconsistent

with the ethos of the Quran and the historical role of Muslim women"(Zine 168). They are trying to assert new subjectivities that do not conform to fundamentalist ideologies and interpretations enforced by Muslim and secular, Eastern and Western patriarchies alike. They have concentrated their efforts to create counter- narratives in which they have the agency and determination to make their voices heard. In their assertion of new subjectivities, they realize the need to resist the various oppressive voices that hinder their progress such as those reflecting patriarchal Islamic or patriarchal secular ideologies or imperialist and hegemonic discourses. Zine argues that:

Secular Muslim feminists all too often brand their faith- based sisters as victims of "false consciousness" who therefore presumably lack the political maturity to understand, articulate, and combat the nexus of oppressions they face (173).

It is only fair to say that such a critique misrepresents many highly educated Muslim women around the world who made that informed decision to follow a certain faith and system of beliefs after careful thought and reflection and against the will of many in a period controlled by a dominant world rhetoric of hegemony that legitimates the discrimination and oppression of Muslims. This type of biased critique made by secular Muslim feminists like Saadawi reproduce the Orientalist rhetoric of "Western 'imperialist feminists' who cast Muslim women in similarly pejorative terms and positioned themselves as the intellectual vanguards of these politically vulnerable women who needed to be guided and schooled in the ways of Eurocentered cultural feminism"(Zine 174). Due to the multiple oppressions Arab and Muslim women have suffered by strict Muslim and secular patriarchy, Arab Islamic feminists have rejected and condemned simultaneously those laws mandating veiling, and those banning the wearing of the

headscarf that are equally oppressive to women. In either case, Muslim women's bodies, whether in the Middle East or the West, continue to be "disciplined and regulated" (Zine 175). To be denied that right to have control over one's own body and the freedom of choice to dress in a way that any woman feels is appropriate whether by covering or uncovering is a form of oppression the East and the West alike are guilty of. While the war against Afghanistan is justified under the call for the liberation of women and ending compulsory veiling, France and Turkey's law that bans the headscarf and strips women of the right of freedom of worship is respected and goes unquestioned by the West. It is obvious that under the current hegemonic laws and rhetoric of power, certain injustices are justified while others are criminalized and penalized. The distorted image of the veil in the West and its representation by hegemonic and patriarchal discourses has been one of the key issues addressed by Arab/ Islamic feminists. They have dedicated their efforts to the unsettling of typical hegemonic and patriarchal structures of the veil.

### *Unsettling Hegemonic and Patriarchal Structures: The Veil*

#### *Highlighting Historical and Cultural Variation*

Through some Arab/ Islamic feminists' counter- hegemonic narrative, Arab- American feminists and activists have highlighted the historical and cultural variations of the veil in their attempt to subvert its image and unsettle hegemonic and patriarchal interpretations of it. There have been significant contributions and scholarly work produced by Arab/ Islamic feminists and some Western feminists whose goal, among many others, is to expose issues of sexism, racism, and Islamophobia. They have also

strived to dismantle patriarchal systems of oppression and to subvert the image of the Muslim veil as many Westerners have successfully produced, consciously or unconsciously, a rather distorted image of it from an Orientalist and imperialist perspective. These feminists provide different readings of the veil and create new interpretations that reflect its various contemporary functions and meanings in modern Arab and non- Arab Islamic societies. Crucial issues that have been raised around veiling, such as the need to historicize and locate women's own understanding of it and varying responses to the veil have become the subject of many scholarly debates. Nevertheless, many aspects and interpretations of the Muslim practice of veiling have been frequently ignored by theorists and critics. One of the feminists who discusses such an issue is Alison Donnell who states in her article "Visibility, Violence and Voice? Attitudes to Veiling Post-11 September" that:

The differences in social conditions and political status enjoyed by different communities of veiled women and the many cultural variables and specificities that attend the wearing of veils are seldom the interest of those who represent the veiled woman to and for the West. Even the word 'veil' implies the fixing and homogenizing of a range of dress practices and garments which are worn in accordance with hijab (132).

Certain facts have hardly found their way into Western discussions about Arabs and Muslims, such as the fact that veiling practices and Islam itself varies from one culture to another and that many Muslim women do not veil at all. In addition, the fact that Arab societies are made of a mixture of Muslims, Christians, Jews and secular individuals who have been able to coexist for centuries does not concern Western Orientalists nor

imperialist feminists in the Arab world who received a Western education. In the discussion of the veil, Nancy Hirschmann, who writes about Eastern veiling and Western freedoms, believes that the great variation in the dress code in the Muslim world and the heterogeneity within such a practice should be taken into consideration to prevent sweeping generalizations and a homogenization of a rather non-monolithic act.

Hirschman argues that:

It is vital to recognize that the history and practices of veiling vary widely from country to country in terms of style, ranging from flimsy, sheer-fabric robes, to head scarves, to dark and heavy full-length coverings of the entire face and body. Veiling also varies in terms of how the practice is carried out, again running the gamut from overt coercion (state mandates and “cultural police” in Afghanistan, Iran, and Algeria) to modest social pressure with an overt emphasis on women’s individual choice (466).

Hirschman, as a feminist activist, calls for the reconsideration of the practice of veiling and the diverse shapes and forms it takes in Muslim Eastern and Western societies and the way it is practiced through coercion or no coercion. Arab/ Islamic feminists have opened up the discussion about the veil and welcomed new interpretations of it in their attempt to deconstruct it and reclaim its meaning through their counter-hegemonic narrative.

### *Deconstructing the Veil, Reclaiming its Meaning*

The deconstruction of the veil and reclaiming its meaning has been pivotal in Arab-American resistance to hegemonic and patriarchal dominance. They deconstruct

the veil and rewrite its meanings to free it and themselves from Western hegemonic and patriarchal grip on the production of knowledge and formation of its meanings and interpretations. When Islamic and Arab- American feminists produce their own meanings of the veil, they disrupt the hegemonic definitions of it and destabilize Western hegemony's absolute domination over meanings. In the discussion of the veil and Islamic faith, Hirschmann reiterates Ahmed's belief that in the modern era, the West has perceived Islam as "a form of barbarism- fueled in contemporary times by popular antipathy toward terrorist bombing and hostage- taking" which is seen as a source of Muslim women's inequality; and the veil is now seen as "the ultimate symbol, if not tool, of this inequality"(464). Nevertheless, Hirschman realizes that not only do many Muslim women participate voluntarily in the practice and choose to wear the veil but also defend it and even claim it as "a mark of resistance, agency, and cultural membership"(464). The writings of many Arab/ Islamic feminists and their counter- narratives show a growing awareness of unbiased interpretations of the veil and its location within its own cultural and religious context. Hirschmann presents a view uninfluenced by the imperialist and hegemonic rhetoric of the veil and realizes that it is the women who consider the veil a crucial element in the formation of their identity and self- actualization. In fact, it is the women themselves and not the men who defend it so strongly. For instance, many women had not welcomed the ban against the veil in Iran in 1936 (Bullock 222). "In fact, some women did not leave home during the entire seven years of the ban" (Bullock 223). Although the West frequently portrays the practice of veiling as an act of coercion and oppression by the patriarchal system, which it sometimes is, it is clear that many Muslim women around the world have taken on the veil willingly in Muslim and secular nations

alike. Many Muslim women are presented with that option of unveiling as they are surrounded by many unveiled women, especially in Western societies, and yet still take on veiling as an aspect of their religious identity and a part of their commitment to the Muslim faith. This can be seen in countries such as the US, the United Kingdom, France, among other Western cultures, and Morocco, Turkey, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Cyprus, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and India where veiling is not forced upon women.

The veil reflects the religious identity many Muslim women wish to hold on to. Katherine Bullock, in her book *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*, discusses the perceptions veiled Muslim women have of the veil and the reasoning behind taking it on. Bullock refers to previous studies in which interviews were conducted with veiled Muslim women who stressed that they had adopted the veil as a “religious choice” and an “expression of adhering to *true Islam*”(96). Her discussion reveals that many Muslim women wear the veil out of tradition, whereas many others wear it out of conviction, and so neither one is through coercion (Bullock 96). Making society better is one of the motives behind Muslim women’s adoption of the veil as Bullock states that:

Along with the themes of rejecting Westernization and secularization, and adopting Islam as an alternative, is the pervasive one that women who ... [veil] feel that they are being proactive about improving society (97).

Many Muslim women have lost faith in secular and westernized societies due to colonization and imperialism. Western ideals came to Muslim nations along with oppression, exploitation, and humiliation during colonial times. In other words, the West

did not bring about change, democracy, or progress to the Muslim world thus leading many Muslims to resort to the Muslim faith in hope for justice and social reform. The veil within this context symbolizes a resistance to Westernization, Western supported dictatorships and patriarchies, and the return to Islamic principles. In this sense, Islam became an “alternative to Westernization and secularization” in countries such as Egypt, Indonesia, Algeria, Morocco, Turkey and the veil became an affirmation of Muslim women’s identity and religious commitment toward social reform (Bullock 98-9).

Veiling has been adopted by many Muslim women to signify equality and a resistance to social and economic stratification. That is, veiled women do not feel the social pressure to keep up with fashion because the veil gives them a sense of equality with other women who come from the upper class. Many working women in Iran and other nations are pleased with the veil since it relieves them from that constant burden of dressing fashionably, they feel the veil can “materialize their abilities and potential, without too much worry about their clothing or appearance” (Qtd in Bullock 104). The Canadian anthropologist, Fatemeh Givechian, who educates people about the veil and its interpretations notes:

... The unveiling of women ... imprisoned women in their look and clothing thus exaggerating their ascribed status as women, [while] the veiling of women has given rise to expectation of achievement and work. It has freed women from fascination of men with their look and also has forced them to compete if they are to enjoy their rights as human beings. The aggressiveness and professionalities of many of the new veiled women generation are a pleasant welcome to the passive and patronized unveiled women of modernized generation (Qtd. in Bullock104).

It is understandable that many Muslim women, through veiling, experience a sense of relief and freedom from judgment with regards to their physical beauty or lack of it and a sense of accomplishment as well since they are only judged through their achievement or lack of it. Several Muslim women in Bullock's study believe that "true equality will be had only when women don't need to display themselves to get attention and women need to defend their decision to keep their bodies to themselves"(Qtd in Bullock 184).

Although Islamic and Arab- American feminists find it necessary to address the issue of the veil in their resistance to hegemony and Western oppression, it does not reflect their main concerns or worries. They are compelled to focus on the veil because it is the major issue raised by the West and through it they are attacked and degraded, and it is the West that determines which issues need to be foregrounded and which do not.

To situate the veil as the focal point of any discussion and intellectual conversation about Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East is very reductive and offensive to these nations and Arab/ Muslim Americans. It is important to remember that these types of conversations do not serve Muslim women, let alone Christian or Jewish or secular Arab women in the region. Because this phenomenon has prevailed in extensive social, political and educational circles and it cannot be escaped or ignored, many feminists are determined to alter the direction of contemporary discussions in public forums and shift the focus to more critical issues and concerns that touch Muslim women's lives. Alison Donnell, a British scholar of postcolonial literature, explains how the concentration on the veil in Western dialogues about the Middle East and Muslims seems to divert attention from other pressing issues that may be of more importance to them such as health care, education and legal rights (134). Donnell agrees with Mohanty

that post 9/11 the attitudes towards the veil have only confirmed her proposal that the veiled woman is one of the “universal images of ‘the third-world woman... setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing first/third world connections”(73).

Mohanty believes that serious attempts to question, destabilize and reconstruct the political biases which inform acts of representing the veil may be “a significant starting point from which to redefine the terms of the ‘insider/outsider’ divide that 11 September all too often and disappointingly provoked (Qtd. in Donnell, 134). Arab/ Islamic and Arab- American feminists are dealing with this challenge that is not merely seeking acceptance by the mainstream but dismantling the "despised difference" they have been labeled with. Donnell rightly claims that the previously “over- determined” and “over-simplified” representation of the veil in Western discourses has been completely shunned post 9/11 and is now being replaced with a new set of meanings that bear political significance. Donnell emphasizes that:

The familiar and much- analyzed Orientalist gaze through which the veil is viewed as an object of mystique, exoticism and eroticism and the veiled woman as an object of fantasy, excitement and desire is now replaced by the xenophobic, more specifically Islamophobic, gaze through which the veil, or headscarf, is seen as a highly visible sign of a despised difference (123).

The veil and its interpretations within the hegemonic discourse has become highly politicized and decontextualized in Western society. It has been stripped of its original multifaceted significances and reduced to a piece of cloth the West is manipulating to justify its inhumane behavior in foreign countries and cultures. The changes in the

meanings the veil has undergone can be analyzed through Raymond Williams' conception of hegemony. Williams states that “[Hegemony] does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own”(112). Hegemony in this sense recreates discourses to preserve itself and ensure its continuation. In today's hegemony, it is vital to promote Islamophobia to justify the war on terror, the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the American protection of Israel, and the establishment of military bases throughout the whole Middle Eastern region. It is also important to attack one of the most significant symbols of Islam, the veil, and recreate its image in Western discourse and defend the new image to enforce Western domination and preserve the divide between East and West, and "them" and "us", the colonizer and the colonized. The perpetuation of this divide is crucial to ensure the continuation of the call for the liberation of Muslim women, the war on terror and the spread of democracy which are in reality no more than powerful tools through which the imperialist empire rules the world and maintains an everlasting cultural colonization of oil producing nations in the Middle East. Moallem believes that the tendency toward a “fundamentalist” conception of non- Western Muslim women reveals "the paradoxical nostalgia of colonial discourse for the “barbaric other” in need of civilization." Due to this nostalgia, the West is now claiming once again the liberation of the rest of the world as its responsibility (55). It is this self- serving hegemonic mission promoted by that false claim for the liberation of women and entire nations that Arab/ Islamic feminists are continuously challenging and resisting in their writings. For instance, the representation of the Muslim veil as signifying a "despised difference" is being undermined by the various positive

interpretations of the veil that are being provided by contemporary Arab/ Islamic feminists and the new readings that have been introduced into Western dialogue.

Donnell supports Afra Jalabi in her claim that the veil has become a “tool of political distraction.” That is, the veil is a false center to discussions of social justice and “a highly charged symbol of difference that paralyzes productive cross- cultural debate and communication” (127). Many feminists have not been able to go beyond the issue of the Muslim veil to more important matters that Muslim women struggle with in their discussions in public forums and conferences. Productive dialogue has been stifled because of that narrow lens through which Arab and Muslim women are perceived and the unwillingness to unlearn the stereotypes surrounding them. Arab- American and Muslim feminists are disappointed, more frequently than not, by the fact that discussions about the Islamic culture, religion and the Middle East are constantly reduced to a focus on the dress code and the scarf at the expense of important paradigms that define Islam, its history and role in Eastern and Western civilization.

This limitation in Western dialogue about the Middle East and Islam has compelled Arab/ Islamic feminists to deal with the issue of the veil extensively, but not in the traditional manner that reflects the imperialist discourse. They have analyzed its meanings from an Islamic and cultural perspective and relocated it within its original context without having to perpetuate the false readings of it available today. In their writings, these feminists have acknowledged the multiple functions and values of the veil, and interpreted the ways in which it has been utilized socially, politically and religiously. Bullock provides insight into the “ways of seeing” in her analysis of the veil. She explains John Berger’s view of the male gaze that presents women as the object of sight

that attracts male attention (187). That is, “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (Qtd. in Bullock 187). Accordingly, women not only internalize “the male gaze and judge [themselves] with the eyes of his desire, but also women then turn to one another and judge one another with those male eyes. Both men and women are gazing at women through the eyes of the *male gaze*”(Bullock 187). Obviously, if a woman fails to meet standards of beauty set by patriarchy, she is undervalued as an individual by this male gaze. Having this understanding of the male gaze which affects how women perceive themselves, Islamic feminists and Muslim women have utilized the veil to resist such a dynamic that often characterizes male-female relationships. The veil from this perspective frees women from both, the male and female gaze and their negative impact on the way women see and value themselves in terms of their beauty and role in society.

The view of the veil as empowering for the Muslim woman has also been presented and supported by Donnell who recognizes that:

For some women, the veil empowers them by removing their bodies from male scrutiny and the social judgments of beauty and sexuality and they wear it by choice. For others, enforced veiling is a political oppression disconnected from Islam, as experienced in Afghanistan (132).

These women feel they have control over their bodies and what others are able to see of them. They seem to feel appreciated for who they are and what they have accomplished through hard work and not their physical appearance, in this sense they feel equal to men. While enforced veiling is a political oppression committed by very few governments such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, the other form of political oppression Western and non-

Western governments take on with regards to Muslim women is that of enforced unveiling in countries such as France, Turkey and Tunisia. As the West may view the veil as a sign of backwardness, Muslims resist such a notion and reverse it to symbolize empowerment and freedom from the enslavement of fashion, consumerism and societal pretension. With the rise of globalization and capitalism, the veil has taken on the meaning of resistance to cultural emphasis on external appearance and materialism. Some Muslim women wear the veil in order to rebel against Western culture's emphasis on physical beauty and so it is "one of the most fundamental aspects of female empowerment" to some of them (Bullock 185). Bullock refers to a view presented by one of the participants in a study on the veil in which the veil is used to resist the commodification of women's bodies (185). The participant asserts that she has not taken on the veil due to any type of pressure or coercion. On the contrary, she believes it has given her a sense of empowerment since she has control over the way other people perceive her. She states: "I enjoy the fact that I don't give anyone anything to look at and that I have released myself from the bondage of the swinging pendulum of the fashion industry and other institutions that exploit females" (185). These views present the veil as a liberation from the oppression of the Western consumer culture. Bullock believes that these views of the veil reflect two types of feminist analysis they have used as Muslim feminists: first, "the objectification and commodification of women's bodies in capitalist culture, and second, the theory of harm done to women by the promotion of a beauty ideal" (186). Arab/ Islamic feminists reveal that the veil in history has conveyed multiple political messages apart from being an act of resistance to commodification and Western ideals of beauty.

*The Veil in History and After 9/11*

In the counter- hegemonic narrative Arab/ Islamic feminists have been creating, they unravel the significations the veil took on in history in resistance to hegemonic discourses and interpretations of it. Donnell and Frantz Fanon explain how the veil can convey a political message or be utilized to achieve certain political purposes. Donnell asserts that “Veiling can also be a conscious drawing attention to oneself- not as a beautiful or sexual being- but as a political one” (132). In ‘Algeria Unveiled,’ Fanon documents how in relation to Algeria’s struggle for independence the veil has been “manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a means of struggle”(83). Not only is Fanon referring to the practical value of a garment that conceals arms and grants anonymity, but also to the struggle for ideological identification in which the veil represents a determination for the abolition of Western values (132). In the horrific conditions of war and occupation, the need to hold on to the veil and Islamic practices becomes more urgent because the entire nation's identity and culture is under attack. The veil, in these situations, comes to symbolize resistance of the West and all the ideologies it brings with it to Muslim societies. Many women who may not regularly be very active in society in times of peace become aggressive activists in times of war. A Muslim woman during these times may join revolutionary nationalist movements and engage in political activity. Other women choose to become more socially and politically active in civil society through creating Muslim women's groups in which the Quran and teachings of Islam are taught as social and political tools to transform society and raise an awareness of the danger standing at their doors. Other women, on the other hand, take on the veil, apart from believing in it, to prove they are independent empowered women not

because they have followed the West or been liberated by it, but because they have a strong desire to revive Islamic principles of female empowerment and activism that were passed down by the prophet and many Muslim female figures significant in history. These principles may be forgotten when people feel secure, but when their peace is shattered and existence under threat, their weapon of resistance and survival is the return to their Islamic faith partially because of the lack of resources and military power needed for self- defense and loss of faith in human justice. This can be illustrated by the example El Guindi provides with regards to the gulf war. El Guindi explains that when the Islamic East felt the force of foreign dominance in the Gulf war, it was a lesson perhaps for “keeping feminism, democracy, and nationalism embedded in the larger Islamic movement so that women and men both are empowered as their nations are liberated”(161).

History shows how it is the Western colonization of Muslim lands that led to the transformation of the Muslim veil from being a sign of faith and peace to a weapon used in the struggle for survival. History also reveals the way the veil was considered by the West, as an enemy, that had to be attacked to enforce Western domination and fragment any forms of national solidarity. In “Algeria Unveiled” Fanon examines the political atmosphere in Algeria in the 1930s when the veil was used to fracture national and resistance movements. Fanon argues that the French administration was determined to bring about the dissolution of “forms of existence likely to evoke a national reality directly or indirectly” and concentrate its efforts on the wearing of the veil, which was viewed as a “symbol of the status of the Algerian woman” (74). Analyses of sociologists revealed that there was a significant and vital existence of a matriarchy that united

Algerian society which remained hidden behind the visible patriarchy, and thus, it became pivotal to control the women. This realization helped the French colonizer define a precise political doctrine:

If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves... (74).

In the colonialist program, it was the woman who was given the responsibility to weaken the Algerian man. Women were manipulated to function as a powerful means of “destructuring” Algerian culture. It was thought that converting the woman, and winning her over to the foreign values was also achieving power over the man (Fanon 75).

In the French colonizer’s eyes every veil abandoned by Algerian women is a sign of society’s willingness to attend “the master’s school” and submit to the occupier’s civilizing mission (Fanon 76). Fanon believes that the colonizer is frustrated by the veiled woman who sees without being seen, that is, there is no reciprocity. It upsets the colonizer who considers himself superior that this woman, “veiled” read as inferior, does not give herself, does not offer herself. Because the European would like to see behind the veil, he reacts with hostility against the colonized before this limitation of his perception (77). The plurality of interpretations of the veil, Islam and positions in the Muslim world reveals the heterogeneity within that falsely homogenized group of people. This is a heterogeneity many Western, non-Western, Muslim and non- Muslim theorists, feminists and scholars have consciously or unconsciously failed to recognize. To talk of veiling in Islamic countries and the practices of Islam is as difficult as it is to talk about

the Muslim world or third world women because such broad categories always fail to recognize significant variations and particularities.

CHAPTER 3  
CREATING A NARRATIVE OF COUNTER- HEGEMONY AND RESISTANCE IN  
MOHJA KAHF'S *THE GIRL IN THE TANGERINE SCARF* AND POETRY

People keep asking me where I come from  
Says my son.  
Trouble is I'm an American on the inside and oriental on the outside.  
No Kai  
Turn that outside in  
THIS is what American looks like.  
-- Mitsuye Yamada

*Introduction*

In this age of new imperialism and colonized minds, the U.S. hegemonic system works to decontextualize, that is, erase contexts and histories, to create misunderstandings of certain otherized cultures. This powerful system has applied this strategy in its handling of the veil, the Muslim culture, and the Middle East at large.

This chapter aims at unraveling the highly complex ways U. S. hegemony maintains its power through its dehistoricized representations of the Middle East and Arabs and Muslims around the world. As an act of resistance, in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Mohja Kahf contextualizes the Arab- American experience and culture, and historicizes the Muslim woman's practice of veiling, situating it within cultural, social, religious, and geopolitical contexts so as to counter hegemonic discourses and distorted narratives of Arab- Americans and the Middle East. The chapter also examines Arab- American and Muslim women's voices in resistance to hegemonic and monolithic images of them through the analysis of Kahf's counternarrative. This chapter studies Kahf's narrative and poetry of resistance and the possibility of subverting the veil as a sign of oppression to becoming a sign of resistance and an autonomous identity. Great emphasis is placed on the formation of the Muslim American woman's identity and

finding a space for her individual voice among the many conflicting voices of the East and the West, Muslim and secular, feminist and anti- feminist in America.

In this chapter, the theory of hegemony and resistance as proposed by Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams is initially explicated to foreground the ways hegemony and resistance operate, and then applied to Kahf's literary work. This chapter breaks down the hegemonic process affecting Muslims, the Middle East, Arabs, and Arab-American women into three major techniques: 1) the deployment of binaries of us vs. them; 2) othering; and 3) othering by misrepresentations of the veil. This is followed by a discussion of six main strategies of resistance applied by Kahf in her counter- hegemonic narrative. These strategies are: 1) rupturing the dominant narrative, 2) juxtaposition, 3) the use of positive representations, 4) de- fetishization or de- reification, 5) bearing witness, and 6) retelling history. The chapter then continues to expose elements of the counter- hegemonic discourse utilized by Kahf that are laid out in several sections. These sections generally focus on Arab- American resistance to hegemonic formations of identity and the recreation of new selves. These strategies of resistance are not new to Kahf since she has incorporated them in various genres in an attempt to dismantle negative perceptions of Arabs and Muslims in Western discourses.

Mohja Kahf contributes significantly to Arab- American visibility. Born in Syria and raised in the U.S., she continues to make attempts to bridge the gap between the West and the Middle East through engaging in dialogues and intellectual discussions in public forums. As she grew up, she became aware of the Syrian struggles against the authoritarian rule of the Baath Party, and equally aware of anti-Muslim sentiments and ignorance in America, where her family's Islamic center faced regular vandalism by the

Klan (Abdul Ghafur). Kahf is often critical of both Western and Eastern patriarchal and hegemonic structures of power.

Mohja Kahf is now a comparative literature professor at the University of Arkansas. She has published several works significant to the growing field of Arab/ Islamic feminism. Her works in general resist homogenized images of Arab- Americans and Muslim women in America critiquing the mainstream and its representations of them. Her writings include *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (University of Texas, 1999), "Politics and Erotics in Nizar Kabbani's Poetry: From the Sultan's Wife to the Lady Friend" (in *World Literature Today*, 2000), "Braiding the Stories: Women's Eloquence in the Early Islamic Era" in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women's Scholarship and Activism*, edited by Gisela Webb (Syracuse UP, 2000). She also has a sex column at *Muslim Wake Up!* Her poetry has been published in literary journals for over ten years, including *The Paris Review* (#164) and *The Atlanta Review* (Fall/Winter 2001) and her collection of poetry *E-mails from Scheherazad*, (University Press of Florida, 2003), in addition to her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* published in 2006.

An overview of key moments in the novel is perhaps useful in the discussion. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is generally about an Arab- American female's journey in search of identity. Through the protagonist's journey into herself, and the Middle East, Khadra tries to come to terms with her Arabness, Americaness, and Islamness. Eventually, Khadra gives up on the veil and defines her own identity embracing a new self that has emerged out of the profound experiences she has gone through during her journey. In this chapter, Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and selections of her

poetry are carefully examined in terms of the changing structures through which hegemony operates and strategies of resistance within a Muslim/ Arab- American community. It is crucial, however, that definitions of hegemony are introduced before its major structures are discussed in Kahf.

