Mohja Kahf

Novelist, poet, sex columnist — UA professor Mohja Kahf is changing minds about the lives of Muslim women.

By David Koon
By the time we reached the halfway point of our interview at the Fayetteville public library, where the no smoking signs are almost as plentiful as books, Mohja Kahf was dying for a cigarette.

Maybe something can be gleaned about her view of authority in the fact that, albeit on an exterior balcony with a hazy view of the Ozark Mountains and the University of Arkansas campus, she went ahead and smoked. You can surely learn almost everything you need to know about her personality in that, instead of stealing furtive puffs from a butt cupped in her hand, glancing around for the prying eyes of library staff, she instead pulled out a cigarette holder that seemed as long as your arm — maybe the most conspicuous smoking device ever conceived. Tipped with a slender clove cigarette, it looked like something that would have fit perfectly between the lips of Dorothy Parker as she held court at the Algonquin Hotel's Round Table. Kahf smoked with great relish while we talked, right up to the second that a librarian finally spotted her and told her there was no smoking at the library.

Kahf is used to upsetting those in charge. In the past few years, through her poetry, novels, scholarship, essays and an online column dealing with the issue of sex in the Muslim world, Kahf — an associate professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas — has been busily challenging the conventional wisdom about the role, viewpoint and desires of Muslim women at every opportunity. In the process, she has managed to touch some deep nerves, both in the Islamic world and the West.

Born in Damascus, Syria, in 1967, Kahf came to America with her parents at the age of 3. With her father pursuing a graduate degree and her mother finishing a BS in pharmacy, they landed in Salt Lake City, Utah, which Kahf said was probably the best place her parents could have started their lives in the West. Conservative Islamists — followers of a cultural-political revival which sought to mediate between traditional and modern Muslims with a vision of Islam that is both true to orthodox religious beliefs and applicable to modern society — they were more than a little concerned about American culture. In Utah, they found a bastion of clean living and morality.

“It was kind of a refreshing place to start,” she said. “In the ’70s, it was an oasis from what my what my folks saw as the enormous permissiveness and mass drug use and free sex of the ’70’s. That was probably the best place they could have landed.”

From there, the family moved to Plainfield, Ind., just outside of Indianapolis. It was a choice that Mohja Kahf admits she has often puzzled over. Kahf calls the time she spent growing up in the Midwest some of the worst years of her life. Ruthlessly taunted because of her ethnicity, especially as tensions between America and the Middle East grew to a fever pitch in the 1970s, she said that experiencing nearly constant oppression in the days before anti-bullying rules and hate crime statutes gave her presence of mind, and a belief that her own voice could make a difference.

“I remember the actual moment and day when I knew how to not take it anymore,” she said, “and to whirl around and say something back, and to have that shock of, oh, what I say can actually be effective in some way. That voice is still in me.”

The experience didn’t slow her down academically or creatively. Around age 12, Kahf started writing in a journal — writing that slowly morphed into poems. She graduated from high school at age 15. A year after completing her PhD in comparative literature at Rutgers University, Kahf came to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, where she was hired as an associate professor.

Though she has a definite love and knack for scholarship — her dissertation on Western representations of Muslim women was her first book, published by the University of Texas Press in 1999 — it is Kahf’s moving, emotional and often hilariously funny creative efforts which have made her one of the most important emerging voices in the Muslim world. The buzz surrounding her name has really kicked up in the years since she started writing “Sex and the Ummah,” (“Ummah” is roughly translated as “the Muslim community”) a semi-regular column for the website muslimwakeup.com. Through the medium of often-bawdy short stories, “Sex and the Ummah”
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Young, Kahf, who grew up in Virginia and has explored a corner of the Muslim mind that is almost unknown (or at least ignored) in the West — sensuality, orgasmic bliss and good ol’ headboard-rattling sex as seen from an Islamic viewpoint.

Kahf said the idea for the column came from an essay idea she had been kicking around about Ramadan, the Muslim holy month when followers are supposed to abstain from food and sex during daylight hours. While Imams and other Muslim scholars and essayists often talk and write about the spiritual aspects of fasting and hunger during Ramadan, she said, they don’t ever seem to want to talk about the requirements concerning sex.

“There’s never anything about Ramadan horniness,” she said, “and what that is supposed to inculcate, and thoughts careful reading and independent thinking. So I’ll come out with something very religious or spiritual. And that says, Hey, don’t just label this person with one label.”

