Social and Human Sciences Review, Batna 1 university Volume:27 N 01(June, 2026) pp 277-286
ISSN: 1111-5149, EISSN: 2588 – 2430

Resistance in Public Space: Rituals and Cultural Identities in Mohja Kahf's "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears" (2003)

المقاومة في الفضاء العام: الطقوس والهويات الثقافية في قصة مهجة قحف "جدتي تغسل قدميها في حوض الحمام في سيرز" (2003)

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Received in	12-12-2025	accepted in	06-03-2026

Abstract

Intergenerational relationships often reveal how religious and cultural values are preserved, questioned, and passed on. In Mohja Kahf's "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears" (2003), the everyday act of wudu, or Islamic ablution, becomes a meaningful expression of identity in an American public space. Through the granddaughter's observation of her grandmother washing her feet in a department-store bathroom, the poem reflects the tension between Islamic tradition and Western social expectations. From a postcolonial perspective, this paper examines linguistic hybridity and code-switching as poetic strategies that express cross-cultural identity. Using a qualitative approach based on descriptive analysis and close reading, it argues that Kahf presents linguistic hybridity as a bridge between Muslim identity and American public culture, while the grandmother's public ritual challenges stereotypes and encourages openness to difference.

Keywords: Mohja Kahf; "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears"; Cross-Cultural Identities; Linguistic Hybridity; the American gaze.

ملخّص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل قصيدة مهجة قحف «جدتي تغسل قدميها في مغسلة حمّام متجر سيرز» (2003) من منظور ما بعد كولونيالي، بوصفها نصا شعريا يكشف تشكل الهوية المسلمة داخل الفضاء الأمريكي العام، من خلال تصوير ممارسة شعيرة دينية في مكان غير مألوف دينيا وثقافيا. ويبرز مشهد الوضوء في حمّام أحد المتاجر بوصفه ممارسة تبرز دور الهوية الدينية في تأكيد الانتماء، وتكشف في الوقت نفسه عن المفارقة بين الخصوصية الإسلامية والمعايير الاجتماعية الغربية. كما تركز الدراسة على التهجين اللغوي والتناوب اللساني بوصفهما آليتين شعريتين تعبّران عن تشكل هوية عابرة للثقافات.

وتعتمد الدراسة مقاربة نوعية قائمة على التحليل الوصفي والقراءة المتأنية للنص، مبرزة كيفية توظيف اللغة والممارسة الدينية في تقريب الهوية المسلمة من الثقافة الأمريكية العامة، وجعل هذا الفعل الديني في الفضاء العام وسيلة رمزية لتجاوز الصور النمطية والدعوة إلى الانفتاح على الاختلاف الثقافي والديني.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مهجة قحف: "جدتي تغسل قدميها في حوض الحمام في سيرز"؛ الهويات العابرة للثقافات؛ التهجين اللغوي؛ النظرة الأمريكية.

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Introduction

Notably, cross-generational bonds involve the transmission of deeply rooted values and traditions. The preservation of ethical codes and the passing down of wisdom are essential to maintaining social norms. In many cultures, intergenerational relationships are regarded as a sacred duty, positioning elders as guardians of cultural heritage and younger generations as its inheritors. Thus, this dynamic sustains cultural identity and reinforces moral and religious ideals.

In this respect, Mohja Kahf, a Syrian American writer, examines immigrant Muslim experiences in relation to cross-cultural identities and the tension between Islamic and Western cultures. Her interest in diasporic struggles emerges from her early experiences as a Syrian immigrant in the United States. For instance, her collection of poems *Emails from Shehrazade* (2003) explores the challenges of identity negotiation in Arab and Muslim communities in America.

In "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears" (2003), the narrator describes his grandmother's preparation for Muslim prayer (salat). Amid curious and disapproving glances, she performs *wudu* in a public restroom at Sears, an act that highlights the tension between Islamic ritual practice and dominant religious and cultural norms in the United States. This study aims at examining Mohja Kahf's use of hybrid language and code-switching to illustrate the negotiation of cultural identities within the poem. It also explores how the public performance of an Islamic ritual functions as an act of cultural resistance, foregrounding the tensions between dominant Western norms and marginalized Muslim identities.

Accordingly, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do intergenerational relationships help maintain cultural and Islamic values as depicted in Mohja Kahf's poem "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears"?
2. How does Kahf use language as a tool to represent the intersection of cultural identities in the poem?
3. How does the poem depict the challenges of cultural adaptation faced by immigrants in America?
4. How does the grandmother's public performance of *wudu* resist the American gaze and challenge dominant Western stereotypes?