*Hegemony: An Unwritten Law of Oppression*

Raymond Williams defines “Hegemony” as a concept that includes and goes beyond the two powerful concepts of “culture” as a “whole social process”, “in which men define and shape their whole lives;” and that of “ideology,” in which “a system of meanings and values is the expression or projection of a particular class interest”(108). Williams asserts that hegemony goes beyond culture “in its insistence on relating the ‘whole social process’ to specific distributions of power and influence”(108). It can be said that hegemony is a system that controls the distribution of power and influence and maintains it within the ruling class which ultimately designs a system of beliefs, a set of ideologies and values, and a certain partial outlook on critical socio-economic and political conditions through which people’s lives are controlled and subordinate groups are dominated. Williams describes it as “the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes” (110). In Williams’ critique of hegemony, he concludes:

Hegemony is then not only the articulate upper level of ‘ideology’, nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as ‘manipulation’ or ‘indoctrination’. It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perception of ourselves and our

world. It is a lived system of meanings and values- constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute ... (110).

This definition of hegemony draws our attention to the notion that hegemony can be at times more powerful and dangerous than the actual colonization or occupation of land. It goes far beyond ideology, indoctrination, coercion and power and can be seen as constituting them altogether at once.

Hegemony can be viewed as a system of power that is maintained by constantly updating methods of domination, setting and reinforcing certain ideologies, values, meanings, and practices through which people's lives are shaped and defined. Hegemony is powerfully oppressive, and subtle in the dissemination of values and meanings to sustain its power. Williams emphasizes that "A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits"(112). America's war on terror and its foreign policies and imperialist discourse against Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East define the hegemonic terms on which their relationship is based. They are all components of the process of "a lived hegemony." It is hegemony that has constructed negative images of Arabs, Muslims, and the veil to serve the interests of the ruling class and gain the consent of the ruled. According to Williams, hegemony insists on "relating the 'whole social process' to specific distributions of power and influence"(108). Within the hegemonic discourse, specific cultural signs and what they represent are crucial in the distribution of power and influence. To ensure the dominance

of the West over the Muslim and Arab world and the maintaining of power within the hands of the Western ruling class, the Muslim veil has been selected as an appropriate cultural sign to signify oppression, among other meanings, by the hegemonic force. Because of hegemony, the old and long existing phenomenon of Muslim veiling that was never before a concern to anyone suddenly becomes significant in the contemporary world of the West. It has been established by Gramsci that “the moment of hegemony” involves both the consensual diffusion of a certain cultural and moral view of society and its interrelation with coercive functions of power (360). If we understand there is hegemony, then it becomes possible to see the strong connection between the war on Iraq and Afghanistan and the hegemonic discourse used against Arabs and Muslims. That is, hegemony has been successful in its diffusion of that view of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists and a threat to Western society which accordingly leads to supposedly justifiable coercion and attacks against them since, within these hegemonic terms, they are “the” source of danger. These two elements of diffusion and coercion reinforce each other; the element of coercion in the Middle East is reinforced by the diffusion of the rhetoric of “us” and “them”, and vice versa, a technique and binary incorporated by the hegemonic to maintain power over subordinate cultures.

### *Structures of Hegemony*

#### *a- Deploying Binaries and a “Despised Difference”*

Certain structures of hegemony have evolved since 9/11. With the rise of the rhetoric of fear and war on terror and Islamophobia since 9/11, the use of binaries has

been intensified. Hegemony can be said to consist of several main structures of domination. The first is the deployment of binaries of us vs. them and the view of the other as a “despised difference.” The Hegemonic discourse is strengthened and its dominance reinforced when the imperialist “us” and “them” dichotomy is imposed, and the gap between the West and the East is widened. The power of hegemony is maintained through deepening that divide between “us” and “them,” which translates into the superior West as opposed to the uncivilized and fanatic East, by freezing “the other” in that image of an incomprehensible and “despised difference,” and dehumanizing them within the dominant culture. Within this hegemonic process the continuous bashing of Arabs and Muslims and the Muslim woman’s veil becomes crucial since it widens the gap between “us” and “them” justifying the war and attacks on the Middle East. In this age of imperialism and mental and cultural colonization, hegemonic discourses tend to decontextualize, erase contexts and histories to create misunderstandings of the certain demonized cultures, especially in representations of the Muslim culture, and the Middle East. Hegemony also promotes viewing Arabs and Muslims not only as different from the mainstream, but as constituting a “despised difference” that contributes to the divisive binary of “us” and “them.”

This structure of hegemony is deconstructed by Kahf who creates a counter-narrative throughout *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* in which she exposes the way hegemony works in an attempt to resist being subdued and overpowered by it. Kahf recognizes how hegemonic narratives keep people ignorant of the facts and busy with minor issues. The veil is used as an excuse to detract people's attention from real oppressions taking place by hegemonic and imperialist powers. In resistance to the

dominant narratives of the Muslim world, Kahf draws our attention to the contemporary imperialist age in which images are fabricated to serve the interests of those in power. She gives us a glimpse of people's suffering in the world in contrast to the ways their predicament, displacement, and wars are just glanced over indifferently by the media and Western governments. In many cases not only are they not given attention, but Arabs are also typically portrayed as terrorists or extremists instead of victims. Kahf contextualizes the historical and political circumstances in which Muslims and Arabs have been oppressed yet demonized and misrepresented by the hegemonic mainstream. The narrator in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* describes the situation and how powerfully people feel about it:

Where was the soul at peace? ... There was fighting in Western Sahara. Afghans filled refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. Patani Muslims were being persecuted in their Buddhist- dominated country. Life in Lebanon was a hell of shelling and death. None of this was an important part of the news in America. Whereas the minute details of the lives of the American men held hostage, and the tears and hopes of their mothers, fathers, grandparents ... in Kissamee made news every day (122).

These lines show the indifference of the world towards other people's suffering. Perhaps, within the hegemonic process, it is not so ironic that not only are they denied any help from other nations, but their suffering is not even acknowledged or given a minute for reflection. The narrator's feelings of pain and bitterness are reflected in the comment "Only they were human, had faces, had mothers. People wore yellow ribbons for these fifty- two privileged white men who now were, if the American news was to be believed,

the most wretchedly oppressed of the earth” (123). This is an instance of hegemony being manifested in action. The schism and animosity between “them” and “us” crucial to the sustenance of hegemonic powers is deepened through the diminishment of the importance of “other” nations’ losses with the simultaneous glorification of “our” heroism and dominance.

Kahf is critical of the hegemonic discourse that draws a distorted image of Arab and Muslim men as terrorists. In her poetry she juxtaposes mainstream misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims with positive counter- hegemonic Arab-American voices. In her poem "Descent into JFK" she describes how a Muslim man and woman are perceived by American citizens and officials at the JFK airport:

Here everyone believes only Israel  
Is real; the people living in its shadow,  
Her clan and family, do not exist.  
If they saw Uncle Shukri  
In his checkered headscarf,  
Like when he let her ride  
Behind him on his motorbike,  
They'd think he was a terrorist (37).

In these few lines, it is clear that in the eyes of many American travelers whether Uncle Shukri is an American citizen or not is irrelevant since his looks and dress code give away his connection to Arab ancestry which translates into a "despised difference" within the American mainstream, thus reproducing the binary of “us” and “them.” He could easily be mistaken for a terrorist because the dominant hegemonic discourse has decided

that terrorists have Middle Eastern looks and Arab features and that any Arab male could be a threat to national security. The rhetoric used against individuals with Middle Eastern features even if they are American citizens, as Rabab Adbulhadi notes, explains Arab-Americans' experience of "diasporic and fragmented lives in which [their] souls and concerns are split between here and there" and that sets "them" apart from "us" (73). The major difference between the two lies in that "particular skin shade, a particular accent, a certain last or first name, or markings on the body that betray some affiliation with the enemy" (73). Hegemony determines the common enemy that should be conquered but in the case of Arab-Americans, the common enemy they are being asked to fight are their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons unless their Middle Eastern features do not give away their real identity, and they can pass for white. As for Khaleda, the female with Uncle Shukri, who wears the veil is reduced to a piece of cloth that makes her voice unheard and her education irrelevant. The speaker states that:

They'd never know Khaleda  
Has a Ph.D.  
Because she wears a veil they'll  
Never see beyond (37).

The veil in the minds of many stands for ignorance, backwardness and oppression and therefore must be shed. These minds cannot see a woman wearing a veil without thinking of it as a sign of oppression. They cannot do away with their preconceived notion to consider the possibility that this person may be very educated and with a Ph.d. degree. Clearly, in the eyes of the dominant culture, the veil is a reminder of the "us" and "them" binary and the "despised difference" it protects itself from. The second structure or

technique incorporated by hegemony to dominate and enforce its power over subordinate groups is “othering.”

*b- “Othering”*

Hegemony manifests itself by means of the structure of “othering” through which the non- dominant culture is thrust into the periphery and its voice is marginalized. Through othering, the hegemonic discourse provides only negative images of Arabs and Muslims in various aspects of life while their achievements are made invisible. The narrator in Kahf’s novel mentions that the only Muslims on television were “Arab oil- sheiks, who were supposedly bad because they made America have an energy crisis”(83). They are also represented as oppressive of women as in *Charlie's Angels* in which they forced “the shy angel, Kelly, to bellydance”(83). Muslims in America not only suffer due to their distorted image, but also their erasure from American consciousness and more seriously due to their victimization and deportation. Kahf shows that acts of violence and murder have been committed against Muslims but have been overlooked. One example that takes place in the U.S. is when one day Zuhura, a Muslim female character in the novel, disappeared and her body was found near a bridge. She was murdered and raped. She had cuts on her hands and her scarf and clothes were in shreds. Muslims from the Islamic center thought it was political and attributed her murder to “her vocal espousal of Muslim causes on campus”(95). Muslims were surprised with the various ways Zuhura was referred to in the newspapers as “a young black woman,” and the *Indianapolis Star* called her “a foreign woman’ and ‘an IU international student,’ as if her family didn’t live right there in town”(95). This incident illustrates the way Muslim women in America are

othered by the hegemonic system. Her treatment as "other" by officials and newspapers can be understood in the light of Williams' explanation of hegemony. He argues that hegemony is "a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values" (110). Since certain meanings are part of a lived system under hegemonic circumstances, news reporters are compelled by the hegemonic rhetoric to refer to Muslims as "foreign" as in Zuhura's case. In other words, the life individuals lead and their world view is controlled by the ideologies that hegemony has established. It is evident that the way the crime was handled reflects the impact hegemony has on people's every day living experience and their perception of the world. The narrator states that:

Instead of looking for the killers, or rounding up any of the APES ( American Protectors of the Environs of Simmonsville) for questioning, the police handcuffed Luqman and threw him in the back of a car ... the *Indianapolis Star* reported on him being a suspect: Murder Possible Honor Killing- Middle Eastern Connection, they said, with a sidebar on 'the oppression of women in Islam' (97).

Biased reactions by the mainstream towards this incident and opposing ones by the Muslim American community are juxtaposed in an attempt to create a counter- reality against that portrayed by the hegemonic system. In the end no charge of murder was brought against Luqman, but he was deported on a technical visa violation. Clearly, the situation was not assessed objectively but controlled by hegemonic preconceived notions of the Muslim race. The hegemonic mentality constantly assumes that there is a direct link between a woman's oppression and Islam and the Middle East. Unfortunately,

Luqman is victimized by this false assumption created by the hegemonic discourse that needs to marginalize Arabs and Muslims to sustain its dominance against any other power. Kahf is critical of such negative imagery of Arabs and Muslims in America, and so incorporates several strategies of resistance to counter the hegemonic discourse and representations.

In Kahf's counter-narrative, she adopts six main strategies of resistance that contribute to Muslims'/ Arab- American's visibility and positive presence. These strategies are: 1) rupturing the dominant narrative, 2) juxtaposition, 3) the use of positive representations, 4) de-fetishization or de-reification, 5) bearing witness, and 6) retelling history. First, in resistance to the hegemonic discourse, Kahf ruptures dominant narratives of "othering" that promote Islamophobia through her depiction of moderate Muslims who have not participated in any terrorist activity and yet have been victims of hate crimes and racial discrimination. In Kahf's novel, the Islamic center is subject to vandalism by anti-Muslims. The center is attacked while the women are praying. They soon find that rotten eggs and tomatoes were thrown at the entrance with toilet paper everywhere. The windows are sprayed with various verbal offenses such as "FUCK YOU, RAGHEADS. DIE" and were signed "KKK, 100% USA"(82). While this is an instance of outright racism and othering, it does not represent mainstream America. Second, Kahf uses the strategy of juxtaposition to subvert the hegemonic narrative. For example, the image of a peaceful Muslim celebration and a bride who is a pre-law student activist is juxtaposed against this image of racism and violence by the hegemonic culture. Zuhura, the bride, takes control of the situation as an empowered educated woman and tells everyone not to touch anything or step in the footprints (82). In addition, Kahf gives an example of how

conflicts between the Middle East and the U.S. reflect on Arab- Americans and Muslims in America. That is, when the revolutionaries in Iran blindfolded American embassy workers and took them hostage, and the political situation disturbed America's peace, it eventually reflected upon the lives of Arab and Muslim Americans (118). The narrator states that "Vandalism of the Dawah Center with soap and white spray paint was something the police couldn't seem to stop; they only came and took pictures every time it happened"(119). Khadra and her family took pictures and used them under *The Islamic Forerunner's* article "Hostage Incident Sparks Increased Vandalism of U.S. Islamic Centers" (119). These images of religious intolerance and discrimination are held against positive images of Muslims and their various achievements throughout history.

The third strategy of resistance Kahf adopts in her counter- narrative is the use of positive representation. In dismantling the image of Muslims as terrorists within the American consciousness, Kahf provides her readers with positive representations of the rich Islamic civilization responsible for the advancement of many other civilizations. Khadra's father educates his children about the inventions and discoveries Muslim scientists have accomplished. He refers to Ibn Sina who "advanced the science of optics in the eleventh century"(120). Khadra's mother, Ebtehaj, teaches her children that "Islam ... encourages us to learn science. In history, Christianity killed the scientists" and her father, Wajdy, explains that "It was an Arab who discovered the world was round" but the children came to learn that it was an African Muslim named al-Idrisi who wrote in Arabic and discovered the world (120). Research published by Arab World And Islamic Resources and School Services (AWAIR) in Berkeley, California indicates that it is actually true that Al- Idrisi (1100- 1166), who was a Muslim Moroccan scholar, was the

one to discover the earth is round. Khadra realizes that none of this information is in her school books nor is it taught to American children. It is interesting though how some children engage in the creation of a counter- hegemonic narrative at a young age. The narrator reports that:

Whenever Khadra wrote an essay about how hypocritical America was to say it was democratic while it propped dictators like the Shah and supported Israel's domination of Lebanon, 'and then they wonder why people over there hate them,' she got big red D's and Mrs. Tarkington found a reason to circle every other word with red ink. As soon as she turned in a composition on a neutral topic, no politics or religion, the Tark gave her a big fat A (123).

Khadra realizes that her teacher would not be pleased with her opinion of America and her analysis of the political situation but refuses to alter her position for the sake of a good grade. Khadra creates her own resistance narrative at this age that she carries with her as she grows older and forges her own identity. The hegemonic structure of “othering” has also been established through the veil and portraying it as a sign of oppression.

*c- “Othering” and the Veil*

Muslim women are othered by hegemony through its construction of fabricated images of the Muslim woman’s veil. U.S. Hegemony has manipulated the veil to further the marginalization of the Muslim woman and portray her as in need of liberation in order to justify its presence in Afghanistan and any violations committed against Muslim men. It is important to explore how certain meanings of the veil have come into existence

and how hegemony utilizes it as a tool of oppression. In Kahf's novel, the sign, the veil, through which hegemony oppresses Muslim women is deconstructed and reconstructed into a tool of empowerment instead of an instrument of oppression. In the analysis of the image of the veil, V.N. Volosinov's discussion of sign, which was introduced in chapter one, provides a useful tool to set a framework through which this image can be explored. Volosinov analyzes the concept of sign perceiving it as "A construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction. Therefore, the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction. When these forms change, so does sign"(65). Volosinov's theorization of the sign helps us examine the ways a certain sign comes to signify certain things and take on certain meanings during a specific time and place. Since its interpretations and what it stands for are social constructs determined by certain social and political conditions at a certain period in history, the very same sign will have different meanings to other people, and during other time periods and locales. Volosinov explains that every ideological sign comes into existence specifically when it is associated with the "vital socio- economic prerequisites of the particular group's existence"(65).

Kahf's novel exposes the oppressive ideologies and histories shaping the sign or image of the veil and works towards the unsettling of these constructions and their meanings giving them new meanings and interpretations. This unsettling of the veil takes place in Kahf's narrative by demonstrating how the veil is fetishized in dominant discourses. This is the fourth strategy of resistance referred to as de- fetishization or de-reification of the veil. The veil has become a fetish in Western discourses that needs to be

discussed within its own religious, historical, and cultural contexts to resist such fetishization and politicization. The Arab/ Islamic feminist Leila Ahmed deals with the image of the veil as the “most visible marker of [difference]” between veiled Muslim women and the Western world. As Ahmed writes, “Veiling- to Western eyes... became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam”(152). Volosinov realizes the danger of any sign that a certain group may choose to place their fears on and give it meanings originally unfamiliar to it. The sign of the veil has been assigned certain meanings to serve imperialist ideologies and hegemonic powers. The accuracy of what it really stands for becomes irrelevant within these circumstances and what matters is only what the hegemonic discourse identifies and determines. Samaa Abdurraqib who has written about homelands, Muslim identity and women in the diaspora, agrees with Chandra Mohanty, whose work I discussed earlier, that because Muslim women who choose to veil are continuously battling discursive constructions that label them as oppressed, it becomes difficult to hear voices that assert otherwise (59). Muslim women who veil are denied agency and a voice of their own “to veil by their own volition, or to have their own cultural or political conscience” when they are constructed in this manner (Abdurraqib 59). Kahf discusses the issue of the Muslim woman's invisibility especially if she takes on the Muslim veil that is a fetish and sign of oppression in the eyes of hegemonic discourses. She makes a reference to the rejection of the veiled Muslim woman who is made invisible within Western feminist circles. In Kahf’s poem "Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective," the speaker comments:

No one wanted to know about us

Statements were issued on our behalf

By Arab nationalists, Iranian dissidents, Western feminists

The National Organization for Women got annoyed

After some of us put on hijab,

And wouldn't let us speak at their rally,

But wanted us up on their dais as tokens of diversity (66).

Through the previous lines, Kahf confirms that veiled Muslim women are oppressed and silenced by both Arab and Muslim men in addition to some Western feminists who cannot see beyond the veil. Their oppression stems from the patriarchal system and some feminists who have adopted the hegemonic discourse. The imperialist feminist agenda has no room for the concerns of Arab and Muslim women but urges them to be present in their feminist circles as "tokens of diversity." Abdurraqib emphasizes that:

By overlooking the particularities of their veiling practices (or of their actual oppression) and reinforcing the boundaries between western women and the Other, veiling practices are linked to universal practices of oppression, sexual control, and nationality (59).

Kahf realizes that the particularities of veiling have been and continue to be overlooked within hegemonic discourses and thus brings issues surrounding the veil and veiled Muslim women to the forefront by using the strategy of bearing witness in her novel. Through bearing witness, the fifth strategy of resistance Kahf utilizes in her counter-hegemonic narrative, she provides evidence and instances that demonstrate the way Muslim women were othered due to the veil and their resistance to such injustice.

Kahf provides examples of persecution and victimization of veiled women in the United States and other countries to stress the type of oppression and discrimination Muslim women experience worldwide. In doing this she creates a new genre of the practicing Muslim woman who is thought to be oppressed by the veil only to prove that the sign of the veil has been created and manipulated to be used as a tool to oppress her through the negative meanings attached to it. In other words, it is not the veil itself that is oppressive, but the way it is portrayed and enforced in people's imaginary. This distorted image of it as backward and disempowering has unfortunately become part of the Muslim individual's consciousness, let alone many non-Muslims or secular ones. Readers go on the journey with Khadra back and forth to America. One of the childhood experiences in America that Khadra continues to recall in her adult life was when she was harassed at school and mocked because of the veil. One of the children at school takes from Khadra her Malcolm X book and then tells her if she takes off her "towel," he would return it to her. So he ends up pulling her scarf off her head and comments "Look, raghead's got hair under that piece a shit" (124). Khadra tries to resist, but the children hold her down until they rip her scarf. She shouts to them "I hate you" and one of them shouts back at her telling her "It's just *hair*, you psycho!"(124).

In the novel, Bitsy, Khadra's Muslim Iranian- American roommate, freaks out when she sees Khadra wearing her veil and asks her "You're not one of those fanatics, are you?" To which Khadra replies: "Of course I am ... I come from a long, proud line of fanatics"(363). This is an instance of a Muslim, who originally comes from a predominantly Muslim nation, and yet she herself looks on Islam and Muslims negatively and views its followers as fanatics and terrorists. Khadra's response comes from her

awareness that the term “Muslim” has now become synonymous with fanatic or fundamentalist and so does not mind being called fanatic since practicing the Islamic religion is perceived fanatic, along these terms she is fanatic in this sense. She is not offended by Bitsy’s ignorance of the religion or misconceptions of it. She just comes to the realization that Bitsy is one of the many people she will continue to encounter in her life who revitalize and confirm Western notions of the East and Muslims.

The strategy of bearing witness is demonstrated in Kahf’s narrative when she contextualizes the practice of the veil and the social and political pressures that restrict the Muslim woman from practicing her faith. Kahf highlights the oppression and discrimination many Muslim women had encountered for taking on the veil and practicing this basic Islamic belief. She exposes her protagonist to these hardships suffered by other Muslim women to gain insight that will perhaps help her find her true self and what her commitments are. After Khadra’s divorce, she is very conflicted about her beliefs, identity and commitment to the veil. She leaves to visit Syria in search of herself, hoping that her visit to her cultural origins will be a journey into herself without any external pressure telling her who to be and what to do. There she comes to learn about her mother’s suffering from Teta, her grandmother, who reveals some truths Khadra was unaware of. Apparently, after the death of her mother, Ebtehaj’s stepmother who was secular gave her a hard time because of the veil. She had mocked her for wearing it because during those times, according to Teta, “The city was against it, the tide was against it” (275). Teta narrates “she tried everything- she’d yank it right off her head. I heard she put it in the pot and shat on it” and she was embarrassed to be seen in public with her veiled stepdaughter; she even made Ebtehaj walk on the other side of the

street (275). Her stepmother did not allow her to continue with her Quran circle that she got interested in after her mother's death and tried to force her into a marriage with a man "who drank and whored, just to make her misery lifelong"(276). Through these stories about her mother's past, Khadra bonds with her grandmother and comes to a better appreciation of her mother. She realizes that her mother was strong enough to hold on to the veil that had caused her so much agony and was determined to follow her Islamic beliefs no matter what the trend was at the time.

Kahf not only uses the strategy of bearing witness to demonstrate her characters' resistance to marginalization, but also supports these stories of Muslim/ Arab- American women's oppression and resistance with similar situations taken from history. Kahf retells history as the sixth strategy of resistance to hegemony. Kahf is aware of the significance of such a strategy in her critique of hegemonic and patriarchal constructions of the veil and the treatment of veiled women throughout history. The importance of retelling history in resistance to hegemony can be understood through Gramsci's powerful claim that "... in a given state, history is the history of the ruling classes, so, on a world scale, history is the history of the hegemonic states. The history of the subaltern states is explained by the history of hegemonic states" (222-3). Clearly, in Kahf's resistance to hegemony, she challenges the history constructed by the ruling classes through retelling the history of victimization hegemonic and patriarchal forces inflicted upon Muslim/ Arab women.

The narrative resists the dehistoricization of an Arab nation that is demonized and represented as fanatically Muslim. Kahf provides a historical background of the oppression the veiled Muslim woman had experienced in this supposedly "Muslim"

nation. Kahf uses Syria as an example to illustrate the persecution Muslim women had to bear due to the Islamic veil. Khadra's aunt tells her about what had happened in Syria in 1982. During this period, according to William Cleveland, who has written about Arab nationalism and the history of the Middle East, the Islamic front rebelled against the Syrian government that was repressive, corrupt, and dictatorial (362). They seized control of parts of the city of Hama and the government in response launched "a deadly campaign" against the city and its civilians. At least 10,000 people were killed by the armed forces and a warning was issued by the government to potential dissidents that the regime would "use all the force at its disposal to remain in power"(362). Apparently, the government after that had become anti- religious because its supremacy had been under threat by the Islamic front. Khadra's aunt explains that in 1982 the capital was blocked by the government and a thousand paratroopers got hold of any woman who was wearing the veil. Her aunt states that "You could strip off your hijab [veil] ..., or get a gun to your head" (281). She adds, her daughter, Reem, on her way home, got stopped by the paratroopers so she slips off the scarf right away. Her aunt comments "Why endanger your life for it?" then continues with her story (281). The paratrooper asks her to take off her clothes because she was fully covered with her long garb, but does not wait for Reem to take off her clothes so she rips it off her and "holds it up in the air and sets it on fire with a blowtorch"(281). Her uncle Mazen explains to her that that had happened because of the dissidents like Khadra's mother and father, who in his opinion had politicized the veil and upset the government and led to this behavior. This incident shocks Khadra and makes her realize how important her parents' decision was when they left their homeland to the United States and why her mother holds on to the veil. It is because of what she

suffered in a Muslim country that she now appreciates the freedom she enjoys in America to practice her religion without persecution. She may have to deal with stereotypes and misconceptions, nevertheless, her situation as a practicing Muslim in America is better than others' in the supposedly called "Muslim" countries. In America Khadra and her mother are faced with narratives and scenarios of immigration and identity imposed by the hegemonic culture that require them to hold on to a single allegiance and let go of any other. Their dilemma lies in the fact that they are to make a decision with regards to their identity, and they are limited by the two options made available by the dominant culture which are either to express their Muslim otherness through the veil or assimilate to American culture. The following section focuses on the way Kahf's narrative resists these hegemonic scripts of immigration and identity.

