

Faith, Identity and Belonging in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

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This paper analyses Syrian- American writer Mohja Kahf's novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) as a key text to understand how an emergent group of immigrant Muslim women writers negotiate their hyphenated identities and write insightful and poignant accounts of being Muslim in America, by embracing all the complexities and contradictions of their hybrid Muslim American identity. This paper studies Kahf's novel to probe the ways in which the author critically explores the construction of Muslim women's identity in the context of displacement, belonging, race and religion in the diasporic space of North America in a post 9/11 world. The analysis looks for the ways in which the writer critiques certain compelling representations of the Muslim woman in popular culture that have contributed to the political alienation and growing marginalization of Muslims in contemporary mainstream society. At a time when Islamophobia is rampant and is used as a political strategy to otherise and alienate, narratives like these, I argue, are stories that people tell about themselves to reclaim their voice and redefine restrictive representations. Furthermore, cultural productions like Kahf's can be seen as sites of contestation, as oppositional spaces, where Muslim minorities challenge stereotypes, and problematize homogenization to construct a distinct American Muslim counter-public. Functioning simultaneously as counter narrative against gendered racialization and

critique of intra-community tensions, Kahf's novel is a timely case study of narrative control, questioning totalizing discourses of community, religion and politics to negotiate meanings from a multiplicity of subject positions. The identity crisis and eventual self-discovery articulated by the protagonist Khadra are viewed through the lens of diasporic consciousness as theorized by Robin Cohen (1997) within the fluid spatial imaginary of a transnational Muslim public sphere as elucidated by Eickelman and Piscatori (1990).

Keywords: Migrant Identity Politics, Hybridity, Displacement, Transnational Muslim public sphere, Counter-public, Narrative control

Introduction

In the essay titled "On Being a Muslim Woman Writer in the West" (2006), Mohja Kahf writes candidly about the perils as well as the opportunities involved in being a Muslim woman writer in the West, who is caught between unreasonable expectations of a prejudiced readership and a market-driven book industry that promotes a certain retrograde vision of Muslim womanhood. According to Kahf (2006), "between an ignorant industry and an ungenerous home base community of readers, how can a Muslim woman write and publish in the West and do her best to dodge the machine?" Her fiction exemplifies her predicament (para 1).

Kahf's literary oeuvre chronicles the negotiations of her faith, identity and belonging in a non-Muslim American diasporic space. By probing the relationship between migration, identity, home and the role of faith in connecting these experiences, this paper aims to discuss some aspects of the lives of first and second generation Muslim immigrants, particularly women, in their attempts to claim a space in the mainstream western society without selling out or erasing their religious identity. In doing so, Kahf politicizes these issues and presents them in a way that brings forth the role of women, particularly Muslim women, in the public domain. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to define the space from which Kahf advances a feminist critique of the ways some Muslims practice their religion- be it their entrenched anti-women practices or their racist, prejudiced outlook- while remaining true to her faith in Islam.

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf is also a sympathetic exploration of the profound imprint migration and dislocation have upon displaced people all over the world. Like other migrant literary works that explore the subtle meanings of home and belonging in a foreign land, Kahf's novel is also a journey into the struggles around exilic anxieties, multiple identities and unwarranted fixation that diasporic communities in the west are constantly subjected to grapple with. But along with these familiar diasporic preoccupations, Kahf utilizes the possibility of the diaspora as a third space, in line with Homi Bhabha (1990), as an in between space facilitating cultural negotiation and hybridity to look inward and initiate critical conversations about the categories of gender and religion. The author creates a space in the novel to productively engage with the tensions emanating from hegemonic racial and gendered formations within the community and calls upon Muslims to reflect upon the culturally entrenched practices of their countries of origin. By narrating the story of Khadra Shammy and her devout Muslim family's challenging experiences of living as practicing Muslims in a foreign country which has got striking parallels with Kahf's own journey of growing up Muslim in America, Kahf compels the readers to acknowledge that American Muslims, with a variety of identifications that complement and enrich each other, are an integral part of the American society.

Traversing hybrid spaces and redefining belief

The protagonist of the novel, Khadra is brought up in a highly devout, religiously observant, Syrian Muslim immigrant family in which the tenets of faith are diligently followed and practiced by her father Wajdy and mother Ebtehaj. Khadra spends her early years in an idyllic childhood, living with her parents and two brothers in a close knit Muslim community where her father is the coordinator of an Islamic community center or the Dawah Center. The plot meanders through different phases of Khadra's life, throughout which she struggles to locate herself simultaneously within the American culture in which she grows up and her Syrian-Muslim roots.