This study advances the following hypotheses:

Mohja Kahf's poem demonstrates that intergenerational relationships play a crucial role in preserving cultural and Islamic values. The grandmother's performance of *wudu* in a public restroom—observed with admiration by her grandson—underscores her commitment to religious practice, even in the face of cultural differences and social expectations.

Moreover, Kahf blends Arab-Islamic and American references, highlighting the convergence of multiple cultural worlds. These linguistic strategies articulate the narrator's dual heritage, showing how language can embody cultural identities. Kahf integrates both colloquial and formal registers, alongside religious and cultural

allusions, to reflect the linguistic negotiations of immigrant life. This interplay mirrors the experience of navigating dual identities—speaking English, the dominant language, while preserving native expressions and cultural resonance.

In addition, the poem illustrates how immigrants often feel uncomfortable practicing their traditions in environments where they are not fully welcomed. The grandmother's simple act of *wudu* becomes a moment of tension due to people's stares, confusion, and quiet judgment. When *wudu* is performed openly in a public space, it makes Muslim faith visible in a context where it is often unexpected, challenging stereotypes that view Islam as private, foreign, or out of place in Western society.

A number of scholarly sources have been selected to address the research questions of this study. Leela Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (1998) provides a clear overview of the historical development and major debates of postcolonial studies. The work examines the foundational ideas of key theorists such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, focusing on issues of power, identity, hybridity, and resistance. Gandhi also highlights the ethical dimension of postcolonial thought, presenting it as a framework for understanding cultural difference and the enduring effects of colonialism.

In her book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999), Mohja Kahf examines the persistent misrepresentations of Muslim women in western literature from the medieval period to the twentieth century. She identifies two dominant stereotypes: "the termagant," depicted as excessively angry and unreasonable, and "the odalisque," portrayed as submissive, silent, and eroticized. Kahf argues that these characterizations serve colonial and patriarchal interests by rendering Muslim women powerless and marginalized. She emphasizes the importance of Muslim women reclaiming their narratives through representations that reflect their lived experiences, diversity, complexity, and agency.

In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is fluid and shaped by experience rather than fixed or unchanging. He challenges the notion of identity as a stable essence tied to a shared history, describing it instead as an evolving construct influenced by cultural, historical, and political forces. Hall presents identity as a dynamic process—concerned not only with who one is, but also who one is becoming—particularly for individuals navigating life between multiple world (255).

Exploring Linguistic Hybridity and Cultural Identity through a Postcolonial Lens

To approach *"My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears"* from a postcolonial perspective, this study examines the theoretical foundations of linguistic hybridity and cross-cultural identity. These concepts are essential in postcolonial analysis because language often becomes a space where cultures meet, overlap, or come into tension. Linguistic hybridity, in particular, highlights the use of mixed linguistic forms to question cultural boundaries and challenge dominant power structures. The following study demonstrates that the

poem uses language not only to represent cultural identity, but also to expose the subtle negotiations that occur when differing cultural values encounter one another in everyday settings.

Approaching Postcolonial Theory and Criticism

Postcolonial theory is a critical framework concerned with the study of literary and cultural productions emerging from societies shaped by colonial domination. It also examines texts produced within imperial centers when such works engage with colonial spaces and colonized peoples. As Young notes, *"postcolonial theory emerged as a critique of colonial power and its continuing effects"* (Young, 2001, p. 4), emphasizing its central commitment to exposing and challenging the structures of domination that persist beyond the end of formal empire. More broadly, postcolonial studies investigate the enduring political, cultural, psychological, and linguistic consequences of colonial rule in contemporary societies. Its scope extends beyond the period of formal colonization to examine how power, knowledge, identity, and representation continue to be shaped by imperial histories.

Ikiroma-Owiye (2017) explains that postcolonial theory exposes the ideology and practices of neo-colonialism through interdisciplinary engagement with history, political science, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and human geography. The theory critically investigates how colonial authority reshaped indigenous cultures, gender relations, language, and systems of value, often privileging western civilizational standards over local epistemologies. As such, postcolonial criticism seeks to uncover how colonial dominance persists through cultural and epistemic structures even after political independence.

A central objective of postcolonial studies is the critique of Eurocentric perspectives that have historically constructed colonized peoples as inferior, passive, or voiceless. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) argue that postcolonial writing and criticism work to dismantle **"the dominance of imperial discourse"** and to recover voices that were **"silenced or marginalised by the imperial process"** (p. 11). Within this framework, identity is no longer perceived as fixed or essential but as hybrid, fluid, and historically shaped through displacement, migration, and cultural encounter.