*Resisting Hegemonic Scripts and Narratives of Immigration and Identity*

Resistance to hegemonic scripts and narratives of immigration and identity is crucial in Kahf's counter-narrative because she tries to create her own genre of the Muslim/ Arab- American woman in which she hopes to provide her with possibilities not offered by hegemonic scripts. In the current anti- Islam/ anti- Muslim and political and cultural climate in the United States, Kahf and other Muslim writers are faced with the complicated choice between expressing Muslim otherness and assimilating. The options open to Kahf within the hegemonic system with regards to the type of narrative she can construct are very limited and limiting. As a Muslim Arab- American writer, who does not want to be further marginalized due to the false reputation Islam and Muslims have

gained over the years, her narrative is expected to reiterate the mainstream's fears of Muslims which has become synonymous with "terrorists." In fact, this has become the most popular, and widely accepted and highly distributed narrative nowadays. In this type of dominant narrative, she is expected to focus on the oppressive and radical nature of Islam and Muslim societies as opposed to the free world of the West. This approach will ease her way into assimilation and further acceptance by the dominant culture. This has occurred frequently and led to the erasure of the Arab- American women's identity because many individuals of Arab origins have assimilated so successfully to the American culture and have renounced their connection to the Arab world. However, if Kahf or any Muslim writer chooses to focus on religion, according to Abdurraqib, "religion is treated as a culture that needs to be left behind because it does not correlate with being American"(56). This combination of being Muslim and American simultaneously is incomprehensible to many. The public's perception of its contradictoriness is one of the major problems Muslim American women struggle with sometimes on daily basis. In people's eyes, being Muslim threatens their Americanness, to them the two incompatible identities cannot coexist. Nevertheless, if they are non-practicing Muslims, and there are no visual markers that mark their difference or religion, their Americanness is more likely accepted and not necessarily questioned.

Kahf's narrative raises questions about the possibility of retaining difference in this anti- Muslim climate, and if unity is possible when the "common enemy" determined by U. S. hegemony is not so "common" for many of its citizens. Hegemony has defined its enemy, Arabs and Muslims, but to Arab- Americans they are their family, friends and relatives. In the narrative, the main character fluctuates between retaining her cultural

difference and assimilating to the American culture especially when her allegiance is questioned. Abdurraqib believes that because Islam is still considered foreign to America, much of the literature produced by Muslims can be considered immigrant fiction. It does not surprise Abdurraqib that fiction by Muslim writers tends to “adhere to the general narrative trends of other immigrant writings: to establish a coherent identity, characters must negotiate the difference between the ‘old’ world and the ‘new’ one” (55). She points out that, in general, authors have had to choose between depictions of acculturation, assimilation or cultural hybridity and this negotiation has always been influenced by cultural climate. Abdurraqib emphasizes that:

Narratives that espouse retaining difference and cultural exchange do not work well when the cultural climate requires that the audience be unified against a common enemy. In these situations, narratives that present a trajectory of assimilation are more acceptable because assimilation, in these situations, is related to allegiances (55).

Kahf explores the Arab- American woman’s experience and life in America. She recognizes all the spaces in the American culture that a Muslim Arab- American woman cannot occupy. She also realizes the limitations by which she is confined due to culture, religion, and gender differences. In her narrative she carves a new space from which the Arab- American woman can speak. She renegotiates the Arab- American and Muslim identity that is not one or the other but all together. Kahf weaves into her narrative recurrent debates between Arab/ Islamic feminists and the various views they hold. Kahf engages in the Arab/ Islamic feminist efforts to challenge the hegemonic and imperialist discourse through the creation of a counter- narrative.

Identity issues raised in Arab- American writings are usually problematic but the issue of the veil results in great controversy. Being Muslim per se is perceived as un-American let alone wearing the Muslim veil. It is thought that Muslim women who veil cannot be fully incorporated into American society because “their bodies cannot escape being marked as other”(Abdurraqib, 56). Abdurraqib emphasizes that:

In these texts, women who wear hijab [veil], by virtue of their adherence to a practice that is clearly not American, can never construct a narrative in which comfortable assimilation is the denouement. As a result, immigrant Muslim women who veil must create a new genre that defies the demands American culture places on conformity (56).

Kahf resists that false notion that a Muslim woman wearing the veil, that is clearly un-American, cannot be part of the American fabric of society and lead an American life style. Nevertheless, Kahf's novel and poetry reveal that although this veiled woman needs to construct a narrative of her own and tell her own stories, her narrative can never be about comfortable assimilation. Therefore, the Muslim woman is compelled to construct a narrative of defiance and resistance of hegemony and oppression. In Kahf's poem "Hijab Scene # 3," she juxtaposes the image of the hegemonic mainstream othering of the veiled Muslim woman with that of the Muslim woman resisting invisibility and silencing. In the poem, the speaker makes a serious effort to become an active participant in American society. She volunteers to join the PTA, but the school board refuses to acknowledge her presence. The speaker responds to their call to join the PTA:

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.

... "I would, I would," I sent up flares,

beat on drums, waved navy flags,

tried smoke signals, American Sign Language... (25).

After her many attempts to get attention and to be heard, she finally understands what the problem is and why she is being ignored, and is upset by this recognition. She shouts "Dammit, Jim, I'm a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!" – but the positronic force field of hijab jammed all her cosmic coordinates" (25). This scene is an instance of the suffering and marginalization Muslim women experience in American society and in educational institutions in particular, but at the same time it reflects the strength of the veiled Muslim woman, and her resistance of such oppression and refusal to be unacknowledged and made invisible. This is also an instance of the humor Kahf uses as a strategy of resistance to monolithic images of Muslim/ Arab- American women.

The U.S. hegemony manipulates the Muslim veil and utilizes it as a powerful tool and sign to build solid barriers and misunderstandings between "us" and "them" so as to ensure the continuity of fear and alienation of "the Other," and feelings of hostility and threat between the two parties, and a sense of dependence on each other. The veil and other visual markers that indicate Muslims' difference from others put their allegiances into question regardless of their Americaness. Abdurraqib notes that visual markers can take on new interpretations "when context is erased or misunderstood"(57). Kahf provides an instance of a veiled Muslim woman whose Americaness is questioned in her

poem "Hijab Scene # 7." In this poem, the female speaker resists hegemonic perceptions of her and refuses to be silenced, she says:

No, I'm not bald under the scarf

No, I'm not from that country

Where women can't drive cars

No, I would not like to defect

I'm already American

But thank you for offering (39).

In this poem and many others, Kahf uses gentle humor as a strategy of subversion that is powerful. Through the female speaker, Kahf challenges the image of Arab and Muslim women as silenced, humorless and subservient individuals. She presents an alternative image in her counter- hegemonic narrative of an empowered Muslim woman who insists on being heard and speaks for herself. She says:

Yes, I speak English

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 (39).

The Arab/ Islamic feminist Eisa Ulen points out that many feminists, Western or Eastern, Muslim and non- Muslim, focus on the veil, "urging complete unveiling as the key to unleashing an authentic liberation. For them scarves strangle any movement toward Muslim women's emancipation" (46). Arab Islamic feminists have dealt

extensively with such misconceptions and imperialist interpretations of this sign and struggled to create counter- narratives that highlight the original meanings of the veil within their cultural and religious context.

In Kahf's counter- hegemonic narrative of the Muslim veil, she juxtaposes the image of Muslim identity with the image of American identity in her poem "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 (42).

In these few lines, the modern American woman views the Muslim woman's dress code as very "restrictive" and fails to see that she herself is being restricted by her high heels and outfit. By comparing the two cultural expressions, "Kahf illustrates how it is culture, rather than veiling, that keeps veiled Muslim women in liminal positions. Kahf illustrates that veiling is not incongruous with being American and with other American practices" (Abdurraqib 68). That is, being Muslim does not make any American less American and vice versa, being American does not make a Muslim any less Muslim. This is a realization that Khadra took so long to come to for she initially was trapped in her miscomprehension of this dual identity of Americanness and Muslimness.

In the counter- hegemonic narrative of the veil and the Muslim woman, Ulen challenges Western interpretations of the veil. Like Kahf, she juxtaposes the image of the Muslim veiled woman against that of an American woman and subverts the meaning of the veil. In "Tapping our Strength" Ulen raises important questions with regards to the veil and what it signifies in the West. She asks:

Are women who insist on wearing hijab unselfconsciously oppressed, or are they performing daily acts of resistance by covering their hair? In the West, where long blond tresses signify a certain power through sexuality and set the standard for beauty, are veiled women the most daring revolutionaries? ... Is liberation possible within the veil? (43).

She resists the hegemonic discourse that makes the assumption that the millions of veiled Muslim women around the world are "unselfconsciously oppressed." She asks her readers to consider the possibility that these women just may be covering their hair as an act of resistance. She calls people to view them from a different perspective, she believes they should be viewed as revolutionaries rather than oppressed victims to have taken on that difficult task of veiling and resisting all those personal, political and social attacks caused by it. Ulen puts into question the Western assumption that the veiled Muslim woman's liberation can only be achieved through the shedding of the veil. She subverts that image of oppression and asks her readers to think about whether liberation is actually possible within the veil. Through the question she raises, she is indirectly calling for new interpretations of the veil which consider the practice of veiling as liberating and an act of resistance. Veiling can be liberating if it is interpreted within its own cultural and religious context and practiced accordingly. The veil does not stand alone in isolation as a Muslim practice but is originally associated with simplicity, piety, and freedom from materialism. When the women wear the veil, they are no longer slaves to appearances nor victims to objectification. The Islamic dress code and veil frees the women from consumerism and the fashion's control over their bodies and their representation in society. Taking on the Muslim veil can be considered a liberating act through which

Muslim women resist objectification and reject the respect that is only attained through physical appearance and attraction. The homogenized image of Arab and Muslim women as oppressed veiled women is contested in Kahf's counter-hegemonic narrative. Kahf's resistance to this homogenized and reductive image of Muslim/ Arab- American women is demonstrated through the following strategy of deconstruction.

*Deconstructing Homogeneity and Constructing Heterogeneous Identities*

Kahf's narrative and poetry deconstruct the homogenized image of Muslim/ Arab- Americans and construct heterogeneous identities of Muslim women to reflect their actual conditions of freedom and oppression. Kahf, as many other Arab Islamic feminists, is outraged by the chains through which patriarchy, Eastern or Western, restricts Muslim women and their choices in life. She rejects the rhetoric that reduces the Muslim woman to a veil which has become the center of discussions in the East and the West. In both worlds the Muslim woman, the human being, and her suffering is forgotten and trivialized but her hair and veil are foregrounded by patriarchal and hegemonic discourses. In a poem, Kahf deconstructs the homogenized identity of a Muslim/ Arab- American woman through representing an empowered Muslim female speaker who asserts her identity and speaks out to be heard by the hegemonic discourse. In rejection of contemporary discussions of the Muslim veil by colonial feminists, hegemonic imperialists, Western and strict Muslim patriarchal figures, and their reductive approach to Muslim women's affairs around the world, Kahf states in her poem "My Body is Not Your Battleground" that:

My body is not your battleground  
My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,  
Neither the cause of your disarray  
Nor the path to your liberation  
My hair will not bring progress and clean water  
If it flies unbraided in the breeze  
It will not save us from our attackers  
If it is wrapped and shielded from the sun (58).

She refuses to listen to those oppressive voices that objectify the Muslim woman's body. These lines support Zine's claim that in either case, forced veiling or unveiling, "Muslim women's bodies, whether in the Middle East or the West, continue to be "disciplined and regulated" (Zine 175). Kahf mocks those who believe liberation can be brought by shedding the veil and those who think wearing it will save them from their attackers. The speaker finds both parties irrational and neither one leading to true freedom or progress.

Kahf's narrative deals with these conflicts and the Muslim woman's struggle to assimilate but at the same time preserve her culture. Khadra is also forced to make a decision about whether she should hold on to the veil or shed it to gain acceptance within American society. Due to the multiple pressures by parents, culture and society, which Muslim women experience in America, Kahf builds her narrative to revolve around these issues and the development of her protagonist's identity. This pressure to preserve the original culture and system of beliefs can be illustrated by what Khadra is told by her mother and aunt. Khadra's mother, Ebtahaj, admits to her daughter that "Our biggest fear

was always losing you ... Losing our children to America. Having you not keep Islam one hundred percent” (383-4). Later on in the narrative, her aunt reiterates the same concern stating that:

We put a lot of weight on your shoulders... Not just you- all our children ... But especially you girls. You had a lot to measure up to ... Young in a strange land , your mother was, like me ... Afraid ... of being swallowed up by this land, reduced to nothing ... ‘And we were so idealistic ... But we put it all on you ... Wanting you to carry our vision for us, our identity,- our entire identity, on your heads (404-5).

In Khadra's journey in the search of a coherent identity, she is faced with many obstacles that compel her to make a decision about who she is and what stance she should take. Throughout her journey, Kahf exposes her to a wide range of options, styles of lives and Muslim individuals that help her in the formation of herself and the development of the identity she chooses for herself. Khadra is exposed to a variety of practicing and secular Muslims, empowered and traditional Muslim men and women all that add to her experience and knowledge of what Islam is about. Khadra is constantly met with various images of Muslim women that represent the heterogeneity within the Muslim community that is often left out from media representations and the hegemonic discourse. In Kahf's counter-narrative, she recreates the image of the Arab/ Muslim woman in her resistance of the hegemonic discourse that portrays her as oppressed, silenced and subservient. She addresses the stereotypes and misconceptions about Arabs and Muslims and puts them into question by providing a wide range of non- monolithic images of Arabs and Muslims through the characters of her narrative. As an Arab/Islamic feminist who is seriously

concerned with the status of women, Kahf places the women at the forefront of her narrative. She presents her readers with various representations and heterogeneous images of women playing different roles in society that reflect the Muslim and Arab-American community and the roles of its women more accurately. Through these representations she creates new alternative readings of the lives of Muslim and Arab-American women in defiance of the sterile, prejudiced and homogenized image of the U.S. Third World woman, Muslim and Arab- American in particular as backward, uncivilized, and suppressed and sexually oppressed. In resistance of the hegemonic discourse and the oppression of the Muslim and Arab- American women and discrimination against them, she allows us to take a closer look at their lives and learn about them, their experiences and suffering in the hope that we are able to appreciate their struggle for a better and more just future.

In deconstructing homogenized images of Arab Muslim women, Kahf incorporates the strategy of heterogeneity in gender identity in her counter- hegemonic Arab- American narrative. She introduces several heterogeneous images of the Muslim/ Arab- American woman in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Initially, we are presented with the image of an educated and ambitious woman who wanted to go to medical school. Khadra's mother explains to her daughter that she thought she would go to medical school "But after [she] graduated, [she] chose to stay home. For the children"(21). Khadra's mother had sacrificed her interest in furthering her education to take care of the children. She states "I used to dream I would be a doctor one day, and open a free clinic for poor people"(26). Another image of an empowered woman is Khadra's grandmother, Teta, who comes from Syria. She had been a telephone operator

long ago and was among “the very first wave of working women;” it was one of the new jobs that had opened up for women in the old days (271). Her grandmother did not conform to society that decided that “a telephone girl’s job was a bad thing, a thing for floozies.” She resisted such nonsense and those confining roles assigned to women and she and her girlfriends went on with their jobs. Teta asserts “We wanted to be the New Woman” (271). She tells Khadra about her girlfriends and the solidarity among them. She says proudly “We were ... women who cherish themselves, women who are cherished”(272). Teta shares many stories about her marriage and life with Khadra because she senses her granddaughter’s psychological turmoil which is in part due to her divorce from Juma and loss of peace with herself and identity. Teta narrates to her how she eloped to get married to a Circassian living in Palestine. Her parents had disapproved of him it seems because he was an immigrant and not Syrian, nonetheless, she married him legally. At this point her parents had said she was dead to them. Teta shows Khadra how her Muslim parents at the time did not follow the laws of Islam when it came to her marriage but were controlled by their prejudices against other races. She tells Khadra:

What was such a crime? Had I gone against God and the Prophet? Not I. They were the ones in violation ... Doesn’t the Prophet say if you find a good god-loving man, accept him? Does the Prophet say unless he’s Circassian? Does the Prophet say he must be from your people? (273).

Through this narrative, Teta reflects her strong sense of self and wants Khadra to know that she had decided on her own who to marry and how to lead her life. In addition, this can be looked at as Kahf sending a message out to her readers, that is, the behavior of many Muslims does not reflect the core of Islamic values but their own mindset or the

cultural influence on them. Teta's parents' prejudice and discrimination against other races and colors is actually condemned in the Muslim faith because all people are perceived equal in Islam.

The hegemonic and imperialist image of the Muslim woman as vulnerable, passive and in need of liberation is challenged through the representation of Hanifa, a Muslim American woman. Hanifa is a professional driver and a participant in a car race. She is a wife and a mother and the first Muslim woman in Indianapolis to be a professional driver. Hanifa represents an alternative and new image of a Muslim woman that also challenges the common notions Khadra mistakenly has of what a Muslim woman should be like. Khadra is actually impressed with this new dimension of the modern Muslim community. She realizes that many Muslims attend the car races frequently and that they are able to be part of the American fabric of society and pursue their interests without breaking Islamic laws. She now understands that being a practicing Muslim does not contradict with being American. They can both be aspects of a unified identity and a whole self if one has come to peace with him/ herself.

Kahf presents an alternative image of a practicing Muslim woman for Khadra to consider and learn from. Her friend Maryam is an independent and successful assistant public defender. She does not always go to the mosque or belong to a certain one but practices her religion on her own. The narrator gives us a glimpse of how Khadra perceives this new image of a Muslim woman in America. The narrator states that:

This friend mapped Muslim space in a way new to Khadra. Maryam's thing was service. Service to the poor is service to God .... 'I don't have to be working only with Muslims or on Muslim issues or Muslim this or Muslim that. By

representing impoverished defendants, I'm manifesting Muslim values in my life. We don't need a ghetto mentality' (367).

The image of Maryam is crucial to the counter-hegemonic narrative Kahf is creating. Maryam represents a positive image of the practicing Muslim American woman who is able to reconcile her Muslim values with her American life. She is successful in her professional and personal life as well. She concentrates on the core values of uncontaminated Islam that urges a Muslim to manifest his/ her faith in their conduct and everyday life. She does not conform to the female role assigned by the patriarchal system, nor can anyone tell her how to lead her life.

Kahf provides Khadra with another model of a Muslim woman who has decided to forge a new identity for herself and compromise her culture and religion in order to be accepted by the mainstream. Through this model, Kahf presents the conflict between the secular and the practicing Muslim and their view of each other. In the minds of many Americans, Muslims are frequently reduced to that static image of brainwashed followers of the religion of Islam or terrorists whose job is to convert people by force. The non-monolithic image of the Muslim woman that Kahf utilizes in her narrative presents Khadra and readers with various paths to a Muslim life and different ways to practice the faith. Khadra is no longer trapped by a single image of Islam and Muslims but has many models to choose from to lead the kind of life that she wants. Bitsy, Khadra's Iranian roommate, for instance, is a secular Muslim who contributes to the stereotypes of Muslims. She does not identify herself as a Muslim Iranian. Once she moved to the United States and got her citizenship, she had changed her Muslim name Fatima-Zahra to Bitsy. Khadra is puzzled by the fact that she refuses to tell her what her Iranian name

was. Khadra asks her why she changed her name and Bitsy tells her “So we could do things like ... order pizza without the guy on the phone getting all confused ... And job applications and such, ... Makes things just a whole lot easier” (369). Bitsy chooses not to be associated with Muslims or Iran and since she carries no visible markers that give away her identity, she is able to lead an ordinary life without experiencing discrimination against her religion.

The representation of Bitsy and her hostile relationship with Khadra is just a simplified exemplification of that serious conflict and political divide between practicing Muslim women and secular Muslim women. The conflict between the two parties is based on the lack of trust between the two. That is, many “faith- based” Muslim women, as Zine calls them, are suspicious of the motives of secular Muslim feminists as being "purveyors of Western ideological discourses alien to indigenous feminist theorizing and praxis" (173). Secular Muslim women, in turn, frequently label their faith- based sisters as victims of "false consciousness" who lack the political maturity to understand their own oppression" (Zine 173). These negative attitudes toward each other hinder any potential for solidarity clearly missing in the relationship between Bitsy and Khadra. While one group perceives the other as slaves to the West and its ideologies, the other does not think of its counterpart as equal but as inferiors lacking maturity, and thus, unable to engage in political and intellectual dialogues about the oppression of women. This view of practicing Muslim women as victims of false consciousness is not at all dissimilar to that rhetoric adopted by the imperialist and hegemonic discourse that deals with the Muslim woman as an inferior in need of liberation. Through the various female characters of Teta, Hanifa, Maryam, Bitsy, and Khadra, Kahf constructs heterogeneous

identities, and deconstructs the homogenized image of Muslim and Arab- American women. This heterogeneity that exists within the Muslim/ Arab- American community is also present in terms of veiling practices within different geopolitical and patriarchal contexts. The next section discusses the way veiling practices vary geopolitically and are sometimes determined by specific patriarchal structures.

### *Negotiating Multiple Contexts of Geopolitics and Patriarchy*

In her creation of a counter- hegemonic narrative, Kahf contextualizes veiling within its varying shapes and forms of practice in different hegemonic contexts. Using the strategy of shifting locations, she is able to delve into those particularities of the Muslim veiling practices through the various representations of Muslim characters within different geopolitical locations. Kahf utilizes Khadra's trip to Saudi Arabia and her cousin's behavior to rupture those constructed boundaries between the veiled and unveiled Muslim woman and destabilize the dichotomy between them that is assumed to be fixed. In Saudi Arabia, Afaaf, Khadra's cousin, takes her out to meet her male friends. She throws off her veil and long garment once she gets into the limo and joins her male friends. She introduces Khadra to them as her "American" cousin which is read as liberated and sexually available although she does not take off her veil. One of the men points at Khadra's veil and says to her "Surely you don't wear that thing in America." A few minutes afterwards, he pulls her veil down and "pushes his other hand up against her breasts and his mouth was grazing her now exposed neck" and she tries to get him off of her and he asks her "What is it- what is the big deal- we're not doing anything you have to

worry about ... don't tell me you never do stuff like this in America" (178). This incident is very significant to the counter- hegemonic narrative and the dismantling of the image of the veil as an oppressive sign. The image of empowerment and oppression are juxtaposed against each other. Khadra is an empowered female who wears the veil because she believes in it, whereas Afaaf's conduct indicates that she does not believe in what it stands for and wears it only because she is forced to. Khadra continues to wear the veil in Saudi Arabia and in America despite all the obstacles she faces because of it. Afaaf, on the other hand, submits to social expectations and patriarchal oppression that does not give the Muslim woman the chance to choose to veil or not to veil.

Vijay Prashad, who has written about the Third World, provides insight into the patriarchal system in Saudi Arabia. He states that the Islam adopted by this patriarchal system is a "masculine" Islam (262). It takes the form of an oppressive Islam, an Islam that has been hijacked and misused to oppress people, that restricts people's freedom and yet it has been supported by the U.S. to guarantee its hegemony over the area (Prashad 264). Through hegemony, U.S. oil corporations in Saudi Arabia have flourished since the 1930s, as Prashad notes, and the U.S. and British governments offered "security for the longevity of the antidemocratic regime", and in return the Saudis acted as "rentiers of a reservoir that holds a quarter or more of the world's oil" (263). Unfortunately, Afaaf is a victim of this oppressive system that has adopted a "masculine" and patriarchal approach, and therefore she is denied some of her rights as a female. In this system of patriarchy, the woman does not have control over her body or the dress code. The example given of the two women, Khadra and Afaaf, illustrates how both women are oppressed by society but due to different reasons. In America, Khadra would be respected more if she did not

wear the veil because it is a condemned sign that represents a despised difference, and so she is oppressed by the way the veil is viewed by the dominant culture and hegemonic discourse. Afaaf, however, gains more respect if she takes on the veil even if it is by force and uncovering her body is condemned by patriarchy that strives to maintain its control over women's bodies. These images of Muslim women and their veiling or unveiling practices prove that the source of their oppression and marginalization is not the Islamic faith or its values but the hegemonic and patriarchal dominance over women and their lives. On the other hand, Kahf presents the image of Afaaf's aunt, Sheikha, who is a journalist. She is also in charge of Saudi women writers series and is an independent veiled woman. Khadra admired Sheikha because she presented an image of an autonomous Muslim woman who is in control of her life. The image of Sheikha is held against that of the immature Afaaf who veils only for political reasons and not religious ones.

Not only are the particularities of veiling overlooked within the hegemonic discourse but so is Muslim women's actual oppression in the East and the West. In Kahf's resistance of the hegemonic narrative of the Muslim woman, she creates a new genre for the veiled woman and a new space for the Muslim American woman. She delves into the details of Khadra's and other Muslim women's lives to destabilize that homogenized image of the Muslim Arab- American woman as subordinate and disempowered. Through her narrative she reflects the heterogeneity within the Muslim and Arab- American community and their negotiation of different patriarchal contexts. Kahf focuses on Khadra's journey in search of herself and identity, and through her and her female relations she represents the heterogeneity in Muslim women's roles and attitudes. She

also presents the various obstacles that limit these women's lives whether they are due to race, religion, the veil or patriarchy and gender oppression. Khadra is presented as an empowered Muslim female, but her freedom has been somewhat restricted by her traditional husband and his patriarchal outlook on life. When Khadra goes to ride her bicycle, he forbids her because he thinks it is an un-Islamic behavior. This comes to Khadra as a shock because bicycle riding has been a part of her whole life and never contradicted with her practice of the Muslim faith. Juma tells her "As your husband, I forbid you," Khadra could not believe he would say something like that for "Her father never said things like that to her mother. It was alien to everything she felt and knew." She gives in and puts her bike away and with time the gears rusted and tires lost air. The narrator notes that "Something inside her rusted a little, too"(230).

Khadra plays a different role from her mother. She is an activist on campus, she demonstrates, holds meetings, circulates petitions among other things. She is not satisfied with her marriage to Juma. The narrator tells us that "Every time she went out in a campus demonstration, Juma complained. 'Does it have to be you?' he asked. 'Let somebody else demonstrate. There's no shortage of people. Does it have to be my wife?'"(241). Khadra is determined to play an active role on campus and in the Muslim community but her husband expects her to follow the norm and give up on her activities for him. He does not appreciate her independence or free thinking, and believes as a wife she should be willing to make all these compromises to accommodate her husband and to fit the profile of the perfect obedient wife. This becomes a site of conflict for Khadra because she begins to feel the gulf between them and feels like she is suffocating with Juma. Khadra tells her brother "I don't know if I can stay married to him... I feel like I

can't go on in this marriage without killing off the 'me' that I am" to which he responds saying "Do you really want to be a twenty-one-year old divorcee?"(242). A thought like that scared her especially that it would be looked at as one of the biggest failures by society. Nevertheless, she explains "I don't think I can stay with Juma without changing who I am. Who I essentially deep- down am"(243).