Protected and well cared for in this close-knit family, both Khadra and her brother Eyad are taught the rituals and practices of the Islamic faith from a tender age. They are taught not to covet the

luxuries of this world as their mother tells them that “we are not in love with the glitter of this world” (Kahf, 2006, p.18). Khadra’s parents are among the founder members of the Dawah community whose mission is to work towards the well-being of Muslims in America. They lead austere lives, completely engaged in the service of God and other Muslims. Her father sees Islamic activism and Dawah work as a service “to help Muslims live by Sharia while being good citizens” (Kahf, 2006, p.235). Kahf seems to put forward a dynamic view of religion that organically blends a faith based life with the requirements of living in the modern world without any perceived contradictions.

Living in America and following a strict, rule- bound Islamic way of life, Khadra is at times unsure of which culture she belongs to. After enduring the racist attacks of her American neighbors and classmates throughout her childhood, she thinks that her parents’ decision to adopt American citizenship, though out of expediency, is opportunistic, betrayal and a “big fat lie” (Kahf, 2005, p.144). “To her, taking citizenship felt like giving up, giving in” (144). Given her upbringing in a closed community with constant references to a homeland they left behind, Khadra, at that point of time is unable to regard America as her home country, though it is the only ‘home’ that she has ever known. Kahf shows that during her initial years in America, Khadra is unwilling to consider herself as American. This view changes in course of her life’s journey to other locations like Saudi Arabia and Syria she had long considered as ‘home’.

Khadra’s parents, who, in turn, never consider themselves as a part of American society, are shown to be equally intolerant and rigid in their views. Kahf doesn’t fail to highlight the intolerance shown by Khadra’s parents towards the Americans whom they consider as different and inferior to them. The Shamys’ often demonize the Americans as blasphemous and materialistic who indulge in many social ills like adultery, alcohol and fornication. They believe that unlike them, Americans lead individualistic and materialistic lives in families that were dysfunctional and broken.

Khadra’s parents follow a literal interpretation of religion and have set tight and inflexible boundaries between the believers and non-believers, and regard the latter with contempt and scorn. The

narrative shows how Khadra's parents live a secluded life, a life closely monitored by their obsession with limits, boundaries and prohibitions. Their sole concern in religion is limited to a strict and literal observance of religious rules, striving to live by what they think as pure and exact definition of a true Muslim, almost to the point of prohibiting themselves from having any interaction with those they consider as non-believers. The narrative shows instances where Khadra's mother, suspicious about the cleanliness of Americans runs their laundry twice in the laundry machine: "Because what if the person who used the washer before you had a dog? You never knew with Americans. Pee, poop, vomit, dog spit, and beer were impurities. How Americans tolerate living in such filth is beyond me, her mother said (Kahf, 2006, p.4). She, like others in her community, thinks that Americans are unmindful about what Muslims consider as impurities.

Like this, and in many other instances also, without knowing much about the people of the host country, Khadra's parents Ebtehaj and Wajdy easily stereotype them, set rigid boundaries between the believers and non-believers and come to the overall generalization that "all in all, Americans lead shallow, wasteful, materialistic lives" (Kahf, 2006, p.68). As a teenager, Khadra too follows this inflexible view of her parents and is quite fixated on the rigidity of belief and authenticity of identities until she embarks upon journeys of self-reflection to ponder over the true meaning of her identity. Kahf, as a person who grew up in a similar community with unrelenting stereotypes about the non-Muslim other, makes a point that preconceived notions about the other exist on both sides of the divide.

Khadra's family's and community's approach to the outside non-Muslim world is also replete with stereotyping and feelings of superiority over the non-Muslims. Throughout the entire length of the novel there are no efforts from them to build bridges of understanding with those outside their community, nor are there any attempts towards self-reflection and growth. The novel thus delves into a rarely discussed area, the dangers inherent in holding inflexible and rigid views about others, often arising from a narrow and literal interpretation of religion. This rigidity of belief and refusal to accept other ways of life are also evident in the way Shia Muslims are treated by the Dawah

community members. For them, the Islam that they follow is the only legitimate one, and condescendingly hold all other variants as blasphemous and false. Khadra's mother takes extra care to steer her children away from such 'distorted' beliefs.