Moreover, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) constitutes a foundational text in postcolonial studies. Said reveals how western representations constructed the East as an exotic, irrational, and inferior "Other," thereby justifying imperial conquest and domination. He defines Orientalism as **"a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient"** (Said, 1978, p. 3). For Said, representation is inseparable from power, as knowledge itself operates as a tool of domination. He further stresses that **"there is no such thing as a pure, neutral knowledge"** (Said, 1978), highlighting the ideological nature of western epistemology.

Homi K. Bhabha (1994) extends Said's work through his concept of the *Third Space*, a site where identities shaped by colonial encounters intersect and are constantly renegotiated. He argues that this space **"displaces the histories that**

constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37), thereby destabilizing rigid binaries such as colonizer/colonized and East/West. Identity, in this sense, becomes performative, hybrid, and dynamic rather than fixed.

Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988), interrogates the possibility of representation for marginalized subjects, particularly colonized women. Spivak argues that even attempts to represent the oppressed often reproduce imperial power structures. Her assertion that **"the subaltern cannot speak"** (Spivak, 1988, p. 104) draws attention to the deep epistemic violence embedded within dominant systems of knowledge. Consequently, postcolonial theory remains both politically committed and critically self-reflexive.

Cultural Identity and Linguistic Hybridism

In postcolonial and diasporic contexts, cultural identity is no longer understood as singular or stable. Rather, it is viewed as dynamic, constructed, and shaped by continuous interaction with language, power, and place. Stuart Hall (1990) conceptualizes identity as a "production" that is always in process, evolving through historical experience and representation. Within such contexts, linguistic hybridism emerges as one of the most visible expressions of cultural negotiation.

Drawing on Bhabha's notion of the *Third Space*, linguistic hybridism becomes a site where meanings are contested and renegotiated. Practices such as code-switching, borrowing, and translanguaging allow speakers and writers to express multiple cultural affiliations simultaneously. Such strategies resist linguistic assimilation and enable the preservation of cultural memory.

Moreover, linguistic hybridity disrupts the authority of dominant colonial languages by inserting marginalized voices and worldviews into mainstream discourse. As Ashcroft et al. (1989) observe, postcolonial writers often appropriate the language of the colonizer and reshape it to express local experiences. In the work of diasporic writers such as Mohja Kahf, linguistic hybridism functions as both an aesthetic strategy and a form of cultural resistance. Language thus becomes a crucial medium for negotiating belonging, identity, and power.

Linguistic Hybridity as Resistance in Mohja *Kahf's* My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at *Sears* (2003)

Linguistic hybridity is widely recognized as a defining feature of diasporic and postcolonial literature, where language reflects the interaction between different cultures and identities. In Mohja Kahf's "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears" (2003), this hybridity appears through the meeting of Arab-Islamic cultural expression and the everyday language of American public life. The poem presents an ordinary setting transformed by a culturally specific religious practice, allowing different linguistic and cultural worlds to exist side by side. Through this blending, the text reflects the lived reality of cross-cultural experience and the presence of multiple identities within a single social space.

Contextualizing Mohja Kahf's "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears"

Mohja Kahf's "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears" can be situated within postcolonial and Arab-American poetic traditions that foreground cultural negotiation, ritual visibility, and the politics of representation. As Stuart Hall reminds us, cultural identity in diaspora is not fixed but **"a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (1990, p. 225),** and Kahf's poem dramatizes this continual process of negotiation through the grandmother's insistence on performing wudu in a public American space. Her act embodies what Bhabha (1994) calls the **"Third Space,"** a hybrid site where dominant cultural boundaries are unsettled, and new identities are articulated (p. 37). Language and ritual function here as tools of self-assertion, echoing Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's argument that reclaiming cultural practices is essential because **"language carries culture" (1986, p. 16).** Similarly, Achebe's defense of using English while retaining native worldviews— **"I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience" (1965, p. 30)**—helps illuminate Kahf's poetic strategy: she writes in English but centers Arab-Muslim epistemologies to subvert cultural expectations.

Kahf's work also responds to the Orientalist gaze that, as Said argues, reduces the Muslim subject to a **"book to be read"** and interpreted by the West **(1978, p. 92).** By narrating the grandmother's dignity and agency, the poem counters what Kahf (1999) herself describes as **"centuries of reductive Western portrayals of the Muslim woman" (p. 5).** The confrontation in the Sears bathroom exemplifies Fanon's (1963) insight that colonial and racialized subjects are constantly required to justify their presence in public spaces. Yet, the grandmother refuses erasure; her calm declaration of religious practice exemplifies Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak—here, she not only speaks but speaks on her own terms. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) note, postcolonial writing often works by **"re-placing the displaced" (p. 2),** and Kahf's poem does precisely that: it relocates the Arab-Muslim woman from the margins of U.S. cultural imagination to the center of poetic representation.

