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Feminist Readings of Qur'anic and Torah Narratives in the Poetry of Mohja Kahf and Alicia Ostriker

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"قَالُوا سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ"

صدق الله العظيم

(البقره: 32)

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INTRODUCTION

“It is perfectly natural for the future woman to feel indignant at the limitations posed upon her by her sex. The real question is not why she should reject them: the problem is rather to understand why she accepts them.” (Simone de Beauvoir)

Twentieth century American literature witnessed a great change due to the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the passage of Immigration Act in 1965. As a result, the United States is now a multicultural state that hosts many cultures of mixed race citizens. Feminism, which involves the critical study of gender as one foundation of social experience and cultural expression, emerged during this period of change. This period is pivotal for ethnic minorities as well as women of the United States where the intellectual atmosphere led these groups to reexamine their own history and culture.

Feminism, in its first wave, was mainly concerned with the social equality of males and females, aiming to transform the male-dominance of the past and to create a fair future for all. The second wave of feminism looked for a way to shed light on women's roles in history, literature, mythology, and religious traditions. They regularly used religious and cultural discourse that characteristically revolved around religious archetypes and Biblical citations. This emphasis on the religious and the archetypal

continued to be present in the third wave of feminism. With its postmodernist emphasis on adaptation and appropriation, this wave has further revived the interest in history and myth.

The present thesis remarks feminist readings of the Torah and Qur'anic Narratives in selected poems of two American women poets Alicia Ostriker (born 1937) and Mohja Kahf (born 1967). The study tackles selected religious narratives from Ostriker's Torah-based volume of prose and poetry entitled *The Nakedness of Fathers: Biblical visions and Revisions* (1994) and from Kahf's Qur'anic-based volume of poetry *Hagar Poems* (2016).

Ostriker and Kahf show their religious traditions through their poems to confront the cultural hegemony that many female immigrants face in the United States of America. Based on readings of the Jewish and the Qur'anic figuration, Ostriker and Kahf re-read and re-wrote some religious narratives. Both poets read the traditional Jewish and Muslim narratives with an aim to explore cultural and spiritual issues of gender, race, class and identity. The two texts/intertexts, the Torah and the Qur'an are used by the two poets as authoritative sources for themes, characters, images and plots. Yet, each of these two writers seems to have used her intertext differently: either placing more emphasis on the past; or using the past as foil for the present; or using

history to portray and critique the present reality of contemporary women. By so doing, both poets engage in the process of 'figuration' in which characters from the past are being transformed, given a new life and used to shed light on the values and experiences of the present. In addition, both resort to their traditional narratives in an attempt to reassert their identity in the United States of America in which they are sometimes cast as minorities or even as threatening immigrants.

The study highlights the comparison between Ostriker's and Kahf's treatment of the archetypal figures they choose in their poems, relying on Jewish and Islamic traditions. As the Torah and the Qur'an served as excellent sources for the two writers, the poems of 'Hagar' and 'Sarah' in particular could be viewed as totally dependent on the Qur'anic and Torah narratives. As matriarchal models, Hagar and Sarah are appropriate leading figures to both Muslims and Jews in the modern American society.

The aim of this thesis is to explore how Ostriker and Kahf read the Torah and the Qur'an to reconstruct the female figures of 'Hagar' and 'Sarah' from a feminist perspective. The study will rely on relevant concepts and theories such as archetype, adaptation, appropriation, intertextuality and myth.

Do the poets succeed in dealing with the narratives in the religious texts from a feminist perspective? Do they reflect feminist figures in their rewriting of these Archetypes? Do they present critiques of their societies through the re-figuration they attempt? Do they reflect their culture/values through the rereading/rewriting? Do they merge the past with the present in a postmodernist collage? Do they provide moral/religious lessons by retelling the narratives of the female figures? These are some questions that this study will try to answer.

The study will be divided into an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. **The Introduction** will briefly introduce the background of the study to prepare the reader for the analysis of the poems. **Chapter one** will explain the concepts of Jewish and Islamic feminism respectively as they represent the ideological backgrounds of Ostriker and Kahf in terms of history, emergence, growth and definition. **Chapter two** will present the theoretical framework of the study with sections dealing with concepts namely: "Archetype", "Myth", "Adaptation", "Appropriation", and "Intertextuality". It will briefly explain the terms and notions used in analyzing the selected poems in the third and fourth chapters. **Chapter three** is entitled "Hagar: An Archetype Matriarch". In this chapter, two poems will be analyzed: Ostriker's "The Opinion of Hagar" and Kahf's "Hagar in the Valley". **Chapter four** entitled "Sarah: The promised Matriarch" will also

examine two poems: Ostriker's "Sarah's Or Defiance" and Kahf's "Sarah Laugh II". Ultimately, **the conclusion** will sum up the findings of the study.

A Brief Biographical Background about the Two Poets

Alicia Suskin Ostriker (born 1937) is a Jewish-American poet, critic, and professor of religion and poetry. Ostriker came to prominence both as a poet and a critic in 1986, when she published her prize-winning volume *The Imaginary Lover*, a collection of poems, and *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, in which she makes a controversial argument concerning the women's poetry movement in the postwar and post-1960s America. She is considered one of the most playful experimenters with poetic *midrash*.¹ Her 1994 *midrashic* volume, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions*, is a revision to the Torah stories from a contemporary Jewish woman's perspective. She develops and redefines the impulse to transform the traditions she inherits. She creates a text that embraces and counters traditional Judaism as well as established conventions of American and Jewish American literature. She looks to the past in order to comprehend what was lost, and to reach a new understanding of Judaism in the present. Through her poetry, as a Jewish feminist, Ostriker counters traditional Judaism; she does not reject the traditions which she has been brought up to cherish but she challenges the patriarchal monopoly of this tradition.