Khadra's protected life where her parents' socialize her exclusively with a chosen group of like-minded Muslims makes her totally ignorant of other ways of practicing Islam. Similar intolerance is exhibited by other Shia characters in the novels like Ramsey Nabolsey who states, "Sunni Islam is just a sellout... It's just a load of compromises and lies told by cowards too cowardly to fight for what they believe in" (Kahf, 2006, p.151). These incidents incite Khadra into researching more about the historical precincts of Shia-Sunni conflict. Her attempts to understand the truth of sectarian differences help her to come out of the blind prejudices harbored by her parents and culminate in her reversal of attitude towards Shias from stigmatizing hostility to one of tolerance and compassion.

The self-assuredness of the community members often creates situations where they become hypocritical, mostly unable to practice what they preach. One such instance is when Khadra confronts the sensitive issue of racism practiced by her community members, including her parents. The narrative exposes the contradictions existing in the way the Dawah community preaches and its members act in real life. They pride themselves to be above ordinary people in their moral code of conduct and in their practice of religiosity and virtue. Though, she vehemently rejects the black American community member Hakim's claim that the Dawah community members hold racist views and are "immigrant white-pleasers" (Kahf, 2006, p.137), deep down she knows that Hakim was right in pointing out the racism of white Muslims who, he stated, never married black people. Khadra is sensitive to the discrimination rampant in her community of believers, "She bit her lip, knowing he was right. Syrian Arabs like her parents sure didn't think black was beautiful" (Kahf, 2006, p.137). Her realization is underscored by her parents' racist attitude at home when her brother Eyad seeks their consent to marry an educated and accomplished Muslim girl Maha who happens to be a dark-skinned Sudanese girl visibly different from white skinned

Arabs like the Shamys. Their initial shock and visible disapproval however sensitize the young Khadra and Eyad about the hypocrisy and feelings of superiority internalized by their parents despite their best efforts to hide it “behind a smokescreen of denial that retarded any real attempt to deal with the prejudices that existed among Muslims” (Kahf, 2006,p.137). Kahf shows how Khadra, who is made to believe that there is no racism in Islam, discovers the underlying prejudices set deep inside the minds of her parents in their horrific reactions to her brother Eyad’s suggestion. Kahf gives us many instances like this in the novel to reflect upon the deep prejudices harbored by Khadra’s parents and the Dawah community members. This leads the protagonist to the realization that her belief, or what she believed to be the ideal community of believers is far from being perfect.

Furthermore, Kahf criticizes the Arab-centric homogenization of Islam and reflects upon the often side lined issue of racial tensions that exist among Muslims belonging to different races and nationalities. An example of such intra-community tension is illustrated through the difficult relationship between Khadra and her Iranian roommate Bitsy. Bitsy makes no attempt to hide her contempt and hostility towards Arabs, whom she is convinced have brought about the downfall and destruction of the once mighty Persian Empire. In her first meeting with Khadra, she makes her hostility and hatred towards Arabs clear. Her hatred towards Arabs is so deep-rooted that she refuses to communicate with Khadra and instead leaves notes for her. Bitsy declares, “I want to make it clear that I normally loathe and despise Arabs and have successfully avoided them all my life” (Kahf, 2006, p.347). It is interesting to note that Bitsy considers Persians racially and culturally closer to Aryans and not to Arabs. According to her, “Arabs caused the ruination of the once- proud Persian people by corrupting their culture, religion, language and race” (Kahf, 2006, p.348). Moreover, in portraying Bitsy as a Shah loyalist and therefore, pro-regime and pro-American, and Khadra as pro-revolutionary and anti-American, Kahf illustrates the ideological and political differences that divide Muslims. It is to be noted here that Khadra’s affinity towards revolutionary Iran doesn’t support the extreme brand of Islam upheld

by Iran, but her pro-Iran stance is due to admiration towards “the way it stood up to America” (Kahf, 2006, p.349). In projecting the tensions between Khadra’s and Bitsy’s loyalties, Kahf makes it clear that there is no single belief or ideology that unites and directs the motivations of heterogeneous group of Muslims separated by geography, culture and history. This view counters the mainstream distorted view that Muslims form a monolithic group united by an irrational antagonism against the West. The author raises a very important issue in this novel that racial prejudice and distrust of the ‘other’ is not a one- sided affair. Without moralizing or judging any side, Kahf points out the superficial nature of beliefs and hints at the existence of non-productive tensions between cultures as people with different backgrounds coexist in the country.