Language, Identity, and Resistance

Language occupies a central position in postcolonial theory, not merely as a medium of communication but as a primary site of ideological struggle. During colonial rule, European languages were imposed as instruments of domination, marginalizing indigenous tongues and the cultural knowledge they carried. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that language is inseparable from culture and identity, stating that **"language carries culture, and culture carries… the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world"** (p. 16).

Robert Young (2001) similarly asserts that **"language is not merely the medium of expression; it is the very material of our identity"** (p. 7). Stuart Hall (1990) further emphasizes that language is a system of representation through which

meaning is constructed and contested. Consequently, linguistic struggle reflects deeper conflicts over memory, selfhood, and cultural belonging.

Postcolonial writers respond to this linguistic legacy in diverse ways. While some advocate for a return to indigenous languages as an act of decolonization, others—such as Chinua Achebe—strategically appropriate the colonial language itself. Achebe (1965) famously argued that English could be reshaped to **"carry the weight of the African experience."** This strategy is particularly relevant to Kahf's work, which blends English with Arabic expressions to resist cultural erasure.

The colonial encounter fractures identity by imposing external categories and values. Yet, as Bhabha (1994) suggests, identity is forged in the "in-between" spaces of cultural interaction. Postcolonial literature reflects this instability by portraying characters caught between inherited tradition and modern influences. Resistance, therefore, becomes not only political but also cultural and psychological. Fanon (1963) insists that decolonization must involve the liberation of both land and consciousness. Postcolonial literature thus becomes a vital space where identity and language function as tools of critique, survival, and transformation.

Negotiation of Belonging Through Language

Kahf's poem exemplifies linguistic hybridism through its fluid movement between English and Arabic, demonstrating how diasporic identities are shaped in the interstices between languages. The grandmother's religious practices are articulated through Arabic terms such as *wudu*, embedded within an English poetic narrative. This code-switching resist linguistic assimilation and affirms cultural continuity. As Chinua Achebe famously argues, the task of the postcolonial writer is to **"fashion out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience" (Achebe, 1965, p. 30).** Kahf enacts this principle by allowing Arabic religious vocabulary to coexist with English without translation, asserting the legitimacy of Muslim cultural expression within an American context.

Similarly, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) note that postcolonial texts often appropriate and transform the dominant language so that it becomes **"a mode of power and self-assertion" (p. 39).** Kahf's weaving of Arabic into English is precisely such a transformation: it reorients the linguistic center of gravity and foregrounds a diasporic voice that refuses erasure.

The poem also blends sacred and colloquial registers. The reverent description of the washing ritual stands in sharp contrast to the abrupt, authoritative command of the **"Respectable Sears matrons,"** who insist, **"You can't do that."** This mixing of linguistic registers dramatizes the tension between spiritual devotion and social policing. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity is helpful here, for he argues that cultural interaction generates **"new signs of identity"** and **"innovative sites of collaboration and contestation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).** Kahf's linguistic hybridity becomes such a site, challenging rigid boundaries of cultural propriety.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o further reminds us that language carries **"the memory bank of a people's history" (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 15).** When the grandmother speaks Arabic in Sears, she activates this memory bank, transforming the commercial bathroom into a space where identity is reclaimed rather than suppressed. Stuart Hall

reinforces this view, noting that diasporic identity is always **"a matter of becoming as well as being" (Hall, 1990, p. 225).** Through its hybrid language, Kahf's poem shows how memory, faith, and linguistic choice become dynamic tools of identity negotiation and resistance within diasporic life.

Linguistic Hybridism: Code-Switching and Mixed Registers

Kahf's poem exemplifies linguistic hybridism through its fluid movement between English and Arabic. The grandmother's religious practices are articulated through Arabic terms such as *wudu,* embedded within an English narrative.

The poem also blends sacred and colloquial registers. The reverent description of the washing ritual contrasts sharply with the confrontational exchanges between the grandmother and the "Respectable Sears matrons," who declare, **"You can't do that."** This mixing of linguistic registers exposes the tension between spiritual devotion and social policing. Through this hybridity, Kahf demonstrates how language becomes a living site of memory, identity negotiation, and resistance.