Khadra refuses to play the typical role of housewife that her husband expects of her. Through Kahf's representation of Khadra's character, she challenges that image of the subservient and silenced Muslim wife who caters to the needs of her oppressive husband at the expense of her own needs. Juma once asks her "What's for dinner?" to which she responds "I don't know. Why are you asking me? Like I'm the one who's supposed to know?" Juma looks around and says "let's see: who's the wife in this picture?" (241). This really upsets her because she never viewed herself as a housewife whose life is confined to the limited space of the home and the roles allowed by her husband. Her husband, on the other hand, reflects the image of the traditional patriarchal figure that assumes an authority over his wife, believing it is a position rightfully his, due to his privilege of maleness.

I'm not a woman- I don't know HOW to cook! Juma shouted. 'Well, it didn't come with my Boobs!' Khadra shouted back. 'You can LEARN it! Here, I'll show you!' ... 'Put chicken in pan. Put pan in oven. It's that simple. Okay? Now LEAVE me ALONE! (241).

In this dialogue Khadra is portrayed as an empowered Muslim woman who resists male domination and the patriarchal roles assigned to women by multiple, overlapping patriarchal systems. In her relationship with Juma, Khadra was beginning to lose herself

and the dreams she had for her future. During this period, she was unable to find a clear definition of her gender role nor her identity as a Muslim American. When Khadra gets pregnant and realizes that she no longer wants to continue her life with Juma who does not accept her the way she is, she decides to have an abortion against everyone's wishes. She thinks having a baby with him will lock her up in a type of life she does not want for herself. The idea of having to change herself and her whole life for Juma and the child made her suffocate. The narrator shares with the reader what goes on in her subconscious and her dialogue with herself:

Where was it, this will of hers, this misshapen self? She needed to know it. Hello, self. Can we meet at last? It was not vain glorious to have a self. It was not the same as selfish individualism, no. You have to have a self to even start on a journey to God ... She had not taken even a baby step in that direction (248).

Khadra realizes she has lost herself and has been following everything she has been told by others without giving things much thought. She seems to have led her early life in ignorance and blind obedience. She makes a mistake when she believes that her individual self is not as important as the community and that serving the community is what makes her significant. She does not realize that in order to help others and make change, she has to start with herself first, come to terms with her beliefs and who she is and find peace within. At her young age, she misunderstands the Islamic faith's take on individuality and the self. She does not learn about how Islam simultaneously embraces both individualism and the community. Her narrow understanding of the Muslim practices leads to her loss of self because she has the wrong belief that Islam does not cherish the self but cherishes the common good. Khadra reaches a stage where she cannot

give up any more of herself to others or to certain beliefs, and needs to reconcile with herself. The narrator notes:

Her self was a meager thing, scuttling behind a toilet, what she hadn't given over of it to Mama, to Juma. Too much, she has given away too much. She will not give the last inches of her body, will not let them fill her up with a life she does not want (248).

Khadra feels she spent her life giving away pieces of herself to every dear person and religious belief while neglecting her own desires and dreams. In her journey of self-searching, she decides to start a new life where she can exercise the power of thinking for herself and the power of autonomy. She is determined not to bend her will any more for her parents or a husband or a boss. From now on, she makes her own decisions and leads the life she always wanted and practices the faith as she understands it. Kahf deliberately allows her protagonist to assert her autonomy and control over her sexuality. That is, this assertion of Khadra's sexual subjectivity is the next element of resistance integral to the counter-hegemonic narrative Kahf is constructing.

### *Asserting Sexual Subjectivity*

One of the misconceptions the writer challenges is the Muslim woman's suppressed sexuality and lack of control over her body. Khadra goes through a divorce but does not change her attitude toward sex. She enjoys sexual intercourse but is unwilling to force herself into a relationship that does not live up to her standards just to satisfy her sexual desires. At the same time, she refuses to let go of the Islamic rule that

forbids men and women equally from having premarital sex because she has not compromised her Islamic faith regardless of the obstacles standing in her way. Khadra is not ignorant of her right as a Muslim woman to enjoy sex within a marriage relationship and celebrate the pleasure and intimacy gained in this relationship. Khadra tells Chrif “I certainly don’t want to sleep alone forever. I would like to get married one day and have sex again. Good sex. Great sex”(360). Through Chrif, Kahf exposes many people’s perception of the Muslim woman who in order to be liberated has to make her body available to others outside a marriage relationship because chastity is not necessarily a virtue in the eyes of many. In this context, liberation is confused with satisfying sexual needs with random people. Chrif, Khadra’s Arab- American friend tells her:

Alls I know... is that you want to pretend you’re some kind of liberated woman on one level, but on another level you’re just your typical backward Muslim girl with the old country still in her head... You’d rather sleep alone in a cold bed forever than take a lover? Just because some old men back in history made up a rule that you have to be married to have sex? (359).

Reiterating the hegemonic rhetoric through Chrif as a strategy of resistance, Kahf shocks her readers and Khadra back into the reality that hegemonic forces and voices can come from within the Muslim/ Arab- American community and not necessarily from the outside. Chrif’s words remind us of the negative connotations frequently attached to Muslim women by the hegemonic and imperialist discourse. Muslim woman is read as backward, sexually suppressed, and victimized. Chandra Mohanty offers a critique of the discourse of Western feminists that tend to group all women of the Third World into one coherent and homogeneous group that share identical interests regardless of cultural

differences, class or religion. She believes it is this process of homogenization of the oppression of these women that results in producing the image of an “average Third World woman.” In this context our discussion focuses on the U.S. Third World woman who is nevertheless viewed as part of the Third World. Based on her female gender this average Third World woman is read as “sexually constrained, and her being “Third World” is read as “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized... this... is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions”(22). It is this reductive image of the U.S. Third World woman, the Muslim woman in particular, that Kahf resists through her representation of empowered Muslim or Arab- American women, like Khadra, who have a say about their lives and cannot be forced into submission. Khadra develops a character of her own, decides not to submit to anyone any more, and chooses to become a cultural activist who understands the connection between power, oppression, and the production of knowledge. In the coming section, Khadra rethinks the issues she ought to focus on in her coverage of certain topics within her profession. She refuses to reproduce knowledge of Arabs and Muslims that is influenced by prejudice and dominant hegemonies.

*Becoming a Cultural Activist and Rejecting “Professionalism”*

Khadra, as a cultural activist, renegotiates her identity as a Muslim American professional. She resists the stereotypes and negative images of Muslims enforced by the hegemonic discourse, and refuses to contribute to the worldwide misconceptions and

misrepresentations of them. While Khadra works for a magazine, *Alternative Americas*, she is assigned to feature Indianapolis Muslims as part of the magazine's coverage of minority religious communities in Middle America. Her boss is very pleased to learn that Khadra is connected to this Muslim community and that she had actually grown up in it. He tells her "Behind the veil! Wow! A keyhole view of the hidden, inside world of Muslims"(48). Khadra is not comfortable with this assignment and putting her own community in the spotlight. The narrator shares with the readers the mixed feelings Khadra has about such a task:

She doesn't think she herself can take one more of those shots of masses of Muslim butts up in the air during prayer or the clichéd Muslim woman looking inscrutable and oppressed in a voluminous veil (48).

This is one of the important issues Khadra fights for because she does not want to engage in that continuous process of reproduction of the negative and biased images of Muslims. She, later on, takes on the difficult task of covering a panel on "Zionist Agendas and the Islamic Movement in Palestine" and media influence. She focuses her camera on the speaker but is conflicted about whether she should shoot these pictures of the angry Muslim man. She thinks "Everyone already knows this face of Muslims. That's all they know" and when she talks about it with her editor he tells her she should have a record of this because it is part of the picture (407). She is disturbed by this in-between space where she has been positioned against her will and is forced to consider where her priorities lie and make a decision. She protests: "So many religious Muslims are not like this but full of genuine humility and gentleness," and after careful thought, decides she will not include the photo of the shouting angry Muslim. The narrator states "Enough

already. Space is limited and there are new things to be said” (407). Khadra, as a cultural activist, realizes the importance of her role in the magazine and her responsibility toward her community. She believes her job is not to help in the circulation of further misrepresentations and perpetuation of oppressive and distorted images of Muslims but to try to present a different picture, one that truly speaks for them and clarifies their situation.

Khadra, on another occasion, shows strength of character and a determination not be forced into doing what she does not believe in. She argues with her editor about doing an expose on how many Muslims practice polygamy in America and refuses to do it. She tells him “It’s what the mainstream media always does: Pick the most sensational thing and highlight the negative ... See, the wives thing is just not the core story here” (435). It may seem at the first glance like she is not being objective and is unwilling to report the truth the way it is without censoring it when it comes to her Muslim community.

Although she defends her community and argues with her editor about what she should and shouldn’t say about them, we see her arguing with her Muslim fellows and giving them different perspectives about how Islam is a lot more sophisticated than the little details they dwell on. For instance, Khadra tells Eyad that she will include a certain item about Muslims in her article against his wish because she believes it is an important part of the story. She asserts that “Because it takes both sides to make a whole picture- the dark and the bright”(435). In her negotiations with her editor and other fellow Muslims about what should be presented to the public, she renegotiates her own identity as Muslim and American simultaneously, and her position on many issues and in the third space. She tries to find agency in that in-between space where she struggles to bridge the

gap between the supposedly polarized binaries within herself. She explains to Eyad where she stands on the issue of representation of Islam and Muslims, she argues:

Despite all that ... Yeah, even in spite of the Islamophobes and the ignorance out there. I'm counting on the intelligence of the readers... You don't have to tell me how harsh the scrutiny is that the Muslim community is under. I know all that. We still need to face our darkness too. Negatives and positives ... for our own sake... For the sake of studying what our own souls put forth (436).

Not only does Khadra renegotiate her identity as a professional and cultural activist, but also negotiates her hybrid identity. Khadra's hybridity constitutes a mix of an Islamness, an Arabness, and an Americanness that reflect multiples allegiances to nations and cultures that are in conflict with one another. The issue of hybrid identities is tackled in the next section in which Khadra tries to reconcile between the multiple selves within herself.

*Picking your Battles: the Politics of Open- Ended Hybridity*

In Kahf's counter- hegemonic narrative, she unravels the politics of hybrid identities and makes clear that the Arab- American identity is not static and is constantly in development and renegotiation. In Khadra's long journey and search for an identity, it is important that she is exposed to these various images of empowerment and oppression of the Muslim woman in America, for they help her consider her options to make the appropriate decision regarding her commitments and the identity she wishes to display. She decides to pick her battles and define her own identity. Muslim Americans who take on certain visible signs that show their connection to the Islamic religion, such as men

growing their beards or women wearing the veil, are under great pressure in the West. These visible markers, as Abdurraqib suggests, have dual implications. They both “stabilize their identity as Muslim while simultaneously destabilizing their identity by constantly calling into question the degree to which they have become “American”(58). Under such pressure they are forced to take a stance with regards to the kind of identity they wish to display and more importantly bear the consequences of their decision, for some identities are more accepted than others in today’s world. According to Hermansen, a Muslim woman, therefore, must decide to either: “(a) not overtly express the fact of being Muslim; (b) express her Muslim identity context- dependent; (c) visibly express being part of the Muslim minority in America, but continue regular career and social activities; (d) totally modify her lifestyle” (qtd. in Aburraqib 59). Whatever option the Muslim woman chooses, she is compelled to negotiate identity perhaps with some compromises made. The tension of living in the margin and fear of ostracism and isolation by mainstream society may lead, and has in the past, many Muslim women to reconsider their dress and give up the veil. Khadra goes through this stage and conflict when she realizes that these are the options open to her and she will have to choose what to do with her identity as a practicing Muslim in America and how to deal with the Muslim veil.

During her trip to Syria, Khadra seems to have reflected on those options available to her as a Muslim woman in America. Khadra’s journey with the veil ends in Syria where she decides to take off her veil and practice Islam through other manifestations. She tries to come to terms with herself and her views of religion. She is no longer influenced by others’ beliefs and opinion of her, and decides to find her

connection with God and religion on her own. She is no longer lost in that huge gulf between the two worlds that are in conflict with each other, the strict Muslim world and the secular world. She remains in that in-between space where moderate Islam exists but is more at peace with her self. The narrator describes her new experience:

The covered and the uncovered, each mode of being had its moment. She embraced them both. Going out without hijab meant she would have to manifest the quality of modesty in her behavior, she realized one day, with a jolt. It's in how I act, how I move, what I choose, every minute. She had to do it on her own, now, without the jump-start that a jilbab [long garb] offered. This was a rigorous challenge. Some days she just wanted her old friend hijab standing sentry by her side (312).

Khadra is not able to bear the consequences of wearing the veil in the U.S. because it has caused her a lot of trouble and misunderstandings. She cannot take further marginalization due to the veil. She would rather shed it and be more accepted by the mainstream society. Perhaps if less pressure and stress had been placed on the veil, it would not have been an issue and Khadra may have continued to wear it. If it had not become a sign of "oppression," the Muslim woman would not have had to prove she is not oppressed and would have been left alone just to be.

Through her decision not to veil, Khadra seems to be giving herself some relief from being judged by a piece of cloth. Shedding the veil definitely improves her chance to be more American and less Muslim, not in her own eyes, but in the eyes of others. Although the veil was part of her identity, the meanings it took on did not describe her or

reflect who she really is. Khadra's dilemma can be summed up through Abdurraqib's articulate statement about women's narratives that focus on religion, that:

Islam becomes the religion of the 'other' and the culture from which women need to be liberated. In these narratives, women are held accountable for both religious and cultural traditions of the old country... But when Islam is conflated with cultural practices and is seen as oppressive, the female protagonists must consider compromising both religion and culture to incorporate themselves into American society (56).

Khadra has had a conflicted identity; she has tried to find peace between her multiple selves. She has strived to reconcile her identity as an American female with her Islamness and Arabness. She struggles throughout the narrative trying to understand what it means to be a Muslim, an American, an Arab and a woman simultaneously. She also tries to find connections between these multiple identities and their handling of the Muslim veil. In Syria, Khadra stands at the crossroad between religion and culture where she finally decides not to compromise neither her religion nor culture. She does not want to give up on either one but chooses a way that accommodates her through which she can display an identity of her own and develop her own understanding of the components that form her identity. At the beginning of her journey, she thought that becoming an American citizen meant betraying her Arab and Muslim identity and that it would turn her into another person she would not approve of. Eventually, her family gets the American citizenship and she is forced to deal with her new identity. The narrator reveals the conflicted emotions Khadra experiences as she gets her American citizenship:

To her, taking citizenship felt like giving up, giving in. After all she'd been through at school, defending her identity against the jeering kids who vaunted America's superiority as the clincher put- down to everything she said, everything she was. Wasn't she supposed to be an Islamic warrior woman, a Nusayba, a Sumaya, an Um Salamah in exile, by the waters dark, of Babylon?(141).

These images of empowered Muslim women occupy Khadra's mind, she looks up to these female figures and "warriors" and thinks if she becomes American, she can no longer follow in their footsteps. At this stage of her life she is not mature enough to choose her role in society or explore her options to make an informed decision about the type of identity she wishes to take on and defend. Khadra initially equates Islam with foreignness, she is unable to comprehend the mixture that makes Muslim Americanness. The narrative attempts to build a bridge of peace between Islam and Americanness, challenging perceptions of their incompatibility or contradictoriness. This is clear in Wajdy's sermon after he gets the American citizenship. Khadra's father tries to reconcile the two identities within himself and within other American Muslims illustrated in his speech at the mosque, he argues:

In many ways ... America is more Islamic than the countries of the Muslim world. There is no widespread corruption. You can enter a judge's offices and not need to bribe his secretary for the simple basic services ... do not ... think that we will stop protesting against the immoral and unfair policies of America outside, in the Muslim world... But let's face it: here inside America, there are many good qualities. Law and order, cleanliness, democracy, freedom to work ... freedom to practice religion. These are Islamic qualities. America ... is like Islam without

Muslims. And our sick and corrupt Muslim home countries- they are Muslims without Islam (143-4).

After she has been exposed to diverse Muslim communities in the Middle East and in America, and after she travels to Saudi Arabia and Syria in search of an autonomous identity, she learns more about herself and the different paths she can take as a Muslim American. Once she returns to the U.S., she finally realizes she is American and cries out for the first time "Homeland America" (313). The narrator describes Khadra's reconciliation with her newly attained American identity:

And here she is. Eighteen years distant from that ten- year- old girl terrorized by neighborhood boys shouting 'Foreigners go home!' and the girl bewildered by her mother's sobs of 'We are not American!' as she scrubbed her clean of American dirt, eleven years away from the girl who cried into her pillow at the defeat the day the U.S. citizenship papers came, caught between homesick parents and a land that didn't want her. Not just didn't want her, but actively hated her, spit her out, made her defiant in her difference, yet at the same time made her unfit to live anywhere else. Going overseas was what enabled her to see that she was irrevocably American, in some way she couldn't pin down (390- 391).

Khadra's journey ends with a provisional reconciliation of her multiple identities, as an Arab, an American and a Muslim. Her ambivalence towards the veil does not seem to come to a total end. Khadra's travels and many experiences revolving around the veil and the practice of Muslim principles end in her redefinition of her relationship with religion and the Muslim veil, and the decision not to commit herself to the practice of veiling. She

continues to practice Islam and show modesty through her conduct rather than the practice of veiling. Ahmed explains that:

The veil came to symbolize in the resistance narrative, not the inferiority of the culture and the need to cast aside its customs in favor of those of the West, but, on the contrary, the dignity and validity of all native customs, and in particular those customs coming under fiercest colonial attack- the customs relating to women- and the need to tenaciously affirm them as a means of resistance to Western domination (164).

In Kahf's resistance narrative, Khadra is not ashamed of the veil nor does she give up on it in favor of Western fashion but chooses to wear it occasionally. She does not believe that the veil is a sign of the inferiority of her native culture, on the contrary, she wears it to show pride in her culture and its customs and her strong connection to this rich heritage and Islamic civilization. Western domination and misinterpretations of the veil and stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims created by the hegemonic discourse actually strengthen her ties with the veil and her cultural origins. In resistance to Western and colonialist attacks on the veiled Muslim woman, Khadra refuses to give up on it entirely and makes it a point to wear it whenever she wants to assert her Muslim and Middle Eastern identity. The narrator illustrates how the new and transformed Khadra deals with the veil and how she feels about it stating that:

People stare. She is still in hijab. She pulls the tangerine silk tighter around her head. The stares only ever make her want to pull it on tighter, not take it off the way Seemi keeps suggesting she do after every Middle Eastern crisis dredges up more American hate... It's my connector, Khadra had tried to explain to Seemi

once about wearing the scarf through hard times. 'It makes me feel connected to the people in my family, my mosque, where I come from. My heritage... Don't be ridiculous, Seemi had said. Take the damn thing off; it's not worth risking your life for" (424).

Sometimes Khadra seems to have the desire to pass and at certain occasions she wishes to assert her Muslim and Arab identity, and make it visible to the mainstream because she is not ashamed of her heritage or the cultural origins from which she comes. But she may have chosen not to commit herself to the veil so as to avoid being labeled and misjudged by the dominant culture. Kahf seems to have exposed her protagonist to the experience of a fragmented life and a split identity in her call to immigrants, Arabs and Muslims in particular, to deal with this current situation that every Arab or Muslim has encountered in America. Perhaps Khadra's decision to take on this new identity regarding her affiliation with the Islamic religion and the practice of veiling in America can be interpreted in the light of Abdulhadi's words addressed to Arabs in America post 9/11. She sarcastically addresses Arabs telling them:

Avoid as much as you can Being You! Pass if you can! Melt in this melting pot!  
Do not cry multiculturalism and diversity! This is not the time ... better save your life! Better yet: 'Go home,' foreigner! What if you have no home to go back to? What if this your home? Dual loyalty? Split personality? Divided? Not a real American? But who is? How many 'real' Americans are still left around? (73).

It took Khadra a long time to accept her hybrid identity and understand the complexity of her situation as a Muslim and Arab in America. I believe her choice at the end of the narrative is to pass as much as possible, and yet reclaim her cultural heritage and

publically display her connection to her Middle Eastern and Muslim origin whenever she needs to and at whatever occasion that seems appropriate.

Khadra seems to have come to the recognition that she cannot always cry for diversity in the American mainstream and that sometimes it is just easier to "melt in this melting pot," in other words through shedding the veil and "melting" she can pick her battles. This way she prevents misinformed and biased individuals from victimizing her through their sweeping generalizations, stereotypes and discrimination. Having shed the veil, she now has control over which identity she wishes to display and the kind of dialogues she engages in with the mainstream. She can finally be herself without society's constricted and narrow views that imprison the Muslim/ Arab- American woman.

CHAPTER 4  
CHICANA FEMINISM: BREAKING THE SILENCE

Our struggles continue but our silence is forever broken. We are telling our stories and we are recording our triumphs and, by virtue of our presence, we are challenging our surroundings.

-- Teresa Cordova

*Introduction*

In this chapter I examine the various stereotypes and misrepresentations Chicanos and Chicanas have struggled to overcome and replace with new images and self-representations. I specifically focus on the Chicana feminists' resistance to hegemonic and patriarchal structures of oppression and insistence on creating a voice of their own. The discussion shows how they have succeeded in challenging stories and hegemonic narratives written about them through rewriting their own history and experiences of freedom and oppression. In their resistance, they have refused to participate in the continuation of a history of silence and subordination of women by Chicano society and the mainstream. Issues of gender roles and gender oppression are foregrounded to show the importance of the many significant efforts made by Chicana feminists to achieve equality and autonomy. Their contributions to subvert the hegemonic discourse and negative portrayals of the Chicana woman are emphasized.

One of the goals behind this chapter is to show how Chicana feminists have challenged patriarchy in their successful endeavors to gain agency and how they have resisted multiple oppressions imposed on them by patriarchal forces, by both brown and white men. They have created a counter- hegemonic discourse through which their voices are not silenced, and their resistance cannot be ignored. Through Chicana feminism, they have found a space for themselves from which they define their own identities, determine

how to be defined and portrayed, and write their own histories without the impositions made by other histories written for them and by doing so have advanced social change. In the exploration of the Chicana feminist movement, the challenges and obstacles they have encountered that tried to hinder their progress are highlighted. This chapter puts stress on the contributions Chicana feminist scholars have made to rectify the false homogeneity that characterizes the frequent representations of Chicana women by the hegemonic culture, and to theorizing about gender subordination.

As I seek to dismantle hegemonic perceptions and portrayals of Chicanos and Chicanas, I examine Chicana feminist contributions and resistance to oppression and homogenization within the dominant culture. The discussion in this chapter breaks down into four focal points: 1) hegemonic misrepresentations of Chicanos; 2) historicizing activism within the Chicano community; 3) Chicana feminism and social transformation; 4) constructing feminist resistance and a counter- hegemonic discourse.

### *Hegemonic Misrepresentations of Chicanos*

Chicana feminists' contributions are central to the history of Chicanas and to the rebuttal of the many stereotypes that portray them as nonagents in political struggles. Michelle Holling, who has written extensively about Chicano identity, agrees with Portales who argues that within the American culture and media, Chicanos and Chicanas have remained absent as a dynamic presence from the American consciousness. Not only have they been absent, but to be more specific they have had a negative presence in the media, similar to Arab- Americans' situation with variations in the type of

representations they have to deal with. Holling quotes from Portales that Chicana/ os' absence from television, especially as it circulates conceptualizations of family, should not be deemphasized because this way not only does the public remain ignorant of Chicano families, but Chicanos themselves are not "publicly represented as full- fledged Americans"(92). Such invisibility does not come as a surprise. In fact, it can be argued that the negative presence and representation of both Chicanos and Arab- Americans is not an unconscious act and fits with the political agenda of the hegemonic power and its imperialist discourse. It is important that these cultures remain in the shadow or remain misrepresented, so they receive no sympathy from the public that are ignorant of their true reality, and thus, the cycle of violence and imperialist brutality can continue unquestioned.

Knowledge is power and to keep the public ignorant is to ensure the disempowerment of minorities and prevent them from having any influence on the mainstream where they can perhaps create social transformation. These U.S. Third World cultures are not represented in the media or scholarship as Americans but their connection to the foreign culture is what is constantly stressed and so in the case of Chicanos, they are known for their half Mexican identity and for Arab- Americans, it is their half Arabness that is stressed but never their Americaness. This has been an effective strategy to keep them "otherized" and marginalized by mainstream society and keep their voices unheard. It is all part of the social process of hegemony. Stigmatizing their difference from the mainstream and enlarging the gap between "them" and "us" helps legitimate violence and discrimination against them, and the unequal distribution of power. Therefore, self- representation contributes to Chicano and Arab- American

visibility, humanization, and engagement in social reform. It also gives them a sense of responsibility towards their actions and involvement with society. Balanced representations of these minority cultures within the U.S.A. could lead to less conflicts and unity among fractions of society, and thus solidarity to cause change, a result unwanted by imperialist elites, and so it is important to divide and conquer. In this sense, it is necessary for negative representations of Chicanos and Chicanas to continue to have a strong presence in the dominant culture, and for minority groups to be divided at all times to be conquered. It is important to look at recurring misrepresentations of Chicanos and Chicanas to be able to counter them in the discourse of resistance.

#### *Misrepresentations of Chicanos in General*

Rosa Linda Fregoso, who has written about Chicano identity in the borderlands, examines the portrayal of Chicanos in films. In the 1915 film *Martyrs of the Alamo* Mexicans have been caricatured as “dark, ominous, and physically aggressive.” They are also portrayed as “a mass of bodies with faces that are indistinguishable from each other.” Obviously, Mexican females are not portrayed any better. In this film, they are represented as “cantina girls” whose only purpose in the whole narrative is to dance for Mexican men (327). Fregoso reports that this film is informed by an offensive racial narrative, that is, of the colonialist fantasy of white womanhood under siege. In reference to *Martyrs of the Alamo*, Fregoso explains that:

The film positions Mexicans as sexually hungry subaltern men, predators devouring the angelic female with their looks, teasing a white mother with baby, touching white women’s blond locks. The film thus draws from a repertoire of

racial and imperial metaphors to construct the view of Mexican sexual degeneracy as a threat to the virtue of white femininity and racial purity (327).

U.S. filmmakers have made many films about the Mexico- U.S. border. Due to the tense social and political atmosphere, new themes have emerged at the borders that were developed into narratives and films. In both Mexican and U.S. cinemas, the representation of the border as “otherized territory is symptomatic of a colonialist and racist imaginary” (Fregoso 330). In the cultural imaginary of the U.S. and Mexico, the border has come to signify negative meanings. Among the multiple discouraging meanings attached to the border, Fregoso suggests that:

It symbolizes eroticized underdevelopment, an untamed breeding ground for otherness, and the site of unrepressed libidinal energies. Its inhabitants are coded as outcasts, degenerates, sexually hungry subalterns, and outlaws (330).