Kahf’s approach to signifiers like the veil and other Muslim symbols is conceptualized as fluid and flexible positions that enable new possibilities and new ways of thinking. Such hybrid identities, as Homi Bhabha (1990) suggests, enable us to “think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities” and are seen to inhabit a ‘third space’ or ‘liminal space’, a space which is “neither here nor there” but is rather “interstitial” (p. 211). Consequently Bhabha’s concept of hybridity and “Third Space” have considerable implications on the way Kahf maneuvers fixed polarities between Americans and Arabs, Muslims and non-Muslims, East and West and other antagonistic oppositional binaries that are against inclusiveness and are perpetrated on the basis of perceived difference. Kahf simultaneously attempts to sensitize the readers about the profiling and harassment suffered by veiled Muslim women almost on a daily basis for their choice of clothing in a so- called liberal secular environment in the West. Khadra, as a school girl is confronted and bullied by two white boys who forcefully takes her veil off and humiliates her in public. Later in the novel, Khadra, on her own terms, lets herself to be unveiled in the bright sunshine of the Ghuta orchard in Syria when her chiffon headscarf slips off her shoulders.

She closed her eyes and let the warm sun shine through the thin skin of her eyelids, warm her body to the very core of her. She opened her eyes, and she knew deep in the place of yaqin that

this was all right, a blessing on her shoulders. Alhamdu, Alhamdulillah. The sun on her head was a gift from God (Kahf, 2006, p.309).

This act of unveiling speaks volumes about how Kahf perceives religion, not as superficial acts of obedience, but as meaningful spiritual connections with the creator. What is remarkable here is the language Kahf uses to describe the process of unveiling. Even here, Kahf uses religious words and symbols to convey that Khadra still identifies with her religious self and that she knows it with absolute certainty that the act of unveiling is as legitimate as veiling itself. She is against all forms of rigid and inflexible conceptualizations of belief. On the other hand, Kahf foregrounds a religious identity that is constantly redefined, is multi-layered and always in the process of becoming rather than being. In this particular example of unveiling, it is clear that Kahf does not see veiling and unveiling as oppositional acts, but as situational acts of agency and choice. The author here rejects a polarizing rhetoric that pits fundamentalist Islamic discourse against a liberal feminist one, as the act of unveiling is understood by many westerners as a proclamation of freedom and empowerment. Rather, she invites the readers to perceive veiling/unveiling as part of a process of one's evolving relationship with religious beliefs. Kahf elaborates: "How veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary; how both light and dark are connected moments in the development of the soul in its darkroom" (Kahf, 2006, p.309). Here, it is clear that Kahf is against all kinds of binaries and suggests flexibility and choice in the way some people choose to veil. The politicization of Muslim women's dress choices, especially of the headscarf, by a hegemonic state as well as by religious stakeholders is subverted in Kahf's open and fluid treatment of the headscarf in this novel.

Travelling theory and shifting religious imagination

The identity crisis in the novel can be seen to work at two levels with regard to diaspora and religion. On the first and the more explicit level, as Cohen suggests, religion, spanning more than one ethnic group "can provide additional cement to bind a diasporic consciousness" (189). This community consciousness brings forth the

idea of a transnational community of believers that seem to subsume the different strands of identities that Muslim immigrants like the Shamys are expected to straddle in their transnational everyday life. But this is not to argue that modes of Muslim belief are uniform under any given circumstances. Secondly, at a deeper level, Muslims are undergoing a process of change as Islam travels to locations beyond the pale of its point of origin. As Islamic beliefs and practices are transplanted and rearticulated from one context to the other, for instance, from Syria to America, as in the case of the small Muslim community in Indianapolis in this novel, a space to understand and come to terms with different interpretations of Islam emerges, giving rise to important dialogues within Islam itself. Eickelman and Piscatori (1990), studying the ways in which travel and migration shape the religious imagination in the Muslim transnational public sphere, opine that travel not only heightens a sense of spiritual identification with Islam and fellow Muslims, but also intensifies the tension between the universality of Islamic principles and various local and contextually relevant interpretations of those principles in the transnational everyday lives of Muslims (p.xiii). The transformation and shift in meanings of the diverse religious practices over time and space compete with the dogmatic and authoritative set of religious practices creating frontiers between Muslims from heterogeneous locations. According to Eickelman and Piscatori “the encounter with the Muslim “other” has been at least as important for self-definition as the confrontation with the European “other” (p. xv). This encounter, as it is portrayed in the case of Khadra, broadens one’s understanding about the shifting nature of religious identity

Theorizing the formation of religious consciousness in diaspora, Vertovec points out that a migrant identity of “being minority “others” often stimulates a mode of religious change through heightened self-awareness” (p.16). The story of the Shamys and the small Muslim community that tries to secure a foothold in America is also a record of the new culture of dialogue and negotiations happening within transnational Muslim communities trying to effect a balance between a conforming and puritanical religious belief and a participatory and compatible approach to religion where individuals have a greater role to play in shaping and negotiating modes of belief.