Embodied Ritual as Spatial Resistance

Embodied ritual refers to the expression of cultural and religious identity through physical actions performed in everyday environments. In literary contexts, such practices emphasize the role of the body as a medium through which identity and belief are enacted. In Mohja Kahf's *"My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears"* (2003), a religious act is carried out within a public commercial space, highlighting the visibility of faith beyond private settings. The presence of this ritual in an unexpected location draws attention to the relationship between the body, space, and cultural belonging. As Stuart Hall notes, cultural identity emerges through "the continuous play of history, culture, and power," and is always **"a matter of becoming as well as being" (Hall, 1990, p. 225**). Likewise, Kahf argues that Western discourse often overlooks **"the ordinariness and dignity of Muslim women's daily lives" (Kahf, 1999, p. 15).** In this way, the poem presents embodied ritual as an integral part of how cultural traditions inhabit and move through public life.

Generational and Cultural Negotiations of Space

The grandmother's performance of *wudu* in the bathroom of Sears transforms a commercial American space into a site of spiritual assertion. Her act challenges dominant assumptions about propriety, hygiene, and cultural belonging. The reaction of the Sears matrons reflects how Western public spaces are governed by norms that marginalize non-Western religious practices, echoing Said's observation that ***"the Orient was almost a European invention"*** **(Said, 1978, p. 1),** shaped through narratives that cast non-Western customs as foreign or disruptive.

The speaker's position—caught between admiration and social awareness—reflects a generational negotiation of identity. Stuart Hall (1990) reminds us that cultural identity is ***"a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'"*** **(p. 225),** a dynamic clearly embodied in the contrast between the grandmother's rootedness and the granddaughter's hybrid self-understanding. While the grandmother embodies cultural continuity and spiritual certainty, the younger generation must navigate a

hybrid identity shaped by both heritage and assimilation. This hybridity evokes Bhabha's argument that identity forms within ***"the in-between spaces where cultural meanings and representations have no primordial unity or fixity"*** **(Bhabha, 1994, p. 55).** The poem thus reveals how diasporic subjects must constantly negotiate their presence within physical and symbolic spaces that often exclude them.

Ritual as a Disruption of the Western Gaze

The grandmother's ritual washing disrupts the Western gaze that exoticizes and marginalizes non-Western bodies. The matrons perceive her act as foreign and contaminating. However, the grandmother recalls washing her feet "over Iznik tile in Istanbul… among the best families of Aleppo," a declaration that reclaims the ritual as an act of refinement, dignity, and spiritual pride. Kahf (1999) notes that ***"the Muslim woman has been repeatedly constructed as a figure through which the West imagines itself"*** **(p. 5)**, a dynamic reflected in the matrons' reaction, which exposes the Orientalist assumptions underlying their discomfort. The act of wudu thus becomes both a sacred practice and a political gesture that unsettles dominant cultural hierarchies, challenging the reductive narratives through which Muslim women are often perceived in Western public spaces.

Conclusion

Mohja Kahf's *My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears* offers a powerful exploration of how diasporic identity is negotiated through language, space, and embodied ritual. The grandmother's act of wudu within a Western commercial setting becomes an assertion of spiritual presence and cultural agency that disrupts dominant norms of visibility and belonging. In performing a sacred ritual in a space governed by secular expectations, the grandmother transforms the public bathroom from a site of surveillance into a space of self-definition. This transformation demonstrates how everyday rituals can operate as subtle yet profound forms of resistance, challenging who is permitted to occupy—and define—public spaces.

Linguistically, Kahf's use of code-switching, Arabic expressions, and shifts in register reflects the layered negotiations faced by diasporic communities, where language functions both as a marker of identity and as a tool for asserting cultural survival. The grandmother's unapologetic reliance on her heritage language destabilizes the dominance of English within the American public sphere, reminding readers that linguistic practice is inseparable from histories of power, memory, and belonging.

Ultimately, the poem demonstrates that belonging within postcolonial and diasporic contexts is not fixed but is continuously redefined through acts of hybridity, negotiation, and cultural resilience. Kahf portrays public space not as a neutral setting but as a contested arena where cultural identities are performed, challenged, and reclaimed. Through its attention to ritual, language, and everyday interactions, the poem highlights how seemingly ordinary acts can become potent expressions of resistance, allowing diasporic subjects to assert presence, dignity, and agency within environments shaped by cultural hierarchies. In this way, Kahf's work underscores

the dynamic interplay between identity and space, revealing how bodies, languages, and rituals actively participate in reshaping the cultural landscapes they inhabit.

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