Fregoso’s view of *Lone Star* (1996), another film about Chicanos, is that it appears to provide a more enlightened vision of race relations. Nonetheless, it “recycles racist and colonialist fantasies of interracial sexual relations (339). This form of popular culture only perpetuate the stereotypes about the Chicano community and continue to present them as alien and a foreign element disturbing the peace of mainstream society. From the previous discussion of Arab/ Islamic feminism, a connection can be made between Arab- Americans and Chicanos because of their relatively similar encounter with stereotypes and homogenized representations of their communities within the various forms of popular culture.

Chicano/as do not only see themselves misrepresented in film or media, but also come face to face on daily basis with certain stereotypes about them. One of the common

stereotypes about Chicanos is the widely held notion of “machismo” and its counterpart of the Chicana female submissiveness (Baca Zinn 20). It is believed that machismo is the male attempt to compensate for feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness and an internalized inferiority by exaggerated masculinity (Baca Zinn 20). However, it is ironic that “machismo” is an expression of power that originates from the powerlessness and subordination the Chicano male feels in the dominant society. To explain the origins of machismo and feelings of inferiority, Maxine Baca Zinn, a leading scholar on Latinas, quotes from Fernando Penalosa who argues that it stems from the historical “conquest of Mexico by Spain involving the exploitation of Indian women by Spanish men thus producing the hybrid Mexican people having an inferiority complex based on the mentality of a conquered people”(20).

Sylvia Gonzales, a Chicana feminist, reiterates the same idea that the macho has feelings of insignificance due to the Mexican history that has left him conquered. His reaction to such feelings is to wear masks that conceal those negative emotions and replace them with an adopted manliness through exaggerated nationalism and sexism (48). Gonzales states that:

By doing so, however, he seals in concrete the one mask he is unable to shed, the shame of his past and present, the mask of the macho. He exchanges the shame and anger of the Indian warrior, defeated by the foreign god on horseback, for the humility of a meek servant of the Catholic Church. He is at one time the conqueror and the conquered. He has internalized the image of the conqueror and while he is also the conquered, he seeks reconciliation with himself as both oppressor and oppressed (49).

This dilemma and the male dichotomy of power the Chicano suffers from actually reflects on the Chicana woman and forces her to live in passivity and submission. The Chicana's marginal role and passivity is not what she chooses for herself, but a condition imposed on her by the Chicano male's subordination by the mainstream and hegemonic culture. She becomes doubly victimized by her husband and mainstream society. Gloria Anzaldua, a Chicana feminist writer and activist, believes that if the machismo had not been so marginalized as a result of the systemic racism in the United States, he probably would not have adapted behaviors of what she calls "false machismo" that is bred by "the loss of a sense of dignity and respect" which is a perversion of the traditional macho, who cared for and felt confident about his ability to feed and protect his family. In this sense the concept of machismo, if it is not taken out of its cultural and social context, had traditionally been attached to positive meanings, and so it was both respectable and admirable but it is not to be confused with the false machismo condemned by Anzaldua and other scholars. In fact, the modern meaning of "machismo" as a concept, is in fact an Anglo invention. Anzaldua writes that today's macho is "an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem. It is the result of hierarchical male dominance" (105). It is this act of decontextualization of certain concepts and cultural norms within the hegemonic discourse that Chicano and Arab-American writers continuously resist and fight aggressively in their writings. It seems to be common for hegemonic dominance to attach certain meanings that fit with their hidden agenda and serve their interests to indigenous traditions and concepts in order to exercise power. It is through the strategies of reconceptualization of certain races, behaviors, and ideologies and reformation of a nation's image that dominant hegemonies get their way, unquestioned, to exercise

violence against a certain people. Clearly, this has been applied to the image of the machismo in Chicano culture, and the image of the Muslim veil in the Muslim/ Arab world.

The enactment of machismo in Chicano culture has become a source of anguish and a feeling of lack of security for many Chicana women. Baca Zinn points out that machismo is said to have serious consequences for a Chicana woman. She is thought to be a submissive female, nevertheless, machismo has produced the image of the suffering yet manipulative wife, who gets her way by manipulating her powerless husband, and a mother who creates “dependency and maternal fixation in [her] sons” (20). As for the Chicano mother- daughter relationship, away from being a single monolithic representation, Ramon Gutierrez, who is a specialist in race, ethnicity, and Chicano history, notes that unfortunately many mothers were despised by their Chicana daughters mostly because of their “subordination/ accommodation” to patriarchal power. As mothers who supported assimilation, they pushed their daughters to learn English, get educated and marry well “to wealthy Anglo men all the better” and if necessary to abandon their cultural past (58). Gutierrez gives the example of Tina Benitez who sees the love/hate relationship that caused conflicts between Chicanas and their mothers was the result of the mother’s desire to “reproduce in her daughter the values of a patriarchal culture” promoting a role of powerlessness (57).

Although this is true in some cases, this image of the mother- daughter relationship is challenged in Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* to defy the dominant culture’s homogenized representations of Chicana women, as being victims of patriarchy and passive recipients of subordination causing a chain of victimhood and feelings of

unworthiness to pass down from mother to daughter. As I explain in the next chapter, the positive representation of the relationship between Esperanza and her mother, the source of support and inspiration, is an act of resistance on the writer's part against hegemonic misrepresentations of Chicana women and an assertion of the Chicana culture's own drawings and perceptions of their own mother figures and their role.

### *Misrepresentations of Chicana Women*

Chicana women have been widely misrepresented in the dominant culture just as much as Chicano men have. Gonzales maintains that any study of the Chicana is a study in contradictions. "On the one hand, the Chicana is viewed as passive and submissive and on the other, she is described as the strength of the family and community"(49). This can be understood in the light of their struggle with their Chicano brothers during the Chicano movement. Chicana women had effective roles in this movement and in the fight for liberation of all people, nevertheless, when it came to women's liberation in particular, under the oppression of Chicanos, they were pushed into subordination and silence. Therefore, Gonzales calls for a reflection here on the Chicano male as "the embodiment of both oppressor and oppressed and the woman as the reflection of this male duality. Through her narrowly defined roles, she is forced to 'concretize' the subconscious reality of the male"(49). Ironically, she is forced into submission yet she takes control over family affairs and needs. She also holds the family together and protects it from disintegration.

Maxine Baca Zinn, a Latina feminist and sociologist, explores the stereotypes surrounding Chicanos and Chicanas in "Gender and Ethnic Identity among Chicanos."

Baca Zinn quotes herself explaining that the representation of the submissive Chicana has its roots in two traditions:

The first tradition treats woman as constitutionally and socially inferior to men, and therefore less interesting than men. The second tradition treats people of color as inherently or culturally inferior to Anglo- white people. Both of these social and intellectual ideologies have produced cultural stereotypes. Chicanas are variously portrayed as exotic objects, manipulated by both Chicano and Anglo men; as long- suffering mothers subject to the brutality of insecure husbands, whose only function is to produce children; and as women who themselves are childlike, simple, and completely dependent on their fathers, brothers, and husbands... Chicanas have been depicted as ignorant, simple women whose subservience and dependence results in the inability to make the home a productive unit for their families (19).

Baca Zinn resists the homogenized image of gender roles within the Chicano community by pointing out that gender roles are constantly undergoing change depending on the availability of resources in the public sphere (19). That is, their identities, social and gender roles are not static as they may be portrayed but are frequently shifting with the change of socio-economic conditions which can be said about any society.

### *Historicizing Activism within the Chicano Community*

Chicanos and Chicanas have suffered from their state of “otherness” and marginalization by the mainstream and the static undermining image they are placed in in

history through stereotypes and misrepresentations. They have been so misrepresented that their activism and achievements have gone unrecognized which intensifies the need to rewrite Chicano history and to historicize their activism within and without the Chicano movement. Denise Segura and Jennifer Pierce, as feminist scholars, indicate that recent research emphasizes that one of the differences between European- American mothers and Chicana mothers is that the latter encourage their children to act and think “communally,” for the good of the family and the community as a whole, and do not raise them to be “independent” or “individualistic” as American mothers do (81). In the Chicano culture every individual’s effort becomes part of the larger struggle of the community, and achievements and success are perceived as success for the whole community. This aspect of the Chicano culture may be looked down upon by other cultures, but it is very much admired and respected by Chicanos. They see themselves having significant roles in society when they work communally to better their society. They believe toiling for the betterment of their conditions and Chicano lives is a collective responsibility.

Another analysis of gender roles within the Chicano community, as Baca Zinn indicates, is that Chicanos both men and women are thought to have a damaged self identity or negative self concepts because of oppression which is responsible for the “unproductive gender role dichotomy”(20). This seems to be a one- dimensional portrayal of Chicanos and Chicanas because there is evidence that many members of this society, both genders, have fought for their independence and sought to preserve their cultural heritage and their Chicano identity they were proud of. Gutierrez maps out the origins and development of the Chicano movement and activism. Gutierrez argues that

their struggle started from World War II. Chicanos fought in the war to build a better future for themselves and others. They fought beside other immigrants and believed in the American Dream of social mobility and middle class status that would be gained. To their surprise the dream materialized for white American men but not for them. The benefits, opportunities and money were not equitably distributed. Minorities such as Blacks, Mexicans and Asians, “all legitimately Americans,” were left out and excluded from all privileges (45). Seeing themselves as socially emasculated and discriminated against, Chicanos sought strength in a heroic Aztec past that emphasized the manhood and power of warriors.

Young Chicanos invested themselves with images of power as a reaction to their feelings of powerlessness and in the construction of a moral community. Aztlan became the homeland Chicanos hoped to repossess someday. This community was aware that they were “an internally colonized population within the United States. They were socially, culturally, and economically subordinated and territorially segregated by white Anglo- Saxon America”(Gutierrez 46). Their moral community was defined by its commitment to collectivism and a strong rejection of individualism. Chicanismo meant identifying with the race or people and collectively defending the rights of their brothers whom they shared with a language, culture, religion and Aztec heritage (Gutierrez 46). This history of domination generated a spirit of continuous resistance toward Anglo- American oppression. Navarro analyzes the relationship between Anglos and Chicanos stating that:

[It] was conceived out of a master- servant relationship between the Anglo conqueror and the Chicano conquered. The Chicano reacted politically in two

ways to the master- servant relationship. Some Chicanos collaborated and accommodated the Anglo invader and engaged in “ballot box politics.” Other Chicanos, however, rejected the conquest and resorted to violence, guerrilla warfare and banditry (Qtd. in Gutierrez 47).

### *Tensions within the Chicano Movement*

It is important to acknowledge that many Chicanos, both men and women, united in their resistance to domination, subjugation, and silence regardless of the tensions within the Chicano movement itself. During the Chicano movement of the 1960’s in which there was a resistance to oppression, as Gonzales states, males have demanded self- actualization and challenged the process that led to their subordination (49). On the other hand, there were also early calls for women to take pride in their cultural heritage and to reject the women’s liberation movement which resulted in many efforts on the part of women to redefine the cultural stereotypes imposed upon them. Women called for the combination of both strengths of the Chicana woman: that of their womanhood with that of their cultural heritage, as mentioned by Baca Zinn (21). However, although Chicanas joined the men in their struggle with a commitment to self- actualization for all people, the Chicano movement did not seem to be concerned with women’s conditions nor did it fight for women’s rights. In addition, whenever she assumed leadership or engaged in any attempt towards self- actualization, her femininity was questioned by society. She was also perceived as a deviant from the common social norm who is selfish, not self- sacrificing and is condemned for seeking to fulfil her own needs. According to Gonzales, this is due to the fact that abnegation is essential to the true identity of the Mexican wife

and mother. Thus, feminism posed a problem since it “would amount to a denial of her culture and alienation from that upon which her entire identity is based”(49). During Chicanas’ support of their Chicano brothers in their movement, Chicanas had conflicted emotions about their attempts and finding their own identity, vision and position within this male dominated movement. They were also warned by them to stay away from the women’s movement in fear of its negative impact on Chicano culture and family. Despite their skepticism, they felt powerless and could not afford to have clashes with the Chicano brothers and patriarchal traditions in fear of rejection and alienation (Gonzales 49).

Initially, it was not an issue at the beginning for Chicanas to work side by side with their Chicano brothers because they fought for the same cause which is justice for all people. But as the brothers and the movement grew stronger, new demands were made that threatened the security of Chicana activists. They were expected to be involved in the movement but in subordination. What is worse is that it became common in those days for the movement’s men “to request sexual cooperation as proof of commitment to the struggle, by gratifying the men who fought it” as quoted by Gutierrez (47). It is this type of behavior on the part of Chicano men and their denial of women’s leadership and ridicule of those who assumed leadership positions as “unfeminine, sexually perverse and promiscuous” that ignited the need to have an independent Chicana feminist movement (Gutierrez 47). This is when Chicanas launched a different battle, for Chicano men and women no longer fought for the same cause. Gutierrez notes that Chicanas began to see themselves as triply oppressed by race, class and gender (47). Thus, their struggle took on a different form from that of Chicano men’s, and the men were perceived as one of the

powers or forces that contributed to the oppression and manipulation of Chicana women and needed to be resisted.

### *Feminist Battles*

Chicana feminists have had many battles to fight within the hegemonic culture and their own culture to gain a voice and empowerment. The Chicana feminists' battle against injustice and inequality, and efforts for social transformation were resisted by both men and women. In these conditions and under the patriarchal force, whenever Chicana feminists questioned their roles in the Chicano movement, the Chicana scholar Aida Hurtado claims, they were perceived by both sexes as not only attacking unequal gender roles but challenging the Catholic underpinnings of all Chicano culture. Therefore, many Chicano men and women called the emerging Chicana feminist consciousness "a betrayal and labeled Chicana feminists 'anti- family, anti- cultural, anti- man and thus anti- Chicano movement'"(141). They were also viewed as traitors to their communities and as "sellouts" to white feminism (Hurtado 141).

Chicana feminists were not welcomed especially not by Chicano men for their movement was born out of acts of disruption, particularly in the Chicano movement, only to create a space for themselves from which they can resist patriarchy. Disruption became one of the most powerful strategies used by Chicana feminists to bring their own issues to the center of discussions and to place gender oppression on the top of their list of priorities (Hurtado 135). Cordova articulates it really well:

Chicanas write in opposition to the symbolic representations of the Chicano movement that did not include them. Chicanas write in opposition to a hegemonic

feminist discourse that places gender as a variable separate from that of race and class. Chicanas write in opposition to academics, whether mainstream or postmodern, who have never fully recognized them as subjects, as active agents (Qtd. In Hurtado 135).

It is clear that Chicanas have tried to get involved in discussions with other feminists but have continuously felt marginalized within various feminist movements. The extremely important issues of race and class which they dealt with on daily basis were not addressed in the predominantly white feminisms, nor were they considered crucial in the dialogues initiated by hegemonic feminists. Therefore, the urgent need to break away from further marginalization and silencing by Chicano men, white patriarchy and white feminists, and a history of subordination led to the creation of their own Chicana feminism. It is a feminism that specifically dedicates itself to social transformation, issues of Chicana women, and places their struggles and suffering at the center of their attention.

### *Chicana Feminism and Social Transformation*

Chicanas created a feminism that grew out of opposition to many and all the struggles they have experienced due to differences in gender, class, and race. Between 1975 and 1981, Teresa Cordova, a feminist Chicana scholar writes, Chicanas addressed feminist and social issues in their production of poetry, literature, and autobiographical testimonies (381). Cordova states that these writings focused on four major points:

- 1) the Chicana is not inherently passive- nor is she what the stereotypes say she is;
- 2) she has a history rooted in a legacy of struggle;
- 3) her history and her contemporary experiences can only be understood in the context of a race and class analysis;
- 4) the Chicana is in the best position to describe and define her own reality (381).

Clearly, these areas of focus reflect empowered Chicana feminists who are dedicated to resistance and change. Their writings are acts of resistance through which they insist that they write their own history and address their own issues because they are capable of reflecting over their own situation and defining their own reality as Cordova puts it.

In their formation of a Chicana feminism and attempt to resist oppression, they have created a distinct feminism that strives to adopt methods and tools for resistance that do not contribute to the erasing of women's voices. Chicana feminists have advocated and used different varieties of Spanish in their writings to increase the inclusion of all women. For many Spanish has remained the home language which according to Hurtado is crucial in maintaining Chicano culture and which sometimes can serve as "a barrier to keep the harshness of the outside world at bay"(136). However, the reacquisition of the language has become a political act for the Chicanas who no longer spoke Spanish. This is important because to many Chicanas, Spanish is the language of intimacy and resistance, and many Chicana feminists make it a point to code- switch to Spanish "to create a woman's space and discourse" which we notice in Anzaldua's and Cisneros works among others'(Hurtado136).

This feature of code- switching can also be found in the poetry, literary and creative works produced by Arab- Americans who switch to Arabic to preserve the

language of their community in the USA and that bond which links them to their Arab ancestors. This can be exemplified in the works of Mohja Kahf , Suheir Hammad, Etel Adnan, Naomi Nye and Jean Makdisi among many other literary artists. It is perhaps the existing diasporic experience and life between cultures that Chicanos and Arab-Americans share that compel them to hold on to their native languages to remain connected to their ancestors. The switch back and forth between languages symbolizes a multiple existence for hybrid identities that reside in between cultures and the need to hold on to both cultures that constitute this diasporic self. This can be sensed in the Arab-American's switch from English to Arabic and the Chicano's from English to Spanish and vice versa. A feature that may not be found in other types of feminisms is also the Chicana feminist's eloquent writing about her loyalty to her mother t hat is also found in many Arab/ Islamic feminist writings. This loyalty is said to come out of their shared condition as women, and also out of "the writers' recognition of these women's class struggles to survive against all odds"(Hurtado143). Hurtado asserts that "They [Chicana feminists] see in their mothers unnamed feminists and unclaimed heroes who, through their daily lives, map what Chicana feminists want to capture in their writings" (143). This view of the mother as an "unclaimed hero" and survivor can be illustrated through the representation of the mother figures in Cisneros and Kahf and how they are perceived by the protagonists.

It is important for Chicana feminists to include all women and not to repeat the mistake white feminists committed when they kept women from lower social classes marginalized and silenced within the movement. Thus, Chicana feminists focused on the making the working- class heard and their issues addressed. Hurtado reports that many

Chicana feminists have a serious commitment and a sense of loyalty towards the working-class because it is the roots from which their feminist struggle originated (137). In the 1960s and 1970s, as Cordova explains, Chicanas wrote about the various issues impacting the lives of the working class such as: labor struggles, education, legal rights, birth control, sex roles, employment issues, and prisoner rights (381). They did not yield to the “demands for silence” and declared the legitimacy of a Chicana feminism significant to the Chicano movement (381). In addition, one of the major goals Chicana feminists aim their efforts towards is political action regardless of their class origins (Hurtado 137). Through their commitment to the working class, Chicana feminists distinguish themselves from White feminists, in particular, those who were not concerned with the class issue and regarded it unworthy of their attention. Hurtado believes there is great emphasis on labor issues because of the active participation of Chicanas in this sphere and also due to the linkage between many Chicana feminist scholars and the Chicano movement (138). Many Chicana feminists have declared that they have dedicated their scholarship and artistic production to achieving social reform through political action. The writings of many Chicana feminists suggest “concrete organizing tools for political action.” It is interesting that there is emphasis on the joys of struggle rather than on victimhood in their writings (Hurtado 145).

Chicanas’ political action and feminist activism can be demonstrated through several historical achievements in the 1980s. That is, Chicana activists succeeded in both asserting their presence in the National Association for Chicano Studies (NACS), resulting in its renaming as the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) and establishing a Chicana Studies organization, *Mujeres Activas en Letras y*

*Cambio Social* (MALCS) (Cordova 381). MALCS conveys the values of working- class Chicanas who saw their work in universities interconnected with their community:

We are the daughters of working class families involved in higher education ...

Our research strives to bridge the gap between intellectual work and active commitment to our communities. We draw upon a tradition of political struggle.

We see ourselves developing strategies for social change- a change emanating from our communities (Qtd. in Cordova 382).

Chicana feminists strived to keep the movement focused and united in their efforts to make change and so ties were strengthened between women coming from various socio-economic backgrounds. Intellectual women continued to interact with the Chicano community and address their issues in their research, and worked for the collective good rather than their own self- interest.

Intellectual Chicana women have been able to establish a space for themselves within the academy. That is, they were able to create the field of Chicana Studies, and claimed that their purpose was to “fight the oppression [they] experienced and to “reject the separation of academic scholarship and community involvement” (Cordova 396). Through the Chicana Studies Organization, Chicanas recognized their “scarcity” in institutions of higher education and knew that they needed “to join together to identify [their] common problems, to support each other and to define collective solutions” (Cordova 396). To continue the involvement of Chicana feminists with the community and fight for social justice, feminists have carried out extensive research about problems within the community such as prisons in the neighborhood, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, low wage employment, disease, health care, alcohol consumption,

displacement and depletion of natural resources (Cordova 390-1). Chicana activists have expressed their views on these serious issues through magazines, newsletters, and correspondence (Cordova 391).

Hurtado agrees with Moraga and Anzaldua that Chicana feminisms have concentrated their efforts on changing the conditions in which women live, achieving autonomy and resisting patriarchy. However, although they acknowledge that Chicano men have patriarchal power over them, at a very early stage of their lives, many Chicana feminists have come to recognize the distinction between the white male's and Chicano male's position in society. They realized that these same men are oppressed by many white men and some white women due to their ethnicity or race. She asserts that "the recognition of difference among men helped produce complex feminisms to explain why the writers kept their political allegiance to Chicanos while at the same time critically contesting these men's sexism..." (147). There were times when Chicanas withheld their criticism in order to join the men in their struggle against white men and women when it came to issues regarding the community as a whole. This was not an easy task by any means for they had to negotiate their positions within this struggle. That is, the tension seems to lie in the fact that they had to place their own interests aside sometimes to achieve the goals set for the community as a whole. Nevertheless, they had to protect themselves from domination by these men yet prevent a division from happening for the good of the collective community.

In the Chicanas' work for the collective good, they share concerns and strongly identify with the struggles of women of color and their Central American sisters (Cordova 384). Chicanas have written poetry about the dilemma of Central American

refugees, people of Guatemala and Nicaragua. “As Chicanas join in alliance with women of color, they are looking to extend their resistance to forge effective opposition to all forms of domination for the *collective good*” (Cordova 393).

Chicana feminists share with other feminisms the commitment to create change and push towards political action. But when the issue of solidarity with other feminists of color was raised, they were faced with the question of why it was needed to categorize individuals according to their group memberships of race, class, gender and sexuality to which Davis’ and Martinez’s response was:

People ask: “Why can’t we all see each other as human beings? Why do we have to emphasize these differences?” or “Why do we need feminism? Why can’t we just have humanism? Doesn’t talking about racism and the different races just perpetuate the problem?” This negates the structures of power that determine human relationships in this society in a way that is deadening for a great number of people, mostly , but by no means only people of color. You can’t just say “Let’s all get along” until we get rid of those structures (Qtd in Hurtado 148).

In all their struggles, Chicana feminisms continue to maintain issues of gender at the center of all their battles yet strive to incorporate diverse issues. Many of them insist on not ranking oppressions because this may lead to the exclusion of causes perceived as not central to women’s rights and so they emphasize gender and still pay attention to other different but equally important types of oppressions (Hurtado 148).

Issues of gender remained at the center of all Chicana feminist concerns, consciousness and activism. This can perhaps be justified if the Chicana woman’s predicament and suffering throughout Chicano history and culture is carefully examined.

Anzaldua, a prominent figure in Chicana writings and scholarship, explores the Chicana woman's position in society and the social roles imposed on her by her own culture.

Anzaldua believes that many Chicana women conform to the values of the culture so as not to be rejected and alienated by society and by their own people. She sums up these women's dilemma by stating that:

Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. Alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits... our cultures take away our ability to act- shackle us in the name of protection. Blocked, immobilized, we can't move forward, can't move backwards... (42-43).

Chicana women are victimized by the system of belief instilled in the minds of Chicanos. For instance, in this culture, women are made to believe they are total failures if they do not get married and have children, for this is the typical role expected of the Chicana woman. Women are also expected by the culture to respect and accept the value system more than men. Both the culture and the Church insist that women are "subservient" to males. One of the dominant cultural beliefs in this society is that the woman is "selfish" if she does not renounce herself in favor of the male. In addition, there are three directions for Chicana women to turn to in their lives: either to the Church as a nun, or to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother (Anzaldua 39). These are the only alternatives open to her. Obviously, Chicana women are confined by these restrictions and limited options she is offered. None of them allow her a space to develop

and excel or show potential. Women are viewed to need protection by the men in the Chicano culture which really keeps them in rigidly defined roles (Anzaldua 39). It is this atmosphere of imprisonment, under-estimation, and subordination Chicana feminists have strived to resist. They have continuously challenged the patriarchal structure that limits their roles in society and strips them of any control over their lives.

Chicana feminists not only struggled with patriarchy but also with women within the movement. Chicanas have experienced tension within their own feminist movement due to the insufficient knowledge and lack of education some women have of the Chicana woman's involvement in society and activism throughout history. At the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) conference in the 1990s, a Chicana had questioned the "near-invisibility" of women in the preview showing of the film *Chicano!* One of the members on the panel presenting the documentary responded, "Those were traditional times. Women were just not as involved" (Dicochea 77). This notion that Chicanas were not as involved in the movement as were men has been challenged by Chicana feminists who suggest that those "traditional" times were actually the "figment of a patriarchal imaginary" (Dicochea 77). I believe many women in the Arab/ Islamic feminist movement who have given into the hegemonic discourse also lack knowledge of the Arab/ Muslim woman's involvement throughout history and have been challenged by other more informed feminists.

Chicanas have struggled because of the tension between Chicano cultural values and what is considered Anglo values that permeates the Chicana feminist movement. Chicanas are torn between Chicano values that assign domestic duties to women and the Anglo values that allow for women's educational and career advancement (Dicochea 81).

Chicanas have had to address women's concerns regarding being considered "anti-men" and have encouraged them to fight for their identity and express what they think and feel without apologizing to men who feel challenged by Chicana feminists (Dicochea 82).

The critic Perlita Dicochea gives the example of Nieto – Gomez who convinces "traditionalists" who hold on to Chicano cultural values and women "who feared exclusion from the Chicana/o community that Chicana feminism was conducive to, not in contradiction with ..." the cause of the movement (85). This was important to Chicanas who were reluctant to take on the feminist stance, that is, they wanted to participate in the feminist movement and yet did not want to be ostracized by society.

