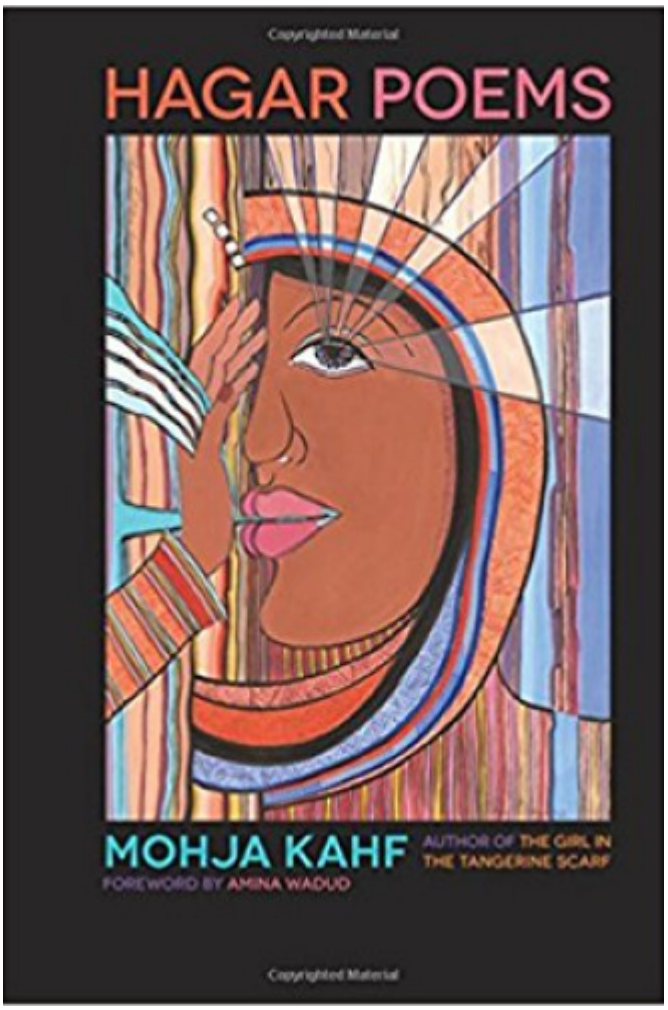
The prism of Mohja Kahf’s poetry

Kahf turns the stories of biblical and Qur'anic women to see their many facets.

by Amy Frykholm in the October 10, 2017 issue

In Review



Hagar Poems

By Mohja Kahf
University of Arkansas Press

I kissed this book when I finished reading it. That doesn’t happen every day. Mohja Kahf had just taken me on a rollicking tour of ancient texts and ancient women radiating through contemporary life that ends with a meditation on the “little mosque” near her home. I had been a companion to Aisha (one of the Prophet Muhammad’s wives) as she complained about her treatment in the tabloids and Zeleikha (Potiphar’s wife) as she went looking for Yusef in every man’s face and coming up empty. I’d considered Solomon from the distrusting perspective of the Queen of Sheba and met Miriam on the riverbank.

The trip had not been easy. Even as I felt that I was exploring some of my soul’s familiar territory, I had to keep Google close by. I did not know what the Kaba is or where Safa is or who the Midianites were. I had to go back and reread passages from Genesis and the Qur’an. Kahf’s poetry offers immersion in both the utterly foreign and the utterly familiar. If you like your poems straight, without the aid of Wikipedia, this collection could be frustrating. But situated within the borderlands of what I knew and what I didn’t, I found myself reading wholeheartedly.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section contains poems specifically related to Hagar, Sarah, Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac—characters who appear both as archetypes and in narrative form. In one poem, Kahf imagines Hagar writing Sarah a letter of reconciliation, “What if we both ditched the old man?” The next poem, “Page Found Crumpled in the Wastebasket by Hajar’s Writing Desk,” takes a different tone to address the same painful personal history: “sarah you bitch / you backstabbing woman / trotting after your husband.” The story behind these poems is contained in a few brief chapters of Genesis with some interpretation and extrapolation in the Qur’an and the Talmud. But here it becomes a prism that the poet turns around and around as she tells stories about stories about stories.

In one poem, Kahf tells two stories about how Arafat, or Arafah, got its name. One of the stories is about Abraham and the other is about Eve. Both end in revelation. Both can be true and even find a certain unity. This poem reveals an underlying reflection on the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that hovers in the collection. Many stories are shared even as their interpretations diverge. Like Sarah and Hagar, perhaps they can find common ground. Or like the way Miriam and Asiya—Moses’s sister and the pharaoh’s wife—reach for each other across the riverbank.

But turning the prism and carrying around these heavy ancestors becomes exhausting to the poet. In the second to the last poem of this section, “Hagar Begone,” Kahf begs her obsession with Hagar to leave her. “The messy soap opera / of Middle Eastern religion / is not the center of the world / Maybe I will make my next volume of poetry / about Norse mythology.” And then in the final poem, Kahn changes her mind. “I didn’t mean begone.” Hagar returns as an “inextractable thorn in my flesh.” Even if we recognize that these stories are not the center of the world, freeing ourselves from them is not an option. Better to offer Hagar “strong dark tea” and welcome her as a “near to me or estranged” sister, teacher, mother, and guide.

The second section of the book widens the lens to explore other biblical and Qur’anic characters. Zeleikha, Balqis, Asiya, Mary, Aisha, and Khadija (the Prophet’s first wife—see what I mean about Google?) each get a voice. As rich as these voices are, the silences are equally rich. Two poems toward the end of this section ask the reader to hold silence for “at least 45 seconds” after reading the title of the poem. By this point in reading, I was in Kahf’s thrall. If she had asked me to read the title of a poem and then stand on my head for 45 seconds, I likely would have participated. But the exercise had the effect of making me want to laugh, cry, and perhaps scream all at the same time.

In the third section, Kahf changes the lens again. All along the poems have been about the poet’s own experience, but she has been more stage manager than actor. Now she steps from behind the curtain. “My inner Kaba crumbled. Who will come / to lift the Black Stone of my heart / on a white sheet by its four corners?” Although I didn’t know what Kaba is, I know the crumbling and the desire for lifting. Here Kahf’s Sufi poet comes out. She writes as if to a very studious boyfriend she left in the library, “Baby, I’m going out to get high on Love / and drunk at the Bar of Crazy Beauty.”

The final sequence, called “The Little Mosque Poems,” is a series of meditations on community, identity, nearness and farness, ancient possibilities, and ancient prejudices that lurk inside every religious community. Kahf pokes fun at the “little mosque,” where no one is allowed to eat marshmallows because they might contain pork enzymes but everyone is allowed plenty of banality, which the poet concludes is “yet verily . . . worse than marshmallows.” But she also approaches the pain and longing that many people feel in relationship to their religious traditions. One stanza reads:

I went to the mosque
when no one was there
The prayer space was soft and serene
I heard a sound like lonely singing
or quiet sobbing
I looked around
A little Quran
on a low shelf
was reciting itself

I once asked a poet how he knew when to publish a collection of his work. He said that a book of poems needs a driving force, an energy that brings disparate elements into one place. Without that energy, a collection is just vanity.

Hagar Poems has this power. The urgency of these poems' synergy grows with every page. Just read it. And then kiss it.