Part of avoiding the label has come in the form of her writing in other areas. Her book of poems “E-mails from Scheherazad” was published in 2003 to modest critical acclaim, and her semi-autobiographical novel “Girl in the Tangerine Scarf” came out last year and is currently gaining steam in college classrooms as one of the few books to truly capture the Muslim-American experience.

As for how her works have been received by the Muslim world, there have been a vocal few who see her books and novels as one of the few books to truly capture the Muslim-American experience.

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about the blessing of sex and of eros and the kind of reawakening of gratitude and grace about that. That’s where [the column] started.”

Kahf approached the editors of the Muslim Wake Up website with the idea. They were so impressed that they asked her to turn it into a regular column. Since then, Kahf has written stories on everything from a Muslim woman who gets turned on by the idea that her husband might be a terrorist, to faux-theological edicts on the sanctity of menstruation. Though she’s currently turning the stories into a book, she said she doesn’t like to be pigeonholed.

“Whenever I start to see readers type me as one kind of writer — like the sex column did because of that buzz — then I’ll come out with something on a totally different tack,” she said. “I don’t want them to take the spin. I want to encourage readers to do their own stories as an affront. In December 2004, a group calling itself the Islamic Challenge Brigades hacked into the Muslim Wake Up website, deleting the archives of the “Sex and the Ummah” column. A warning posted during the hack singled out Kahf as a “pervert” whose writings are insulting to Islam, and branded the website “murtad” — a term meaning apostate, which has often been used in violent Islam as shorthand for a pending attack. In a list of demands, the group called for “No more using our beloved prophet [sic] name in one of your dirty pornographic stories,” and called the hack a “final warning.” The FBI was called in, but the culprits were never found.

Still, Kahf said she is always interested in the views of those who disagree with her. She said that by carefully varying the tone and themes of the writing she publishes in the Muslim world, she is “cultivating” the opinions of even the farthest of far-right thinkers.

“I did an Internet search once where I came up with some insane thing that somebody on one of the Muslim sites had written about [one of her columns],” she said, “that I was ridiculing the Koran,” she said. “And I actually wrote back... I wrote him a note that said, this does not come from a place of ridicule at all. That comes from a place of affection and longing to hear things like this in the scriptures and in religious literature. It tries to write in women Muslims and women of non-Arab culture into that literature.”

Though Kahf’s personal beliefs tend to fall on the more liberal end of the Islamic spectrum (as a ideological comparison, she likened herself to a more open-minded Episcopalian while many Muslim-Americans are closer to strict conservative Islam.”

In the interest of tearing down those narrow stereotypes, Kahf often brings the audiences who come to hear her speak into the conversation. One issue that often comes up is the veil, which Kahf said is wholly misunderstood in the West. Far from a symbol of oppression, Kahf describes being veiled in terms of tradition, honor and power — a way for a woman to see without being seen. The best correlation she has found to get the Muslim concept of the veil across to American audiences, she said, is to compare it to a woman taking her husband’s name at marriage (like most women in the Muslim world, Kahf kept her maiden name when she married).

“The married name connects espe-
“Do we get dick in heaven?”

my best friend’s Aunt Maryam whispers to me during the ladies’ Quran study halaqa at the Jersey City Mosque. We are doing “The Merciful,” the chapter of the Quran where all the sexy virgin babes are promised to men in paradise. “Men get pussy. Do we get dick?” Maryam says. I snort laughing, but turn it into a coughing fit and cover it with the scalloped edge of my headscarf.

“Ecksi-kuse me?” the assistant imam says in his excessively Egyptian accent. “Does zi sister have a question, inshalah?” Dark-skinned and muscular, he’s sitting next to the visiting sheikh and fielding the questions. This session, for ladies exclusively, had been scheduled on the visiting dignitary’s agenda at the insistence of Nany Elhamadany, the matriarch of the sisters’ Quran group.

“Yes, brother,” Maryam says. Oh my God. I can’t believe Maryam is going to ask it out loud. Then again, it shouldn’t surprise me; that’s Maryam for you. “Do women get to have sex in paradise too?”