The loyalists' or traditionalist's approach within the feminist movement was addressed in the 1980s and 1990s. After Chicana feminism had solidified as a movement, Chicana feminists writing in the 1980s and 1990s critiqued earlier Chicana discursive formations on two main grounds. "Challengers from inside the feminist movement argued that earlier stresses on Chicana feminism's ideological indigenosity militated against ideological creativity and creative links with other feminisms" (qtd. in Roth 725). Benita Roth who writes about the emergence of Chicana feminist discourse explains that Chicana critics of "this forced ideological purity" stresses that an emphasis on indigenous ideology limited options; and limited the ability to create solid connections with other types of feminisms. They argued that Chicana feminist attitudes were always marked by ambivalence and "selectivity of engagement, both on personal and ideological levels" (725). Perhaps this stress on indigenous ideology stems from their fear of losing their cultural values and indigenous traditions through their adoption of feminism which may be perceived as part of the Anglo culture. Current scholarship by Chicana feminists

has not emphasized this conflict between embracing indigenous values and producing creative links with other feminisms which can be explained through Roth's statement that "in challenging external power, movement participants innovate, appropriate, and transform dominant discourse in a way that tends to flatten internal relationships of inequality only for the short run"(726). It may be suggested that because Chicana feminists, like Arab- American feminists, are preoccupied with and have prioritized their engagement in creating a counter- hegemonic discourse that resists domination and oppression by the mainstream, they do not engage enough in self- critique or challenge internal issues within the movement. This explains why Arab- American feminists use a rosy picture to portray Arabs and the Middle East although Kahf's and Suheir Hammad's narratives somewhat reveal the racism and sexism within the Arab- American community. Chicana feminists, however, have been more successful in their ability to self- critique and not present an ideal picture of themselves.

Chicana feminists seem to deal better with self- critique but do not seem to speak enough of the criminalization and racialization of their male counterparts like Arab- American feminists do. Chicana feminists have not emphasized enough issues of Chicano immigration, citizenship, and detentions in their scholarship. Teresa Miller writes that post 9/11 "promulgating policies like counterterrorism has blurred traditional distinctions between illegal aliens, criminal aliens, and terrorists by embracing an expansive and unforgiving crime control model" (Castro 54). After 9/11 and during the reactionary war on terror, many Arab- Americans and Chicanos have faced racial profiling, detentions, and discrimination that is essentially based on skin color. Legal American citizens, whether half Mexican or Arab, have been merely perceived as brown citizens and they

were conflated either with illegal immigrants or criminal aliens in the case of Mexicans and terrorists in the case of Arabs. Because a clear distinction between citizens and immigrants and terrorists has not been made, all immigrants and those who share their features and skin color became virtual targets and suspects of crime. Physical similarities between Mexican nationals and Chicanos such as dark features: eyes, hair, and skin color “cast a shadow of suspicion” over Chicanos in spite of being legal citizens protected by U.S. laws, by the same token Arab- Americans whose features gave away their Middle Eastern ancestral origins were targeted as terrorist suspects (Castro 55). Perhaps these personal experiences of discrimination needed to be written and rewritten by the victims themselves which would significantly contribute to the production of autobiography and testimonials Chicana female writers could not have produced as effectively since it is the men who mostly have had such experiences rather than Chicana women.

Autobiographical writing has been one of the key features that characterize many Chicana feminist writings. Nonetheless, among the concerns of Chicana feminists in terms of genre used by Chicana writers is that the 1980s and 1990s demonstrated strong resistance to autobiographical styles, “testimonio,” and the personal essay written by women of color (Davalos 152). Karen Davalos explains that during this period postmodern analysis and mainstream feminist scholarship opposed or “conspicuously ignored” the autobiographical and creative prose of Anzaldua, labeling it “poetic” but not theoretical and even divisive or irrelevant (152). Nevertheless, Anzaldua’s work brought about significant energy and encouraged the personal voice within the Chicana movement. Although Chicana feminist thought generally does not seek “approval, acceptance or intellectual legitimacy” from exterior sources and domains, Ruth Behar,

expresses her ambivalence about the mixing of genres and she worries that the “results are unrecognizable to conventional disciplines.” She wonders,

Does our writing become so unclassifiable that it gets lost in the cracks of all those forms we are meshing together? Does it ni aqui ni alla (neither here nor there) quality render it too amorphous to make a mark in the very fields ... that we wish both to be accepted by and, at the same time, transform” (qtd in Davalos 156).

Behar seems to believe that Chicanas ought to fit in mainstream academic discourses in order to challenge them and be heard. While Behar is concerned about the reception and classification of Chicana writing, other Chicanas do not seem to share her fear. In fact, they write in difference and opposition and take pride in their opposition which they consider a point of strength and a strategy of resistance and defiance of the mainstream and its conventional parameters of writing.

### *Constructing Feminist Resistance and a Counter- Hegemonic Discourse*

Chicana women have suffered greatly from confinement and rigidly defined roles until they were able to speak up through the Chicana feminist movement and acts of resistance. Chicana feminists have created a counter- hegemonic discourse through which they have developed voices of resistance to overcome patriarchal oppression and reclaim the Chicana self that was continuously being subordinated and silenced by patriarchal and hegemonic forces. They have worked towards rewriting their own stories and histories in opposition to those written about them, similar to Arab- American feminists. Cordova

asserts that Chicanas write in opposition to “the symbolic representations of the Chicana movement that did not include them,” and to “hegemonic feminist discourse that places gender as a variable separate from that of race and class,” and to “academics, whether mainstream or postmodern, who have never fully recognized them as subjects, as active agents” (382). Their aim has been to replace patriarchal and hegemonic representations of them with self- representations. Through the counter- hegemonic discourse, Chicana feminists have challenged and opposed all the forces, whether patriarchal, hegemonic or feminist, that stripped them of their own agency and their own voice which they are perfectly capable of articulating on their own. Cordova believes that “The act of redefining the experiences of Chicanas through their own voices is an expression of resistance against all other definitions”(382).

Rewriting history has been one of the significant contributions Chicanas have made to their feminist movement. They have provided women with access to their history that has been distorted by hegemonic forces to empower them and help them resist oppression (Cordova 388). Chicana historians have retrieved some of their historical memory to enable women to recover from the pains of colonization and exploitation (Cordova 388). Perhaps through exposing Chicana women to their painful history and reminding them of the violence, racism, and injustices inflicted upon them, feminists have empowered them through knowledge, and urged them to participate in resistance and the creation of a counter- hegemonic discourse.

*Carving a Space and Writing in the Borderlands*

Chicana feminists have creatively engaged in carving a space for themselves in the borderland in which they rewrite themselves and their history of freedom and oppression. They have created a counter- hegemonic discourse in which they assert their identity and resist the multiple oppressions imposed on them by Chicano and White patriarchy. Living in the borderlands, they have sought new images of themselves, and new beliefs about themselves that do not erase who they are or silence their voices.

A feminism from the borderlands emerged due to what they had experienced in their community and the need to create a new space from which Chicana feminists can shift male designed paradigms and break structures of oppression that have continuously crippled them, and free themselves to create new roles and new images of themselves and retrieve self respect. Chicana feminists theorize from the borderland, a place which Anzaldua asserts is in “a constant state of transition”(25). It is where two worlds merge to form “a third country” and “a border culture.” In her book *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Anzaldua argues that:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary ... The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.... The only “legitimate” inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites... ambivalence and unrest reside there... (25-26).

These borderlands found in the Chicano culture in which its people belong to both and neither of the two sides of the borders resembles the Arab- American experience of living

in- between cultures for they are not perceived as belonging to the Arab culture nor are they part of the mainstream in America because they are viewed only in terms of their connection to their Arab and Middle Eastern ancestors with whom they may not be in touch at all. But in both cultures, it seems to be common for minorities in the dominant culture to be in power if they align themselves with the hegemonic power. This was also explained in our discussion of Arab/ Islamic feminists who aligned themselves with the colonizer to advance and gain acceptance by the hegemonic and imperialist culture. Hurtado describes the Chicana's conflicted situation of in- betweenness and at the border that is reflected in feminist writings and literature, she emphasizes that:

By standing on the U.S. side of the river they see Mexico and they see home; by standing on the Mexican side, they see the United States and they see home. Yet they are not really accepted on either side. The U.S.- Mexico border becomes the metaphor for all the 'border crossings,' both physical and psychological, that many Chicanas have had to endure (150).

Chicanas seem to be content to have found this alternative space to occupy at the borders because it allows them to set their own rules to live by. At the borders, they are not victims of either side because they belong to neither society yet being in this in-between space, and during the process of crossing borders they can be victimized by both cultures. There is a sense of ambivalence at the borders, for in crossing there is hope for a better future nonetheless there are risks to be taken. Crossing borders physically and culturally can be dangerous but crossing is not a new tradition in Mexican history. The changing border between the United States and Mexico "has placed Mexicans in a continuous neocolonial state" powerless in either country (Qtd. in Johnson 43). They look

at the north and the United States and hope for a bright future but in crossing, the Mexican woman is at risk. She is unsafe on both sides of the border simultaneously and in the process of crossing itself. Unfortunately, the Mexican woman who crosses to the United States is subject to sexual violence and a sense of physical helplessness. She becomes a refugee who has left “the familiar and safe homeground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain” searching for a way to make it on her own and assert her missed autonomy (Johnson 43).

The Chicana woman’s status and dissatisfaction with her situation in the Chicano community is perhaps what sparked the need for a new space, the borders. She had undergone various types of oppression from both sides of the borders, that is, by insiders and outsiders of her community. She was confined by both forces that did not allow her the freedom to have an identity of her own or to invent new social roles that actually appeal to women. As Robert Young describes them as the subaltern women who are subject to what he calls ‘a double colonization,’ that is, first in the domestic sphere, “the patriarchy of men, and then in the public sphere, the patriarchy of the colonial power”(Qtd. in Johnson 42). Chicana women can be viewed as doubly colonized since they have been over powered and subordinated by both white and brown men.

### *Challenging the Binary of Good and Bad & Creating Subversive Images*

In their resistance to both Anglo and Chicano patriarchy, some Chicanas have challenged the polarized binary of good and bad woman set by hegemonic and patriarchal forces. Chicanas have resisted this binary because it reduces them and their experience to

simplistic labels and places them in restrictive monolithic categories. They have worked towards subverting this conventional and distorted image of them. Cordova believes that “The act of deconstructing and reconstructing Chicana images is a subversive move against years of ideological mistreatment”(382). Chicana women have strived to break away from such patriarchal and oppressive ideologies that have imprisoned them within their own homes and culture, and immobilized them.

Throughout Chicano history, Chicana women have resisted and subverted various images that were unfair to them and did not reflect their lives and experiences. One of the images Chicana women had been haunted by was the image of the Malinche that had always been portrayed as a villain in Mexican history. Gutierrez confirms that Malinche had been depicted as a traitor because she turned her back on her own people and joined the white man and became assimilated (51). He adds that this image is recurrent in Chicano literature but had been challenged by feminists such as Sylvia Gonzales and Cordelia Candelaria, Cisneros and others. These are just a few examples of Chicana feminists that were frustrated with the restrictive and only two public models that were open to Chicanas which were those of the virgin and the whore (52). It is clear that Chicanas’ yearning for a third space outside the common social boundaries set by patriarchy stems from the very confining nature of these polarized images that they find too rigid. I believe these images and the binary of good/ bad woman is one of the factors that lead to the creation of the borderland and border writings. In the borders, Chicanas have rejected these images to create their own subversive images that no longer have to abide by a binary so ideologically and socially repressive. At the borders Chicanas are no longer only women, or mothers or wives or daughters, all roles defined by gender, but are

independent individuals with autonomous identities, intellectuals, activists, artists and social transformers. Although the borderland is not the mainstream, Chicanas have become the mainstream within their own community that they have created, not in the margins but at the borders touching both cultures and the minds of people on both sides. Anzaldúa further explains the borderlands stating in her preface that:

The Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch... (1)

Individuals living in the borderlands go through hardships yet can build bridges between the two cultures they border and try to subvert the stereotypical notions they have of each other. New ideologies can be formed to fit the two cultures combined and allow people from both sides to come together and live together on shared grounds.

### *Reclaiming “the Home”*

Living in the borderlands has its challenges. The border, the feminist scholar Kelli Johnson notes, has been a violent space that Chicanos/ Chicanas occupy. The border between the two cultures has been viewed by Anglos as a place of conflict and threat (41). Johnson agrees with Roland Walter in his analysis of Ana Castillo’s use of borders in her novels. Walter and Johnson believe that her focus on the interdependence of borders and violence “culminates in the anticolonial project of local political activism in women’s home space that reclaims and revises the notion of women’s “separate sphere” by repositioning the very public activities of politics and resistance into the home”(41). Chicana resistance has been taken to the home to challenge patriarchal ownership or

domination over the public sphere. The private sphere nor longer stands for submission and passivity but for Chicana political activism. Through creative and activist production in the home, Chicana women have reclaimed “the domestic” as a space for recreation and productivity. They have reconstructed the private and the public through subverting their conventional patriarchal and hegemonic constructions of them. This idea of recreating a new home space is significant in the analysis of *The House on Mango Street*. In the narrative, the protagonist does not seek a role in the man’s public sphere nor the confining private sphere of the Chicana woman created by patriarchy, but her activism appears in a third space invented by an autonomous woman. She creates a “home space” and makes it a site of resistance and political activism. It is a space of her own in which she does not need to compete for power or fight for agency with patriarchy or the dominant culture. In this space she exercises power, resistance, and autonomy with no permission from anyone. This space is a subversion of the typical image of home in the Chicano culture.

Anzaldua’s status as an in-between and a border woman may represent the experience of many other Chicanas who theorize from the borderlands. She reflects on her experience as a hybrid that she finds uncomfortable yet enriching. She asserts that:

I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that tejas- Mexican border, and others... it’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape (1).

It seems that Arab- Americans live in a similar landscape and live on the borders psychologically. Although there are no physical borders between the U.S. and the Arab world, they are forced to negotiate their identity and position between the two cultures since they are not fully perceived as Arabs in their mother country nor are they fully American, regardless of their American citizenship. This is because they are associated with terrorists coming from the Middle East. They have become reminders of the war and conflict between the U.S. and Arab nations. It is sometimes this lack of sense of belonging and feeling of estrangement in the U.S., their homeland, and within the dominant culture that leads to the strengthening and reviving of their Arab and Middle Eastern identities that they have been trying to abandon to ensure their assimilation to the American culture. Their marginalization after 9/11, the Iraqi war and the war on terrorism has scarred them and functioned as a reminder of who they are, and how they are frequently perceived in the mainstream due to their ethnicity and religion.

### *Shifting Identities*

Chicanas have found a home in the borderland where they are not forced to claim a single allegiance or identity but can embrace their multiple identities and shift back and forth between them. Anzaldua believes living on the borders and in the margins can be very intriguing because of the shifting back and forth between her multiple identities that allow her to explore and examine the multiple selves that shape her identity and influence her outlook on life. She insists that this status that she occupies in the margins is never comfortable but it is home. It is enriching in her eyes because it has generated an urge

within her to communicate and to write about life on the borders and life in the shadows (Anzaldua 1).

Border writing is one form of the counter- hegemonic activism and resistance of the rigid paradigm patriarchy imposes on Chicanas. Border writings by feminists cross geographical borders and destabilize boundaries of race, gender and class. They are not limited by the space granted to them by the mainstream, a marginalized space, but they break free of all the restrictions that shackle them and invent new standards to live by. They redefine their own lives and their own images. Chicana feminists undergo an independent act of self- birth that Hurtado describes beautifully in *The Color of Privilege*, she states that:

To love oneself as a woman is a revolutionary act. The reclaiming of self has come for Chicana feminists through self love- not narcissistic, selfish involvement but as a political act of valuing what patriarchy has devalued. Chicana feminists proclaim that redemption does not come through men but, rather, comes from giving up the illusion of security and safety that results from being chosen by a man (89).

Writing has also been a form of resistance to silence used by Chicana feminists so as to gain agency, an agency they have been denied by the dominant culture. Norma Klahn, who writes about Chicano culture, explains that in the process of gaining agency through the act of writing, Chicanas have been forced to deal with the additional burden of engaging the discourses of “a racist Anglo society” and the patriarchal structures present in both Anglo and Chicano cultures (117).

### *Resistance through Art*

Because the pressure coming from Chicano and white patriarchy has been so intense, Chicanas have found various ways to show their resistance to such oppression through art. Some feminist activists have expressed their resistance of the systemic structures of oppression through art. Chicanas used art as a powerful tool to make themselves visible to the public eye that has been denied exposure to the heterogeneity of Chicana experience and culture. Chicanas' artistic production shattered the silence and the image of the vulnerable, submissive, and muted Chicana. Their art exposed their gender oppression and spoke the previously unspoken. The Chicano scholar Judith Huacuja, who calls them border region artists, confirms that their work "represents the forging of an activist consciousness rooted in the lived cultural experiences of marginalized people... They work .... to depict assertive active subjects reclaiming personal and public terrains" (104).

In response to the oppressions of patriarchy, race and class, Chicana artists such as Yolanda Lopez, Alma Lopez, Margaret Alarcon, Ester Hernandez have used their art to build a shared sense of an empowered female identity. They used the "power of cultural forms to reproduce themselves- to make visible-... their surrounding social structures" (Huacuja 108- 109). This visibility is crucial to Chicana women as a step forward towards social transformation and a rejection of marginalization and silence. It also contributes to the strengthening of their sense of self and personal voice. Their art can help them regain faith in themselves and their ability to act independently to transform their own lives. The art they have produced is part of their political activism, through their art they wish to start or initiate a dialogue about the hardships Chicanas

experience and the oppressions they suffer from and ways to achieve social justice. They wish for a dissemination of their voice to the largest possible audience, they want individuals from various social classes to act and get people out of their comfort zone in order to resist suppression and exploitation and bring about change. According to Huacuja, Chicana artistic groups have formed particularly in order to “educate and activate themselves and other women on methods of overcoming systemic structures of oppression. They struggle against cultural imperialism, racism, and sexism”(105). They use art to communicate their thoughts, anger, inner turmoil and show a determination to fight back. One of the artists, Patricia Valencia, articulates their goals and vision stating that:

[They use art to] make visible the tactics that disempower [them]: the usurpation of natural resources and land, the destruction of economic and agricultural self-sufficiency, the irrelevant and foreign educational environments, the interference with generational transmission of spiritual knowledge, the devaluing of language, of labor, of women and of youth (Huacuja 105).

The messages the artists convey through their artistic productions contributes to the counter-hegemonic discourse Chicana feminists engage in. In their art, they reinvent themselves and expose the public to new representations of the Chicana woman. They destabilize the static images created by hegemonic forces of Chicanas as passive, subordinate and oppressed women. They put such inaccurate images into question by substituting them with portrayals of women as educated, rebellious, empowered and active citizens in society. It is not only in the images and messages they present in their art that they become involved in the counter- hegemonic discourse, but in the act itself of

producing artistic work. Because of their art, in the eyes of the public Chicanas start to be perceived as creative, artistic and intellectual women who deserve respect and attention. Their image is no longer frozen in history but is constantly being reproduced and revised in the imagination of members of dominant and non- dominant cultures.

CHAPTER 5  
RENEGOTIATING THE CHICANA IDENTITY IN SANDRA CISNEROS'  
*THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET* AND POETRY

In the Borderlands  
You are the battleground  
Where enemies are kin to each other;  
You are at home, a stranger,  
The border disputes have been settled ...  
You are wounded, lost in action  
Dead, fighting back.  
-- Gloria Anzaldua

*Introduction*

Resistance to dominance and dominant images and misrepresentations of Arab-Americans and Chicanos take the form of creating a counter-hegemonic discourse in which new images and alternative ways of thought and new meanings are invented to replace distorted interpretations enforced by the dominant culture. New readings of old and common images are introduced.

Mary DeShazer argues that Third World women challenge “polarized forms of thought, to “unsettle every definition of otherness arrived at” and that women’s resistance poetry “helps with this unsettling”(23). I argue that a similar unsettling of hegemonic perceptions and thoughts can be achieved by U.S. minority women, Chicanas in this case, through other forms of resistance writings besides poetry such as Cisneros’ narrative *The House on Mango Street*. In this chapter, resistance to oppression through creating a counter- hegemonic narrative is explored in Cisneros’ *Mango Street* and selections of her poetry. Cisneros is a writer and intellectual activist resisting typical definitions of otherness and traditional structures of power relations across gender constructions, ethnic, and cultural borders. Her literary works are geared towards change and the unsettling of

the patriarchal constructions of female otherness and the commonly stereotyped United States Third World “Other” mainly represented by the Chicana woman. Cisneros’s narratives are literary attempts of resistance to currently constructed histories of her culture. Through her writing, she rewrites the Chicana woman’s story from a non-hegemonic perspective. In critiquing Cisneros’ resistance and counter- hegemonic narrative, my argument in this chapter breaks down into several elements: unsettling the house, the house and identity formation, constructing a “house of her own”, exposing images of female confinement and oppression, subverting the hegemonic female image, resisting hegemony through writing and the production of ideas.

### *Unsettling the House*

In creating a counter- hegemonic narrative, Cisneros tries to provide non-hegemonic alternatives of the house and the female space. In *The House on Mango Street*, she resists the hegemonic mainstream’s construction of “house” and the female image. In the conventional patriarchal house designed and maintained by hegemony, white women were trapped in either the image of “angel” or “madwoman” which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss in *The Madwomen in the Attic*. In this context, the “angel” is the socially confined and quiet woman who does not question tradition or patriarchy, while the “madwoman” is her counterpart, who dares to rebel against authority. The angel is usually an ideal representation of feminine-associated attributes like purity, submissiveness, and self-denial. The madwoman or monster, conversely, has traits typically associated with masculine behaviors, like aggressiveness (or assertiveness), selfishness (or independence), and the lust for fame and fortune (or ambition and a work ethic). Esperanza, the protagonist, is aware of the alternatives open

to her as a female within those conventional parameters of womanhood and definitions of femaleness. Esperanza shares with her readers what society expects of her and her decision not to commit to those expectations and societal limitations. She narrates:

My mother says when I get older my dusty hair will settle and my blouse will learn to stay clean, but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain ... I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate (88-89).

Esperanza clearly refuses to grow up tame like the others and wait for a man to come along and change her life. She tries to take on a certain behavior associated with masculinity, such as leaving the table without putting back the chair, in the hope of gaining some power she is unable to claim as a Chicana female. She makes a decision to find a different path for herself.

Through the narrative, Cisneros reinvents the house to accommodate Chicana women since the mainstream's dual image of angel and madwoman neglects the issue of race and class in its representation of women and only focuses on female submissiveness to patriarchy or the lack of it. That is, Chicana women and U.S. minority women in general do not share the same experiences and concerns with white women, and so they may be trapped in images that are different from those Anglo women struggle with. For instance, Chicana women are trapped in that image of "maid" or "servant" of white women, while Arab- American women are trapped in the image of "terrorist," or mother breeding terrorists, or "ragheads" that need liberation, while African- American women, on the other hand, are still trapped in images of slavery and servitude to the white man.

Cisneros creates a third space for Chicana women, not the typical Anglo-American space, nor the traditional Chicana limited space. In constructing a counter-hegemonic narrative, Cisneros is compelled to counter both mainstream hegemony and local patriarchy. She is compelled to create a house and an option that resists hegemonic definitions of a house, dominance by white patriarchy, and absolute individualism advocated by middle-class mainstream American Dream. Equally, Cisneros rejects the typical Chicano house that is emblematic of local patriarchy, female subordination, and absolute collectivism. In her construction of a counter-hegemonic narrative, she is forced to shift these paradigms through rejecting both and refusing to adopt either model of a house because they are both controlled and neither one appeases her appetite for autonomy. She does not see any autonomy in the hegemonic version of house because Anglos are subject to enslavement by extreme individualism, the capitalist system, and consumerist mentality.

The Chicano house also falls short of any sense of autonomy because of restriction and confinement imposed on women by society and the sense of shame and internalized inferiority and oppression instilled in them by Chicano patriarchy. Cisneros creates a third space, an in-between space, for Chicana women in which hybridity becomes a utopian space wherein Western dualistic thinking “is transcended” (Quintana 133). This space is not typically American nor Chicano, but a merging of both cultures and simultaneous autonomy and collectivity. It does not comply with the common Western and hegemonic binary images of women as “angel” and “madwoman,” nor that of “virgin” and “whore,” “white” and “brown,” or “us” and “them”. In this hybrid space, the “us” and “them” within the Chicana woman’s subconscious come together to reinvent

the new Chicana woman who is both: autonomous yet loyal to her culture. Although autonomy and loyalty are often conflicted or seem contradictory, the Chicana woman tries to embrace values from both cultures, the Mexican and American culture to fill the gaps that are missing in her life. She seeks autonomy to gain power over her life and future and to make sure she is not to be oppressed and subordinated by economic dependence. This does not necessarily translate into a rejection of her culture or a lack of loyalty to her Mexican origins. On the contrary, because she is loyal to her culture, she wishes to gain empowerment and independence, values adopted by the mainstream, to be able to help other women who are suffering within her culture and to empower them since the Mexican culture has failed to do so. The reinvented Chicana self is strengthened through the merging of the Mexican and American culture that compose the two halves within herself.

In the counter- hegemonic narrative, Esperanza, in *The House on Mango Street*, has been reconstructed as a means for cultural critique not only of traditional Chicano patriarchal expectations for women but also of dominant ideologies “that simply envision liberation in individualistic terms” (Quintana 60). Esperanza is aware that if she leaves Mango Street, her departure will be interpreted as an act of betrayal to Chicano culture because in their eyes it implies a rejection of her own cultural origins and community. To counter these accusations of betrayal, she emphasizes that she does not run away from Mango Street as a way to shed her Mexicanness, but takes her books and papers to pursue an education. And because she suspects people will perceive her as a traitor to her culture and as someone who will never come back, she asserts that she will go away only to come back. She declares:

One day *I will pack my bags of books and paper*. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away. Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away? They will not know I have gone away to come back (110).

In other words, Esperanza indeed seeks liberation but not in individualistic terms or the Western sense of the word. Again, in her departure, she shows an awareness of the multiple interpretations Chicano and Western culture will have of such an act, and responds to both by asserting that she has no intention of adopting either one of the two models of life styles that are expected of her. In fact, she comes up with a third alternative which is liberation not as a form of westernization but a means to education, autonomy, and economic freedom. In her emphasis on “books and paper,” Cisneros provides Chicana women with an alternative to escape from oppression that is not through marriage but through autonomy, education, and freedom envisioned and portrayed in Esperanza’s departure from Mango Street.

This chapter examines the image of the house as a sign of women's oppression. It shows the type of personalities produced by the patriarchal house and the Chicana woman's relationship with the house. The image of the house is explored through Volosinov’s discussion of the sign which he perceives as a socially organized construct designed by individuals within certain circumstances to hold certain meanings under certain conditions. The assigned meanings and interpretations of a sign are important because they affect people's lives socially, economically, politically and psychologically. In *The House on Mango Street* Cisneros unsettles patriarchal constructions of the house.

She recreates the image of the house and gives it new meanings to challenge the hegemonic discourse. She is unhappy with the houses that have been created for women by the patriarchal and hegemonic forces. The houses they have built are not shelters that nurture a woman and her talents, nor provide her with a sense of security. On the contrary, they have become prisons that oppress women and strip them of their rights and freedoms. Cisneros presents multiple images of the house in which Chicana females struggle for justice and an identity of their own.

Anthony King introduces various significances and meanings of the home that can be used to illustrate Cisneros' images of oppression and resistance in her counter-hegemonic narrative and poetry. King's analysis goes beyond the material reality of the house to consider the economic, social, political, cultural and emotional significances attached to it. King states:

At the simplest level, economically, buildings provide for investment, store capital, create work, house activities, occupy land, provide opportunities for rent; socially, they support relationships, provide shelter, express social divisions, permit hierarchies, house institutions, enable the expression of status and authority, embody property relations; spatially, they establish, place, define distance, enclose space, differentiate area; culturally, they store sentiment, symbolize meaning, express identity; politically, they symbolize power, represent authority, become an arena for conflict, or a political resource (Qtd. in McDowell 816).

In Cisneros' literary works, the patriarchal institution is housed within the Chicano home and hierarchies based on gender are established, and patriarchal authority is exercised

over women who are unable to provide for themselves. Culturally, certain meanings are attached to the house that define gender roles, and the formation of identity is influenced by power relations, hierarchical, economic and political structures of society. King's statement reveals the importance of the house and its impact on people's lives, their socio- economic status, and political conditions within their culture. Accordingly, the analysis of Cisneros' narrative and poetry mainly focuses on the house and its value in the formation of identity and all aspects of life.

### *The House and Identity Formation*

In Cisneros' counter- hegemonic narrative, she resists conventional houses and female identities shaped by oppressive patriarchal ideologies and conformist mentalities. Exploring the concept of the house and its relationship with its inhabitants and their identity formation is crucial in Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. In Cisneros' narrative, it is the Chicano patriarchal system that defines the roles of men and women in society. Therefore, the patriarchal force has a powerful role in the formation of the Chicana identity. Monika Kaup states that Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* employs the house as "the master metaphor for the construction of identity"(363). In the narrative, Esperanza realizes that the house and family play a great role in the construction of the identity of the Chicana women surrounding her. She recognizes the fact that the Chicano house dominated by patriarchy will determine the kind of identity and life she will have in the future, and thus, decides to take power over her own life and leaves Mango Street. She leaves in search of herself.

Cisneros presents images of house that imprison their inhabitants and oppress their women and identities, but occasionally unsettles that monolithic image of the Chicano house in which the women are victimized by patriarchy. In this counter-hegemonic narrative, she brings about hope through her recreation of the image of the Chicano house. She presents alternative images of house that are not oppressive but rather nurturing and inspiring. Esperanza lives in a house where there is love and a sense of security regardless of the influence of the Chicano patriarchal society, but she cannot escape the oppression imposed by hegemony and the mainstream due to her family's social status. Esperanza experiences prejudice against the social class she and her family come from. She feels the contempt implied in the nun's reply when she points to her house. The nun replies, "You live there?" Esperanza gives her readers a taste of what she felt that moment. She tells us:

There. I had to look to where she pointed- the third floor, the paint peeling, wood. "There," I said pointing to the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. You live there? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. There. I lived there. I nodded (5).

This modest house defines her and shapes her identity. In the eyes of the hegemonic and dominant culture, Esperanza comes from a shabby home and an impoverished family. The value of this house is overlooked and reduced to class by the hegemonic and capitalist system and the mainstream represented by the nun who cannot see beyond its shabbiness. Ironically, the nun can only sense the poverty of Esperanza's family but cannot see it as a house of love. Her vision is so blurred by class discrimination that she does not realize that this is a house of love where the father cares far more for his

children than the way his house looks. He nailed wooden bars on the windows to keep his children from falling. He did not care about how ugly the windows would look, but cared for their safety. The nun was not able to see the beauty in that. Through this image of an ugly house filled with love and a caring father figure, Cisneros represents the heterogeneity within the Chicano culture in which male figures are not always oppressive nor are females always oppressed either. She also utilizes Esperanza's interaction with the nun to demonstrate class oppression inflicted on Chicanos by the hegemonic culture and to prove that it is not always gender oppression they suffer from, but also other interconnected forces such as class and race.

The nun's reply surprises Esperanza because it seems to be her first encounter with bias by the dominant culture that looks down upon people due to their economic status. It seems this incident has left a scar in Esperanza's life and psyche that eventually drives her to envision and strive for a better house and life in which she will no longer be embarrassed by her economic status or discriminated against by the dominant culture. It seems as though Cisneros realizes that girls like Esperanza are too young to create a discourse for themselves through which they can challenge the mainstream. Thus, she creates a counter-hegemonic discourse through her narrative in an attempt to defend all the young Chicana girls who suffer from multiple oppressions by the dominant culture. Apparently, girls at this age are too young to be able to counter the hegemonic discourse but not too young to be victimized by it.

As a child Esperanza experiences the pain of class discrimination and belittlement by the dominant culture represented by the nun, and yet she is still influenced by various perceptions produced by this culture. She has not reached the stage where she is able to

challenge the dominant culture's perceptions. She adopts them as her ideal. As a child, her initial response is to adopt the American dream in order to escape marginalization and to fit into the mainstream not realizing that the American dream and the ideal house do not guarantee her or people of her race respect and equality because they are the white man's dream and not everyone else's. This can be illustrated through the ideal image of the house Esperanza longs for and describes to her readers:

And our house would have running water and pipes that worked. And inside it would have real stairs, not hallways stairs, but stairs inside like the houses on T.V. and we'd have a basement and at least three washrooms so when we took a bath we wouldn't have to tell everybody. Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence. This was the house Papa talked about when he held a lottery ticket and this was the house Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed (4).

Esperanza realizes that she is defined by her house. This realization contributes to the formation of her dream house. She dreams of the white house promoted by hegemony, a house with a basement, multiple washrooms, trees around it and a big yard. Hegemony successfully builds this image of the house to be consumed by the public. Esperanza picks up this image of the ideal house from T.V. and mainstream media controlled by the hegemonic culture which neglects the needs of U.S. Third World or minority cultures. Not only are these minority cultures ignored in media representations but citizens of a lower social status are ignored likewise. Being 10-15 years old, Esperanza is unaware of the complexity of the situation, and thus does not question the images presented in the media nor their source. She accepts the single image of the house presented to her

because the dominant media does not provide alternative images that can fit all individuals, social classes and races within the borders of the United States. The incident with the nun has made Esperanza, at a young age, aware of the social hierarchies set by the hegemonic culture and the marginalization and invisibility she would have to resist because of the current social class she belongs to. Perhaps this is Esperanza's first unconscious encounter with the hegemonic discourse that she later on becomes aware of and decides to counter, change her situation, and resist oppression and victimization by both the Chicano culture and the dominant culture. She refuses to play the role of the helpless victim in need of sympathy. It is when the nun makes her feel like "nothing" that she decides to be someone and have her own house. She enters the discourse and resists class oppression and confinement. Esperanza asserts:

I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says.

Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go (5).

This incident shows how the Chicano father and mother are equally oppressed by class. And they both realize the importance of social status and the marginalization it could lead to by mainstream society. Therefore, they hope to move on to a better house that will help them gain respect and equality within the dominant culture although Esperanza realizes that it is unlikely to happen.

The house to Esperanza is wherever she can find her identity and shape an independent self be it her home, Mango Street, society, mainstream community or all of them combined together. She is disappointed because of the lack of a sense of belonging that she needs and longs for. She is frustrated with her situation and the house that does

not represent her or reflect who she really is and yet she lives in. She feels an alienation from this house perhaps because it does not live up to her expectations. It does not contribute to the formation of an independent self or an individual identity of her own. On Mango street and within her Chicano home, her interests and needs are overlooked, her voice silenced, and significant existence erased. Esperanza expresses her sadness in her dialogue with Alicia about belonging in the chapter “Alicia and I Talking on Edna’s Steps” in which she comments:

You live right here, 4006 Mango, Alicia says and points to the house I am ashamed of.

No, this isn’t my house I say and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I’ve lived here. I don’t belong. I don’t ever want to come from here. You have a home, Alicia, and one day you’ll go there, to a town you remember, but me I never had a house, not even a photograph ... only one I dream of (106-7).

Although Esperanza loves her family, she does not want to come from her family’s house on Mango Street because she is ashamed of it and longs for a house which she can truly belong to. She is conflicted about her need to leave Mango Street to explore her options and the need to hold on to her Chicana culture and not forget where she came from. Esperanza struggles with her multiple identities: the Chicana identity that is focused on the collective community and common good and her American identity that is focused on individuality and autonomy. The two identities draw her to contrasting life styles. Esperanza’s identity conflict is represented through two types of houses she is drawn to simultaneously and yet that involve central conflicting interpretations. She struggles with the multiple significances of the two houses that represent entirely

different life styles and cultures from which she has to choose. Monika Kaup explains the distinction J.B. Jackson makes between the two types of houses that represent a conflict pointing out that it is a conflict between “permanence and change” and between the “collective and the individual.” The first type is described as “... the traditional ancestral house, identified with long occupancy by the same family over generations ... the second is the new, temporary, and/or movable dwelling, a structure that is flexible and can be altered”(365). Esperanza enjoys the collectivity that characterizes her Chicano community but nonetheless needs to find a place for herself where she can grow as an independent individual and a writer, and *Mango Street* unfortunately does not offer her such space. She tries to reconcile her conflicted interests in the opposing life styles by leaving *Mango Street* but promising to come back for the others. This promise to return to save those women who need to be saved reveals Esperanza’s commitment to social transformation and the collective good. She states she will be leaving one day with her books and paper only to return educated and empowered (110). Esperanza does not want to forget where she comes from but wishes to come back as an educated woman who is able to help those who are not as strong as she is to resist confinement and oppression.

Esperanza’s departure is her first step towards autonomy and self-accomplishment and her resistance to hegemonic and patriarchal oppression of Chicana women. In fact, Esperanza begins to engage in the act of resistance to patriarchal oppressions and hegemonic discourses of the Chicana woman. In the counter- hegemonic narrative Cisneros creates through Esperanza’s activism, she dismantles the typical image of the house and the traditional patriarchal institution that provides no comfort, protection, or happiness for the women in such a corrupt institution. Nevertheless, the

hope for happiness and a better home has not been shattered. On the contrary, the dreadful circumstances of confinement and abuse lead the women on Mango Street to yearn for a house, not the traditional oppressive one provided by the structures of patriarchal society, but a house free of male dominance.

### *Constructing a "House of Her Own"*

Cisneros resists hegemonic perceptions of the house that place the male figure in control. This resistance is manifested through the narrator's vision of an alternative house. Cisneros reinvents the image of "house," a house that leaves no room for any patriarchal rule, but provides the necessary atmosphere and space that can be occupied only by autonomous women who are in no need for a protector or provider. The women in this house do not do sexual favors to survive and can make it on their own with no patriarchal help. In the narrative, Esperanza makes a gradual break away from the patriarchal house to a house of her own where she rules the house and the self she has embraced, emancipated and empowered. In the chapter "A House of My Own," Esperanza presents an alternative space for women like her so as to give Chicana women a glimpse of hope. She presents her own image of the ideal house that she feels is best for her and is made on her own terms. She describes her dream house:

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after.

Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem (108).

What makes this house ideal in Esperanza's eyes is the physical, psychological and economic freedom it allows her. In this house she does not need to obey anyone or make requests to fulfill her basic needs, but can own property and other possessions entirely on her own. In this house she is independent by all means. She enjoys economic independence that enables her to make her own decisions and frees her of various familial and social obligations and restrictions. This space of her own allows for inspiration, intellectual growth and creativity. In this space she can write her own stories, reinvent herself, and draw a more truthful or accurate image of her culture that has been distorted by the dominant culture and media. By having a new home, Esperanza does not reject the entire society because she is a product of this society but wishes to improve her life away from constraints. Esperanza promises herself:

One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house (87).

Esperanza is determined to own her own house. However, she does not wish to forget who she is as a Chicana nor where she comes from. In fact, she does not only embrace her Chicano culture but holds on to its value of collectivism and common good.

Esperanza identifies with the poor and homeless for she commits herself to helping those who do not have a house. She is even willing to take them in and offer them the attic because she herself has suffered from class discrimination by the dominant culture. In Cisneros' counter-hegemonic narrative, Esperanza rejects the house that represents the

Chicano patriarchal system that has failed her and does not have faith in white patriarchy either. She seems to have faith only in women to build a new and better life. Alicia tells Esperanza that she is Mango Street and that she will come back to it eventually to which Esperanza replies:

Not me. Not until somebody makes it better.

Who's going to do it? The mayor?

And the thought of the mayor coming to Mango Street makes me laugh out loud.

Who's going to do it? Not the mayor (107).

The empowered Chicana woman represented by Esperanza resists any illusions of hope to be rescued or saved from economic difficulties or confinement in Mango Street by a patriarchal figure. She believes that transformation and change will not take place through the patriarchal force, on the contrary, it only brings about oppressions and further marginalization of Chicana women.

Cisneros reinvents the house to provide Chicana women with a space different from that illusory ideal house drawn by the American dream and that confined space that is controlled by Western dichotomous and hegemonic thought. Cisneros' compelling urge to create a third space for women stems from the need to counter existing models of oppressive Chicano houses. She exposes Esperanza, who represents any Chicana youth, to multiple existing houses of oppression within the Chicano community to create in her a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo and a desire for change. Cisneros then presents her protagonist with alternative walks of life to explore and experience for herself.

*Exposing Images of Female Confinement and Oppression*

The home in the Chicano culture is a site of contestation where love and support can be found yet at the same time where individuals, women in particular may be oppressed. Cisneros' narrative demonstrates how children absorb the ideologies of a patriarchal society and experience gender inequality. It is not surprising that little girls become aware of their marginalization at an early age. In "Boys and Girls" Esperanza explains that:

The boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls (8).

Esperanza, even at a young age, realizes the inequality between males and females within the Chicano culture. She is made aware of the differences between girls and boys in her own family regardless of the love family members have for each other. There seems to be a non-verbalized agreement between the two genders, brothers and sisters in this case, about their position within the private and public space. Although Esperanza's brothers enjoy their time with their sisters inside the house, they are taught by patriarchal society to act as superior to the female gender and they internalize such teachings at an early age.

Cisneros resists the Chicana woman's oppression through exposing it to the world and condemning it. In *The House on Mango Street* readers are allowed into Esperanza's world to see it through her eyes and into the multiple houses of oppression she resists. Cisneros exposes patriarchy's oppression of women throughout Esperanza's journey in the search of a "home" of her own. Highlighting these images of female oppression is a significant act of resistance to existing social structures and patriarchal constructions of

house. It also helps break the silence about the injustices inflicted upon Chicana women. “Esperanza bears witness to her life and the lives of other women, revealing how social constrictions of poverty, gender, culture, and ethnicity touch upon her life and those around her”(Wissman 28). The Chicano patriarchal oppression takes on different forms and shapes. In the narrative, Esperanza has borne witness to the suffering of many women surrounding her whether through confinement, physical abuse, or silencing.

In *The House on Mango Street* Chicana women are trapped in their houses and in a life designed and limited by the patriarchal force of the Chicano husband and community. The patriarchal institution maintains power to control woman’s sexuality in Chicano culture. Rafaela, for instance, is imprisoned in her own house because she is too beautiful. Her movement is restricted because she can bring shame to the family through her sexuality. She leans out the window and wishes she could go to a bar and dance before she gets old. Esperanza narrates that “And then Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at”(79). Rafaela’s beauty is looked at as trouble and so she is being imprisoned in her home because of it. She is denied freedom due to her femininity. She continues to lean out the window and a long time passes until Esperanza and her friends forget she is up there. She becomes invisible.

Cisneros provides images of the house where gender oppression is exercised and allowed by society. One of the images of female confinement Esperanza learns about during her childhood is that of her great- grandmother whom she was named after. Under

the oppression of a patriarchal figure, she is forced into a marriage she does not want.

Esperanza admires her great- grandmother who she describes as:

A wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great- grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That's the way he did it (11).

Esperanza's grandmother was a strong woman who refused to get married but she had been commodified and dealt with as a possession, "a fancy chandelier," by the man she married through coercion. She was denied the freedom to choose a husband and any control over her life. This image of victimization within her family has made a great impact on Esperanza and the vision she has for her future. She sympathizes with her great- grandmother and learns from this horrible experience. Perhaps this incident strengthens Esperanza's will and desire to become somebody whose life is not wasted by sitting beside the window. Esperanza describes her great- grandmother's situation after she gets married:

She never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window (11).

In this house, the Chicana woman is oppressed and silenced. She plays no significant role that makes her visible. Esperanza's great- grandmother spends her life looking out the window, accomplishing nothing and observing other people living their lives. Esperanza is faced with this image of female oppression that helps her decide the kind of life she

wants to lead. She wonders whether her grandmother made the best out of her situation or spent her whole life feeling sorry for the chances she lost. She does not mind inheriting her name because she was a fierce woman yet she realizes how difficult her grandmother's situation and life was and thus refuses to inherit her place by the window and lead the same kind of life she was forced to lead.

Throughout the narrative, Esperanza is exposed to various houses and styles of life led by Chicana women that she can choose from. Esperanza bears witness to gender oppression that can go much further than just discrimination or confinement that is exercised in Sally's house. In this patriarchal house of oppression, Sally is continuously subject to physical abuse by her father. The narrator describes Sally's situation:

He never hits [her] hard. She said her mama rubs lard on all the places where it hurts. Then at school she'd say she fell. That's where all the blue places come from. That's why her skin is always scarred (92).

In this patriarchal house, the female is punished when she does not conform to the moral codes of Chicano society. Sally is subject to physical abuse by her father because he thinks that is the way to control her sexuality and prevent her from bringing shame to the family. Sally is beaten up by her father like an animal because "He thinks [she's] going to run away like his sisters who made the family ashamed. Just because [she's] a daughter"(92). Sally's father cares more about society and the family's reputation than his own daughter. He hurts her to protect his status and image in Chicano society. He plays the role of the "macho" who is simultaneously aggressive and over protective of his women He is also controlled by the patriarchal view of female as a "good" or "bad" girl, or that binary of virgin vs. whore within the Chicano culture. Sally is victimized by the

limited alternatives available to her as a Chicana woman. Chicano society and her father do not provide her with sufficient alternatives to choose from nor do they allow her to find a path and way of life that best suits her. Sally's father at a certain point promises not to beat her up any more:

Until one day Sally's father catches her talking to a boy and the next day she doesn't come to school. And the next, until the way Sally tells it, he just went crazy, he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt. You're not my daughter ... And then he broke into his hands (93).

Sally is devastated by her father's maltreatment and hopes to have a better life once she is married. She leaves her father's house to her husband's where she thinks she will no longer be victimized. The narrator explains that "Sally got married like we knew she would, young and not ready but married just the same... She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape"(101). Although Sally tries to break free from the oppressive patriarchal rule of her father that took control of her entire existence by getting married, she continues her life away from him only to be victimized by a husband who is another oppressive patriarchal figure that exercises a power granted to him by society. The narrator tells us that he is okay "Except he won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working. She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission"(102). Esperanza bears witness to Sally's abuse by her father and confinement by her husband. Sally does not even get to sit beside the window like the other women, she has been totally imprisoned in her house and controlled by fear of the patriarchal force. Clearly, it is not only through beating and physical abuse that Chicana

women are victimized but they are also oppressed by the physical space they are restricted to as illustrated by Sally's predicament.

The women on Mango Street try to resist the oppression of their fathers and their dominant influence in the house by getting married and moving on to a new home. They go through the transition still having faith in the patriarchal institution and hoping their husbands will fulfill their needs and make up for the suffering they went through in their fathers' houses. In some instances, Cisneros seems to imply that the women's respect for and obedience to patriarchy is only motivated by their need for financial support.

Esperanza declares:

She has her husband and her house now, her pillowcases and her plates... Sally says she likes being married because now she gets to buy her own things when her husband gives her money (101).

Cisneros implies that women may want to marry to escape from their tyrannical fathers or to improve their economic status; Sally gets married for both reasons but unfortunately marriage does not actually help her gain happiness. Michelle Sugiyama finds that "It is not paradoxical that the home-bound girls of Mango Street yearn for houses. Prisoners in houses ruled by their fathers, they seek escape in the only way they know how ...

Unfortunately, the only means of acquiring a house which their rigorously patriarchal culture makes available to them is a husband"(17). Sally and other women have not explored different possibilities to build a better life for themselves and to escape oppression. Instead they have submitted to the limitations set by patriarchal society and the dreams set for them by the patriarchal discourse. Patriarchy has decided that women's

only means to acquire a house is through a husband and many Chicana women such as Sally have conformed to this path while others have challenged it like Esperanza.

Esperanza constantly reminds us that these women have potential and certain interests whether in poetry, writing, dancing or education and it was not a choice they have made on their own to become uneducated dependent housewives but a life style imposed on them by Chicano patriarchy. They have been confined to a domestic space in which a woman's individuality and independence are not a concern but what matters the most is attending to the needs of the husband and children. Esperanza draws an image of women in Mango Street in "A Smart Cookie":

I could've been somebody, you know? My mother says and sighs. She has lived in this city her whole life. She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a T.V. But she doesn't know which subway train to take to get downtown. I hold her hand very tight while we wait for the right train to arrive. She used to draw when she had time... Someday she would like to go to the ballet (90).

Ironically, her mother who did not receive an education or pursue a career of her own, and lives under the patriarchal rule refuses to pass down to her children the passivity imposed on Chicana women. She is aware of the oppressive life and social expectations of confinement and servitude for women within the patriarchal house. Therefore, she stresses the value of education and views it as the only means to economic freedom and control over one's life. She not only encourages Esperanza to get an education and lead an autonomous life she herself could not have, but in fact urges her to study very hard to

overcome the oppressive circumstances within the Chicano house and culture. Esperanza narrates her mother's story:

Today while cooking oatmeal she is Madame Butterfly until she sighs and points the wooden spoon at me. I could've been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard. That Madame Butterfly was a fool. She stirs the oatmeal. Look at my comrades. She means Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead. Got to take care all your own, she says shaking her head (91).

Esperanza's mother has no faith in husbands and fathers and the selves they house, and realizes that a woman's only hope is through education and self-reliance because of the too many patriarchal figures who have failed their wives and daughters. She rejects the patriarchal house of the U.S. Third World and the hegemonic culture alike that only house dependent and paralyzed selves and identities of women. She challenges patriarchal forces and adopts a counter-hegemonic discourse through which she reveals to her daughter the truth that Chicana women got to take care of themselves all on their own (91). She subverts the illusive imagery of patriarchy as absolute protectors, providers and all knowers.

Esperanza's mother also addresses the issue of class and portrays it as a key factor to oppression, imprisonment, and disempowerment. She explains how her social class was an obstacle that stood in the way of her advancement. She felt her economic status deemed her irrelevant and invisible to society and so unworthy of an education and respect. She asserts that:

Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains (91).

We assume that Esperanza is too young to be involved in a counter- hegemonic discourse, but perhaps her involvement in such a discourse of resistance has started within the family circle through her interaction with her mother. Esperanza's mother has managed to create a space in her house in which the patriarchal rule does not always prevail. Within this space, her voice is not silenced. She can interact freely with her daughters and involve them in a counter- hegemonic discourse without necessarily making them conscious of it. She does this by explaining to them that a woman should get an education and make a living on her own because poverty can be detrimental to women's potential and advancement. She uses herself as an example to push her daughter to become what she was not able to in her own life. She teaches them the value of education, autonomy, and economic freedom. This can be illustrated through the image of Rosa Vargas, an overtired mother who has too many children. Esperanza comments that "They are bad those Vargas, and how can they help it with only one mother who is tired all the time from buttoning and bottling and babying, and who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come"(29).

The author also exposes her readers to the mentality of Chicano men and their perception of women and their roles. Esperanza tells us about Alicia who sees mice but is told to close her eyes and sleep because according to her father "... A woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star, the one that appears early just in time to rise and catch the hind legs hide behind the sink..."(31). Alicia resists this typical

role of women in Chicano society and continues her education. The narrator points out that:

Alicia, who inherited her mama's rolling pin and sleepiness, is young and smart and studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin. Is a good girl, my friend, studies all night and sees the mice, the ones her father says do not exist. Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers (31).

Alicia is aware of the oppression inflicted upon women due to their ignorance and gender and thus challenges the patriarchal institution. She is another Chicana female image who, like Esperanza, seeks empowerment through education.

Esperanza's desire to find a third space and house of her own is strengthened by witnessing the suffering of oppressed Chicana women who do not know how to escape their situation such as Minerva whose husband keeps abusing and leaving her. Esperanza sums up her story by saying that "One day she is through and lets him know enough is enough. Out the door he goes. Clothes, records, shoes. Out the window and the door locked. But that night he comes back ... Then he is sorry and she opens the door again. Same story. Next week she comes over black and blue and asks what can she do? (85). These oppressed women are not empowered enough to resist patriarchal oppression. They have accepted the only option patriarchy provides for Chicana women which is to belong to a husband and give in to his domination and abuse. Cisneros exposes to the world such oppression so as not to participate in the silence or further oppression of women. She allows Esperanza to bear witness to the suffering of many Chicana women to find the need to carve a path for herself free from victimization, imprisonment, and

marginalization. Because Esperanza witnesses the various oppressions other Chicana women have experienced, she is determined to create a space and house of her own where no oppression exists and women's voices are heard.