“Ecksi-kuse me?” The dark-skinned assistant flushes an even darker shade under his manly thick beard. Beards turn me on; it’s a Muslim girl thing, I guess. We are all sitting on the prayer floor after maghreb, with our legs tucked to one side under our caftans, at a safe distance of about three yards away from the two men — but still close enough to smell the sandalwood scent from the stocky body of the assistant imam. He sits semi-kneeling with his ankles tucked up under his butt, his pants straining against the posture. I try not to look at his crotch. Carpet. Carpet. I look at the curlicues in the carpet instead. Maryam, who’d come to the mosque to me during the ladies’ Quran study halaqa at the Jersey City Mosque. We are all sitting on the prayer floor after maghreb, with our legs tucked to one side under our caftans, at a safe distance of about three yards away from the two men — but still close enough to smell the sandalwood scent from the stocky body of the assistant imam. He sits semi-kneeling with his ankles tucked up under his butt, his pants straining against the posture. I try not to look at his crotch. Carpet. Carpet. I look at the curlicues in the carpet instead. Maryam, who’d come to the mosque straight from her factory shift and is in black jeans and a long purple turtleneck, sits cross-legged at one end of the horse-shoe half-circle we form, a prayer rug laid over her lap where her legs are apart. Her bushy black curls push out from under the edges of the purple and black checkered headscarf she’s wearing.

When Maryam asks her question, her niece, my best friend Reyann, who’s sitting on her rump with her arms circling her bent knees, ducks her face down behind her knees. I’m not sure if she’s cringing or hiding a smile. Reyann is like that, half old-school and half hip; I never can tell which way she’ll cut on something.

The assistant imam leans toward the visiting scholar from Egypt and whispers something, his eyes downcast, his long eyelashes lying down and surrendering on his cheeks. He is unaware of the grace of his half-turned torso. Glory be to God. Carpet, not crotch, I will my eyes. Sex on the mosque floor, a flash fantasy, to try out tonight in bed with my brand-new husband, the packaging still fresh, yes. I memorize the curlicues in the carpet. Thank you, God.

The sheikh starts visibly. “Any woman who wants such a thing is not likely to make it to paradise,” he says drily. The other ladies titter.

“What about the aya that says ‘round about, boys of eternal youth shall serve him’? What about that?” Maryam says. But the circle is breaking up.

Maryam lights up just outside, on the stoop of the mosque, and starts to pace at the bottom of the stairs while Reyann goes to get the car from the back lot. “It’s just that I follow all the fucking rules,” she says to me, inhaling her first draw. “I never had sex before marriage. I don’t screw around on my husband. And let me tell you, habibi,” she says, jabbing her cigarette at me, its end a point of orange light in the night, “it’s not because I haven’t had ample opportunity. This bod,” she says, using her free hand to tap her J-Lo jello rear-end, which the purple turtleneck falls over but does not entirely obscure, “this bod has had some opportunities thrown at it.”

Some of the ladies floating down the mosque stair in their caftans glance at her, standing in the street emphasizing her booty. “Hurry home to your husband, woman,” Nany Elhamadany, the Egyptian grandmother of the halaqa, calls out to Maryam, clucking and wagging her head as she walks heavily across the street leaning on her two daughters-in-law, her beige caftan sweeping the ground majestically. But a smile is twitching at the corners of her mouth.

Reyann drives up in her tiny battered Geo. Maryam lifts the front passenger seat forward and waits for me to get in the back. I nestle next to stacks of old Azizah magazines and Reyann’s smelly sneakers and workout clothes.

“Drive to Hoda’s,” Maryam orders. She isn’t ordering, really; that’s just how she talks. What she means is, “After we just got the blow-off like that, don’t you girls want to go let off steam at Hoda’s Hookah House and Cafe with me? C’mon.”

Maryam’s only seven years older than Reyann and I, at thirty more like...
the board,” she said, “and I say, these are some of the same reasons that go into the thinking of Muslim women who veil. For some, it is an honor and it’s something they believe in, and for some it’s just what you do in your social context. For some, it’s tradition and habit. That’s always an ah-ha moment.”

Kahf said the people who come to hear her speak are always shocked to learn that while the veil is legally required for women in only two countries today, Iran and Saudi Arabia (and, even there, she said, women are allowed broad leeway outside of major cities and holy sites) — there are half a dozen countries in the world today which forbid women — sometimes violently — from veiling or wearing a head scarf in public.

“I could not teach university in Turkey (while wearing a head scarf). I would be fired. In Tunisia, I would be pulled off the street and hit by police for wearing a head scarf, today,” she said. “The Taliban was an oppressive regime. So were the regimes that stripped women of the veil and made them dress Western. No one has ever written about that, even though that has been the experience of masses and masses of Muslim women in the 20th century — stripped in the street, the mirror opposite of being forced to veil.”

The reason most Americans don’t know that, she said, is because the image of veiled, victimized Muslim women is more useful to both the United States and the American media than the truth.