*Subverting the Hegemonic Female Image*

Historically, Chicana feminists and women who spoke out loud against patriarchy's oppression were judged through the binary that classified them as "bad" for challenging patriarchal power. The "good" girl came to mean in the patriarchal discourse the silent and submissive and oppressed one. She was the one who sought male attraction and approval and never resisted the restrictions and injustices imposed on her. In Cisneros' rejection of female otherness and polarized images of "good" and "bad" girl, she challenges the image of the loose woman and provides an image of an empowered female. She writes in her poem "Loose Woman":

Diamonds and pearls  
Tumble from my tongue.  
Or toads and serpents.  
Depending on the mood I'm in....  
I am the woman of myth and bullshit.  
(True. I authored some of it.)  
I built my little house of ill repute.  
Brick by brick. Labored,  
Loved and masoned it...  
By all accounts I am

A danger to society...  
I break laws,  
Upset the natural order,  
Anguish the Pope and make fathers cry.  
I am beyond the jaw of law (113-114).

In this counter- hegemonic resistance poem, Cisneros disrupts patriarchal definitions of womanhood. The speaker does not represent the "ideal" image of female that patriarchy has designed for Chicana women. She is not a silent, obedient and subservient woman but rather an empowered and outspoken woman whose autonomy and strength is a threat to patriarchal society. She asserts that patriarchal laws cannot control her or silence her and she does not care about her image in society because it is created by patriarchy but she provides an alternative image that best represents independent Chicana women. Norma Alarcon states that “As Chicanas embrace feminism they are charged with betrayal a la Malinche”(209). As a self- motivated activist who took upon herself the responsibility to resist oppression and embrace the feminist stance, Cisneros puts herself on the line and refuses to submit to false charges of betrayal that work against her. Her social and intellectual activism is manifested through her feminist writings and positive representations of female resistance within the Chicano culture as can be seen in her poem "Loose Woman":

I'm an aim-well,  
Shoot- sharp,  
Sharp- tongued,  
Sharp- thinking,

Fast- speaking,  
Foot- loose,  
Loose- tongued,  
Let- loose,  
Woman- on- the- loose  
Loose woman (114).

Cisneros rejects the way patriarchy views empowered and assertive women as loose women. The speaker is proud of being an independent and sharp thinking non-conformist female who can speak and think for herself. She does not think of herself as a loose or an immoral woman but if her autonomy and strength makes her a "loose" woman in the eyes of society, she accepts that label because she has reinvented it and created new and positive meanings for what "loose" stands for. In this light, the speaker reclaims a sense of respect for all women through presenting herself as sexually empowered. The representation of women is significant in the poem because the empowered female speaker rejects any feelings of self-hatred that may have generated through sexual oppression by the patriarchal institution. Cisneros' poem works to rid Chicana women of feelings of an internalized oppression or a sense of inferiority they may have internalized over the years in Chicano history.

In the resistance and counter-hegemonic narrative, Chicana women refuse to be exploited through their sexuality. Nor do they appreciate the empowerment and visibility gained through it for both ways they are being controlled by their femininity and by patriarchal definitions of female beauty. Cisneros allows Chicana girls to explore various ways through which they can gain visibility in the patriarchal Chicano culture. Although

some of these girls temporarily choose to gain visibility through physical attraction and male attention, they eventually develop an insight into the type of life and patriarchal social norms they would be submitting to. This insight leads them to give up on a visibility only gained through their objectification. They eventually realize that such visibility will cost them their freedom and individuality. In “The Family of Little Feet” Esperanza, Lucy, and Rachel enjoy the recognition they get when they wear the little high heel shoes. When they recognize the attention and visibility they have attained through these shoes, they are overjoyed at the beginning but then they are terrified by the risks these shoes have presented. All of a sudden, these girls have become young adults worthy of attention and recognition, an attention they have longed for by their fathers and brothers and families. The shoes have empowered them temporarily making them the center, a place they would like to embrace and experience rather than the periphery they have been accustomed to all their lives. The narrator explains:

It’s Rachel who learns to walk the best all strutted in those magic high heels. She teaches us to cross and uncross our legs, and to run like a double- dutch rope, and how to walk down to the corner so that the shoes talk back to you with every step. Lucy, Rachel, me tee- tottering like so. Down to the corner where the men can’t take their eyes off us. We must be Christmas (40).

Cisneros reveals the girls’ need for recognition by the dominant society and the patriarchal system, and their dissatisfaction with their lack of visibility and voice. In reality, it is not the shoes themselves that they long for but the power and recognition the shoes allow them and the chance to experience such an unfamiliar sense of domination. They are excessively happy about this experience and so do not want to give up these

magical shoes. This appears in the girls' dialogue about the shoes, "Do you like these shoes? Rachel says yes, and Lucy says yes, and yes I say, these are the best shoes. We will never go back to wearing the other kind again (41)." It is only natural that once they step out of the periphery and experience the power of the center, they do not wish to return to their marginal position in society. These "magical shoes" have given them the feeling that they are now worthy of attention and admiration and so in this light, they must be "Christmas." Unfortunately, it is through these shoes that the girls feel valuable and visible. Cisneros shows how these girls have given into the hegemonic and patriarchal discourse of the dominant culture that created the image of "Cinderella" to which women ought to aspire to and through which they are commodified. Cisneros uses this cultural imagery that belongs to the hegemonic mainstream to represent the ideals of femininity and beauty only to subvert its significance later on in the narrative:

Hurray! Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly... Do you like these shoes? But the truth is it is scary to look down at your foot that is no longer yours and see attached a long long leg (40).

The girls are glad to become visible in their society not realizing the danger that comes along with this type of visibility only gained through the high heel shoes. The shoes, for these girls, represent an opportunity to exercise power for the first time. As Michelle Sugiyama argues in the analysis of feet and high heels in an article "Of Woman Bondage: The Eroticism of Feet in *The House on Mango Street*" that "This power to arouse men and to make women jealous initially exhilarates them ... enjoying for the moment their position as the source rather than the object of power"(10). It is not a surprise that they are happy to have this power over men since they do not normally have any power in

their lives. They have been subjugated by the Chicano patriarchal force within the private and public sphere alike. It is unfortunate however that the sexual power these girls possess may be the only power they ever get to exercise and so once the opportunity presents itself they take it. They view it as a means for empowerment and recognition. Lucy says “You need them [hips] to dance”(49). Esperanza responds “I don’t care what kind I get. Just as long as I get hips”(51).

Initially Esperanza and her friends fall into the trap and conform to the set of beliefs enforced by patriarchy through wearing the high heel shoes. They also conform themselves to the male gaze and to definitions of beauty and attractiveness set by patriarchal standards. But after they experience the trouble that comes with the shoes and the patriarchal standards of beauty, they decide they do not care for such power that ironically disempowers them and strips them of any freedom and turns them into victims of male desire. After they are approached by a “bum” that is willing to pay a dollar in exchange for a kiss, they run away in fear. Esperanza narrates “We are tired of being beautiful. Lucy hides the lemon shoes and the red shoes ... until one Tuesday her mother, who is very clean, throws them away. But no one complains”(42). The girls do not regret having lost the power they gained through their sexuality and the shoes nor the source of that power either. They realize that the power they experienced was an illusion and in reality it was a source of victimization they failed to see initially in their desperate search for recognition and visibility within their society. The girls’ final rejection of the high heels translates as their resistance to the social standards and definitions of beauty set by patriarchy. Sugiyama believes their rejection is due to their unwillingness to be attractive on such terms (18).

In resistance to hegemonic representations of Chicana women as a monolithic image of submissive and confined women, Cisneros presents the heterogeneity of female identities within the Chicano culture. To contrast those distorted images that do not acknowledge the Chicana woman's intellect or control over her own life, Cisneros draws images of Chicana women who refuse to gain recognition and visibility through their sexuality, high heel shoes, and physical appearance, and others who do not want to inherit their mothers' rolling pin or place next to the window and others who refuse to wait for a husband, and those who seek empowerment and liberation through education.

*Resisting Hegemony through Writing and the Production of Ideas*

Merelman argues that resistance to hegemony happens when U.S. Third World people themselves become "producers of ideas" and new knowledge, and challenge the dominant culture and reach a broad public (319). Chicana women have come to understand the nature of hegemony and oppression, and so have carved a way for themselves to resist such oppression and to empower themselves. Chicana writers have produced new ideas and knowledge through which they create a counter- hegemonic discourse and resist patriarchal structures of oppression. Chicanas have used writing as a tool to break the silence and to dismantle hegemonic perceptions of Chicana women. In "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers" Gloria Anzaldua explains:

"Why am I compelled to write? ... Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease

my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you (187).

Anzaldua, like other Chicana writers, refuses to play the role of the victim who accepts oppression and subordination by hegemonic forces. She writes to create a narrative that reflects the life of the Chicana woman and her dilemma that defies the fabricated stories written about her and her people. She rewrites the history of the Chicana woman to unfold the truths about her life and to expose the heterogeneity within the Chicano culture. Cisneros, as a feminist working towards social transformation, contributes to the creation of this counter- hegemonic narrative of the Chicana woman. In her resistance to hegemonic and patriarchal oppression of women, Cisneros exposes her readers to the interconnected forms of oppression through which hegemony marginalizes the Chicana woman and perpetuates her otherness. Chicana women have been oppressed by the various forces of gender, class and race that are utilized by hegemony to maintain its dominance over this subordinate group.

In Cisneros counter- hegemonic narrative through which she resists domination, stereotypes of her people and male oppression, negative images of female subjugation and positive images of empowered women are juxtaposed. Cisneros represents a different image of Chicana women, one who is not confined by the patriarchal house. She presents her as an independent woman who travels across oceans, explores the world, and speaks out when she is misrepresented. Cisneros is critical of the West's stereotypical view of Mexicans and their misrepresentation in the media. In "Mexicans in France" a dialogue takes place between a Mexican speaker and a French man who is influenced by media representations. He mentions:

He remembers

A Mexican Marlon Brando once on French tv.

How, in westerns,

The Mexicans are always

The bad guys. And-

Is it true

All Mexicans

Carry knives?

I laugh.

- Lucky for you

I'm not carrying my knife

Today (91-2).

The speaker is cynical of the generalization the French man makes about an entire people and the way he accepts certain notions about the "other" without questioning them.

Chicana feminists rupture the dominant and patriarchal narrative that portrays Chicanas as submissive and passive women and creates a new narrative that reflects their strength and empowerment. Chicana writers refuse to remain on the periphery silenced and victimized. In their counter- hegemonic narrative they bring their suffering and male oppression to the forefront to raise awareness and to urge people to resist domination and suppression. Their resistance to hegemony and patriarchal oppression is manifested through their writing and determination to make themselves visible. Anzaldua explains how her writing is a form of resistance and a tool for survival:

Why am I compelled to write? ...To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self- autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit. To show that I can and that I will write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary. And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing (187).

Anzaldua is aware of the invisibility of the Chicana woman within the dominant culture and the Chicano community, and thus, presents through her writing the image of an empowered and rebellious woman who is a creator of knowledge and a silence breaker. She challenges the patriarchal image of the Chicana woman Cisneros refers to in her poem "I Awake in the Middle of the Night and Wonder if You've Been Taken":

At any moment, a precise second might claim you ...

You're there, in that city. You don't count. You're not history ...

I'm a woman like you.

I don't count either.

Not a thing I say.

Not a thing I do (64).

Cisneros is critical of gender oppression in the Chicano culture. The speaker in the poem sums up the dilemma of some Chicana women who are made invisible, silent, and subordinate by patriarchy. As a woman, she does not count, what she says or does does not count either. These women suffer from discrimination and inequality due to their gender. Anzaldua's and Cisneros' writing inspires these victimized women to take action

and resist oppression and to find a voice for themselves. Cisneros' *Mango Street* deals with this image of the passive and helpless victimized Chicana female but also presents other images of autonomous women from which they can draw strength and power to transform themselves and their lives.

Merelman states that “It is argued that dominants effectively protect themselves by presenting only those subordinate personalities, achievements and expressions which echo, rather than oppose, dominant group beliefs. Alternatively, dominants often depict subordinates as deviants, thereby justifying continued subordination”(320). Interestingly, the entire chicano culture is reduced to one or the other image of either subordinates or deviants that need to be subordinated by the hegemonic discourse. This continuous reproduction of negative and reductive images of Chicano males and females is what Chicana writers struggle with and try to subvert in their writings. In Cisneros' counter-hegemonic narrative, she presents personalities that oppose “dominant group beliefs.” She produces images of women who are aware of their oppression and wish to alter their situation. Esperanza understands that Chicanos suffer from racial discrimination and otherization by the mainstream. Esperanza realizes that in terms of race, there is a sense of mutual fear and hostility between the Chicano culture and the dominant culture. They fail to communicate with one another especially if it is not only racial differences they are dealing with but also economic divisions that further marginalize them. In “Those Who Don’t,” Esperanza addresses the perceptions and attitudes both races have toward each other. She explains:

Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake.

But we aren't afraid ... All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity- shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes (28).

Cisneros unsettles the meanings attached to the subordinate and dominant culture represented by the binary of dark vs. light read as evil vs. good. Esperanza states that Chicanos are brown and dark in color, but nonetheless they are safe being around other people from their own culture. However, these brown people feel insecure and threatened by people of other colors specifically if they are white because they are aware of the antagonism the dominant culture feels against Chicanos. In this sense Cisneros disrupts the dominant narrative that demonizes Chicanos and other minority cultures.

Cisneros raises the issue of racial conflict between Chicanos and the dominant culture so women looking for a way out from Mango Street are not deceived by Esperanza's decision to leave. She does not lead them to believe that Esperanza's departure will only take her to the ideal house and space she has always dreamed of. On the contrary, her decision to leave is informed by the obstacles she will face within the dominant culture. She is aware of the mutual attitudes of hostility and distrust between them due to the color of her skin. Esperanza reassures her community that she is not trying to become westernized or betray her culture through her departure. She conveys to them that is just a path for liberation and education but she would still face racism and

will not be welcomed or granted that feeling of security or solidarity she feels when they are “all brown all around” because in the mainstream culture, her brownness is not welcomed but rather demonized or stigmatized. This reality is a schism between the two cultures within the United States that is nurtured by hegemonic systems. Nevertheless, it is a challenge Esperanza is compelled to face.

Cisneros realizes what hybridity and a third space entails and although the Anglo-American culture may offer economic freedom, class and racial discrimination remain prevalent in this society. As Esperanza renegotiates her hybrid identity, and a space for herself between the two cultures, she realizes that she may be escaping the Chicana woman’s rolling pin and gender oppression within Chicano culture but not necessarily to be met with an ideal situation in the dominant culture. She is aware she will have to deal with different forms of oppression which are class and racial conflicts, but “that is how it goes and goes” when you live in between cultures and house a hybrid identity. Sacrifices have to be made and risks have to be taken.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

A group of women of color come together to organize. An argument ensues about whether or not Arab women should be included. Some argue that Arab women are “white” since they have been classified as such in the US census. Another argument erupts over whether or not Latinas qualify as “women of color,” since some may be classified as “white” in their Latin American countries of origin and/ or “pass” as white in the United States.

-- Andrea Smith

This dissertation began with my attempt to understand the hegemonic discourse, its representations of the Arab- American and Chicano culture, and its tendency to homogenize these very distinct cultures within the U.S. into a single “Other.” I have explored these U.S. minority cultures with special emphasis on their women and feminist issues. In my analysis of Mohja Kahf’s and Sandra Cisneros’ work, I focus on the cultural images through which Arab- American and Chicana women are oppressed and misrepresented by hegemonic discourses. The main cultural images that have played major roles in the lives of these women which I carefully examine in this study are the veil in the case of Arab- Americans and the house in the Chicana community. In my discussion of the two female writers’ works, I provide a critique of the Arab/ Islamic feminist movement and the Chicana feminist movement and the major issues that concern them. In an attempt to explore hegemony and resistance within Kahf’s and Cisneros’ feminist writings, I employ a Gramscian notion of hegemony and counter- hegemony, consistently examining the processes of resistance within and against structures of oppression.

In the counter- hegemonic narrative that I have created through my discussion, I have presented the voices of several Arab- American/ Islamic feminists and Chicana

feminists who have strived to resist silencing and subordination, and subvert patriarchal structures of oppression, whether local or Western. These feminists not only rejected suppression, but rewrote their stories and histories rejecting reductive hegemonic narratives of them. They succeeded in carving autonomous spaces that allow the Arab-American and Chicana woman to speak up, grow, excel, and produce artistic work, and create a counter- hegemonic discourse that challenges various types of patriarchal, hegemonic, and imperialist dominance.

The feminist critic Chela Sandoval argues in her renowned book, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, that the invisibility of U.S. Third World feminism within academia is no longer possible, unless scholars act out of hatred or fear (170). Although Sandoval believes it is impossible for U.S. Third World feminism to remain invisible in academia, I argue that Arab- American feminism has remained and continues to be invisible in academia till today which necessitates so many more projects similar to mine to address this invisibility and contribute to its active presence.

I believe this study opens up new opportunities to explore further the literature of minority women under the framework of U.S. Third World feminism. Through this study and use of the term “U.S. Third World” feminism, I have found that much more research needs to be done to explore the multi- layers of such a term which many scholars have not grasped yet within U.S. academic circles. The term “U.S. Third World Feminism” needs to be re-introduced to feminist and women’s studies conferences that focus on feminist issues and minority women within the borders of the U.S. in order to open up broader theoretical frameworks that are able to integrate the interconnected issues of gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, imperialism, hegemony, resistance, and

colonization in their analyses and interpretations of feminist works, and theorizations of highly complex structures of oppression within the First and Third World. The areas of “U.S. Third World” feminism and Arab- American / Islamic Feminism need to be further explored and addressed as part of the body of American literature because they have been ghettoized by the U.S. academy and feminist conferences, and treated as international issues pertaining to the Third World in particular read as “non- American” and non-central to Western feminist movements or discussions. In fact, Arab- American feminism and literature that have been written in English, taught in American classrooms, and produced in the U.S. have been dealt with on many occasions as Arab, Middle Eastern, and foreign literature that does not in any way connect to the progressive Western world of the United States.

I am optimistic that my critical analysis of an Arab- American literary text along with a Chicano text will open up new doors of discussion about U.S. Third World women’s issues within classes of comparative literature and multi- ethnic literature in U.S. academy. I hope my research project paves the way to build bridges between U.S. feminists and minority women and Arab- American feminists as they have been alienated and excluded from many U.S. feminist discussions. In national and international meetings addressing human rights and the Third World, Arab- American women activists have been rendered invisible and voiceless as it is clearly stated in the anthology of women of color *Incite*:

[In these meetings], the Arab woman’s perspective is consistently left out. We’re either excluded entirely, or minimized by being blended into other categories. In the United Nations meetings I attend, the category “Arab” is often mixed into the

category “Asian” or “African.” There is hardly anything out there for us that allows us to specifically deal with Arab issues, and this leads to a lack in Arab women’s representation at these meetings (qtd. in Naber, *The Forgotten “-ism”* 108).

I believe this exclusion and silencing of Arab- American voices has led to a great lack of information about these women’s concerns and struggles within U.S. intellectual discussions, professional and feminist circles. This lack of information and communication in turn hinders the establishment of coalitions and building solidarities among the various feminisms, mainstream and non- dominant. The gap and lack of communication between Anglo- American and Arab- American women is exemplified through Suheir Hammad’s description of the situation and tense atmosphere right after the fall of The World Trade Center in her poem “First Writing Since”:

First, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot’s heart failed,  
The plane’s engine died.  
... please don’t let it be anyone  
Who looks like my brothers ...  
On my block, a woman was crying in a car parked and stranded in hurt.  
I offered comfort, extended a hand she did not see before she said,  
“we’re gonna burn them so bad, I swear, so bad.” My hand went to my  
Head and my head went to the numbers within it of the dead Iraqi  
Children, the dead in Nicaragua. The dead in Rwanda who had to vie  
With fake sport wrestling for America’s attention (98-99).

In this poem Hammad feels the suffering of others and wishes she can unite in solidarity with other women in their common struggle against oppression and injustice around the world since everyone has been victimized in one form or another. However, she realizes that others in the dominant culture may not share the same sentiments but have internalized hegemonic perceptions of the other and that imperialist rhetoric of “us” vs. “them”.

In the article “The Forgotten “-ism,” the writers explain that Arab- American women have tremendously tired of being misunderstood and perceived as “the nameless veiled women” even in progressive feminist groups (106). They go on to note that the images of the “nameless veiled woman” who is either crying or passively accepting her oppression within mainstream media mark Arab and Muslim women as either “out of control” or “having no control” and thus “there is no space in between for them to assert their identities or power as agents of social change” (106). The research participants in this study explain that “the demonization of Arab women does not only obstruct the ways that they are perceived, but it obstructs Arab American women’s activism by adding to their agenda the additional task of challenging myths and breaking stereotypes” (106). Perhaps if feminists and Western intellectuals approached the issue of the Muslim veil objectively, examined it within its own religious context, and not from a Eurocentric perspective or a hegemonic discursive view of it, they would be able to respect such a practice and people’s freedom of religious belief and finally be able to move beyond it to more pressing issues touching the lives of Arab- American women.

For future studies serious efforts should be dedicated to analyze the rhetoric, language, and diction used in discussions of the Muslim veil within Western hegemonic

discourses as my dissertation initiates such a dialogue through unraveling the sign of the veil and the multiple layers of interpretation it entails. In an attempt on my behalf to build a connection and a bridge between Arab- American feminists and US women of color, in this dissertation I examine the sign of the veil within the Arab- American culture and the house in Chicano community.

In exploring women's issues and their resistance to patriarchy and hegemony in the Arab- American and Chicano community represented in Kahf and Cisneros, the two protagonists: Khadra and Esperanza have renegotiated a space of their own for their hybrid identities and the multiple selves they house. They both struggle to find a third space to occupy outside their original culture and the dominant American culture where they do not feel a sense of belonging. In these two limited spaces, they are trapped between the "them" and "us" when in reality it is exactly this binary that constitutes their hybrid identity, for within them lies the conflicted "them" and "us" simultaneously. Because of this multiple and hybrid identity that defines them, the protagonists are compelled to resist the dichotomous binaries imposed by either culture that aims at aligning them to one without the other. It is as though the protagonists are positioned by the hegemonic discourse in a limited space where they have to choose between the options President Bush offers when he states you are either with us or against us. Kahf and Cisneros reject such rhetoric because it involves and even demands their denial of half of their selves, their less dominant half in particular, in order to have a single allegiance and an Americanness that can go unquestioned. In the counter- hegemonic discourse Kahf and Cisneros create in their narratives, empowered Arab- American and

Chicana women resist patriarchal structures of oppression and hegemonic dominance over their cultures.

Khadra and Esperanza, as U.S. Third World women, have different experiences of othering and marginalization. While Khadra, as a Muslim Arab- American, is mostly discriminated against because of her veil and religious Islamic beliefs, Esperanza's experiences of oppression involve class issues. While this may be a point of divergence that separates the Muslim American woman's struggle from that of the Chicana woman's, their common context of struggle involves a resistance to sexist and racist patriarchal and hegemonic structures of oppression. They both resist the hegemonic discourse that subordinates them and portrays them as silenced oppressed women in need of liberation. They also resist patriarchal dominance over them that tries to keep them confined, limit their freedoms, and stand in the way of their autonomy and intellectual growth. In times of difficulty, Khadra and Esperanza found support and comfort in their solidarity with other women who also seek autonomy and a break away from conformity and social restrictions. They both have mothers who have made sacrifices for their families and encourage their daughters to gain success and autonomy through education and not through unreliable husbands. Both Khadra and Esperanza have encountered racial discrimination due to different reasons. Khadra, who represents Muslim Arab- Americans, faces racism because of her connections to her cultural origins and Middle Eastern ancestry that is mistakenly associated with terrorism and 9/11 in the West. Esperanza, however, who represents Chicanos in general, is discriminated against because of her skin color and the disturbed relationships between Mexicans and Anglo-

Americans at the borders and the tragic history of conquest and invasions by the United States into Mexican lands.

Kahf and Cisneros representing Arab- American and Chicana feminist activists who also represent U.S. Third World feminists whose oppression and suffering may vary have participated through their counter- hegemonic narratives in the common feminist struggle against sexist, racist, socialist, imperialist and hegemonic constructions of oppression that Mohanty constantly stresses in her writing. Although Arab- American and Islamic feminists have been invisible and voiceless for a long time, they have been determined to gain visibility and assert their presence in Western feminist dialogues and discussions of women of color or U.S. Third World feminists. Some progress has been achieved in the last two decades in terms of the visibility of Arab- American feminists. They have resisted the hegemonic and imperialist discourse that otherizes them and demonizes their men and cultures through their writing and creation of a counter- hegemonic discourse in publications such as *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab- Canadian Feminists* edited by Joanna Kadi in 1994, *Arab Women Between Defiance and Restraint* edited by Suha Sabbagh in 1996, *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* edited by Susan Darraj in 2004, and *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* edited by Fawzia Afzal- Khan in 2005 all of which include a collection of essays and writings by Arab/ Muslim American feminists and activists who refuse to be silenced.

Arab- American feminists have produced the previously mentioned anthologies and publications that were strictly written by Arab- American and Islamic feminists. In the cultural and intellectual battles of women of color in the United States, however,

Arab- American feminist voices were previously excluded from the 1983 *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, but they gained visibility and their voices were heard in the 2002 publication *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical visions for Transformation* edited by Gloria Anzaldua and Analouise Keating. *This Bridge We Call Home* included several articles by Arab- American feminists like Evelyn AlSultany, Nathalie Handal, Reem Abdelhadi and Rabab Abdelhadi, Nada Elia, and Nadine Naber. In the 2006 publication *Color of Violence, The Incite! Anthology: Incite! Women of Color Against Violence*, the Arab- American feminists Nadine Naber, Dana Erekat, Dena Al- Adeeb, Eman Desouky, and Lina Baroudi critique the war and the imperialist discourse that has continuously oppressed minorities and women. These writers have also stressed the importance of solidarity among U.S. women of color and the need to energize dialogues and communication between Western feminisms, women of color, and Arab- American feminists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to celebrate difference and build alliances between them in their common struggle to end oppression and achieve social justice. Nadine Naber senses the progress within contemporary women of color feminist circles, she states:

Recently, women of color organizations such as INCITE! Women of Color against Violence and the Women of Color Resource Center have highlighted links between Palestinian women's struggles and indigenous women's struggles. These organizations have also opened up spaces for coalition between US women of color; immigrant, refugee, and displaced women; and women struggling with their communities against US imperialism globally (Call for Consistency 77).

In spite of existing efforts to make the Arab- American woman's voice heard, more work needs to be done to include it in academic conferences and writings about multi- ethnic literature of the U.S. Arab- American and Chicana feminists should also be recognized and empowered in feminist and intellectual forums to continue their struggle against global imperialism and lead resistance movements along with mainstream activists who are resistant to hegemony, colonization, and oppression.

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