**Though she had some reservations about moving to Arkansas, those fears quickly evaporated once she arrived. The South, she said, has a kindness and familiarity she never found growing up in the Midwest. “Arkansas turned out to be totally different than I expected. The ethos of the Midwest is very different from the South. The South contains more room for eccentricity. It matches some of my ingrained Arab cultural structure on hospitality, friendship and civility. The Midwest is so much more gruff and taciturn and mind-your-own-business.”**

For now, Kahf is just happy to be where she is, having just finished a new book of poetry, and in the final stages of getting her “Sex and the Ummah” book to press. It has been, she said, a banner year in terms of publicity for her.

Maybe even more than anything else, she seems happy to be helping change people’s minds about women in Islam. Recently, she said, she was standing on a sidewalk, smoking, when an old man came up to her and inquired whether she found more freedom in America as a Muslim woman.

“I said, ‘What do you mean by that?’ And he said, ‘Well, you’re smoking.’”

Telling the story, a big smile blooms across Mohja Kahf’s face as she relates how she told the man that, back in Syria, her grandmother smoked most of her life.

“He said, ‘Hmmmm. Why do we have these assumptions?’” Kahf said, laughing. “And I told him, ‘You know, I’ve been trying to figure that out for a long time.’”

**UNVEILING SEX:** Kahf’s column is often bawdy, but she writes on the religious and spiritual as well.
a big sister than an aunt to either of us. She danced at my wedding in Paterson, with a red silk scarf tied across her curly hips, and pulled a reluctant Reyann out to dance with her. We’re Gaza girls, came over in the 1980s with our parents, old enough to remember Israeli soldiers beating twelve-year-old kids with slingshots to a pulp, young enough to break in the English language for our use like a pair of red high-top Converse.

It’s Friday night and Hoda’s is hopping. We get an outdoor table so we can do hookah. The Hudson River flows nearby underneath the terraces of the cafe but is not visible at night. It’s a young man who comes to light up for us, with pearly skin and heavy eyebrows like Wael Kfouri, the Lebanese hottie. The band is covering one of Wael’s old girlfriend’s songs, Nawal’s hit “Layali.” The nargileh is beautiful, old blue glass with faded gilding and a tightly coiled red and purple pipe with fur trim. Our pipe boy has our coals glowing and Maryam picks up the water pipe and draws to get it going.

“Here — have one of these,” our gorgeous Wael lookalike says, handing her a mouthpiece. God be thanked for creating him for us to look at.

“Mmm,” Maryam says, “thank you.” She looks demurely down her purple and black checkered headscarf as she inserts the mouthpiece into the end of the long coiled pipe and draws again. “Him I want,” she says when she leaves.

“Ecksi-kuse me?” Reyann says in a mock-Egyptian accent.

“Fuck,” Maryam laughs. “I’d fuck him in a Muslim minute.” We all cuss in English; somehow it seems less bad than cussing in Arabic. She blows smoke out her nostrils. I love the apple-y tobacco smell; it reminds me of my grandmother, whom I saw for the last time when I was five, back in Gaza. My grandmother loved smoking the shisheh, but life under a military occupation doesn’t allow many evenings of unhurried pleasure. “Not for real, I mean. I wouldn’t do that to my Hamudy. I am not an adulteress. But just for fun. Fantasy time. I’d do the pipe boy. Wouldn’t you?”

“I’m satisfied with what I’m getting, honey,” I bluster. I’m still a newlywed, three months and counting. We just got to oral sex a week ago. There’s still plenty of territory left to explore. Maryam passes the nargileh to me. I pick up a mouthpiece and draw on the pipe several times in a row. I want to get to the good stuff.

“I’m not like you, Batool,” Maryam says. “I got married right out of high school. I been married thirteen years, see. You know how it was for me, with Abi dying of lung cancer and he wanted to find me a nice boy before he went. Your orders a fruit salad with two varieties of melon and three kinds of berries. I’m having mint tea with three sugars, and a piece of knafeh. Reyann orders kibbeh, the kind shaped like fat cigars. “I need meat,” she sighs.

“You do, uyyooni,” I say, taking a very long, satisfying puff. The water is really bubbling now. The music is changing over to Western, Bruce Springsteen, Glory Days. “I hope you get some soon.”

“Look at us,” Maryam says. “We don’t drink. We don’t fuck outside marriage. We are Good Fucking Muslim Girls,” she ponders the table on each of the last four words. People glance up from their drinks.

“Alls I’m saying is, we better get some damn dick in heaven. Along with all those glasses of tequila we keep passing up.”

Maryam closes her eyes and draws. She’s getting that itty bitty buzz that the nargileh has to offer.

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Like, how many different ways can you do it with just one guy?