Kahf's novel provides the most incisive criticism of the patriarchal control that pervades Muslim societies, including the ones in the West. The transnational diasporic space in America, provides Kahf more freedom to question the traditional culture-bound customs and rituals associated with the practice of religion that suppress women's freedom and agency. Using the medium of the realistic novel, Kahf reveals a varied picture of a heterogeneous community of believers as well as non-believers. Kahf's writings show that Muslim women can be instrumental in reforming their religion without weakening their spiritual and emotional connection with religion. Kahf simultaneously criticizes and affirms the identity of Muslim communities in the West. She follows a trajectory that allows for a flexible interpretation of religion that is done within the locus of an emotional attachment to Islam, thus making this approach radical and different from the popular Muslim writers who valorize Western notions of agency and empowerment for Muslim women.

In course of the novel, the protagonist Khadra, passes through different phases in her relationship with her faith, from her unquestioning adherence to her parents' strict and literal interpretation of Islam to a period of self-doubt followed by a journey of self-discovery as to what it means to be a Muslim woman of faith in America. This phase of critical enquiry and deep reflection into her faith where she starts questioning many practices of her community becomes a turning point in her life, culminating in a journey to her homeland Syria.

Following a trajectory that is different from contemporary bestselling novelists writing about the religious 'other', Kahf shows a serious and involved critical engagement with Muslim communities in the way they deal with the question of women's subjectivity and agency in a rapidly transforming world. The protagonist Khadra in the novel undertakes a journey of self-exploration armed with her experiences of living as a Muslim in a predominantly non-Muslim setting in the west and goes through phases of self-development that are influenced by her coming to terms with her own interpretation and understanding of religion. Khadra's self-understanding is based on a critical evaluation and reappraisal of her religious identity in a way that facilitates her life as a woman of faith and not on an abandonment of her religious/

cultural identity as advocated by the more popular writers. Moreover, women in gender-conservative religious environments navigate patriarchal power dynamics by establishing female centered spaces that foster autonomy and mutual support. Kahf constructs her female characters in such a way that they find their own spaces in negotiating with patriarchal establishments to write their own modes of resistance.

As evidenced in the novel, Kahf does not espouse an uncritical turn to Western values and norms as a means to reform what she feels is rigid and conservative in the Muslim community. Kahf seems to convey through the character of Khadra and other members of the community that Muslims in the West can retain their Muslim identity and can even enrich it by crossing boundaries of race, class and nationalities, territories etc. For instance, the novel ends with this idea of hybridity as an enriching experience where Khadra contemplates about the multiple meanings of 'home' and 'identity'. She finds in her fellow Americans people who share her own aspirations, fears, and hopes about life and the future. She learns how to be at home with all aspects of her hybridized American Muslim identity:

The Muslim women characters in the fiction discussed here can be seen to redefine the borders between their Western and Islamic identity claiming both in a way that is mutually complimenting, coexisting and enriching at the same time. After going through a seemingly unending trail of struggles they feel at home in a hyphenated identity, simultaneously finding comfort and redemption in their religious faith.

Conclusion

Kahf presents a narrative where Islam becomes the main point of reference. In her novel, she succeeds in presenting a Muslim character who is devout, yet critical and self-reflexive about the evolution of her Muslim identity as she is willing to interpret Islam from unconventional and alternative perspectives. Using the medium of the realistic novel, Kahf reveals a varied picture of a heterogeneous community of believers as well as non-believers. While secular feminists call for a total rejection of religion as they believe it legitimizes patriarchy, Kahf promotes an inclusive and wider impression of feminism compatible with faith. Muslim women have rarely been

treated as subjects having their own agency and voice. They are, as Mohanty (2006) contends, studied as a composite singular third world woman denied of the heterogeneity of diverse lifestyles, cultures and perspectives (p. 174). Kahf's scholarship and her literary outputs encounter and deconstruct this dominant discourse of a homogenous category of the Muslim woman by creating characters whose cultural and historical specificities are addressed in her narratives. Kahf's works take us beyond what she identifies as "the blind spot" in uncovering the monolithic Muslim woman stereotyped as veiled and oppressed beings (p. 33). As the status of women forms the main focus of western discourse on Islam, the relationship between Muslim women and Islam has been the subject of much speculation and conjecture in the popular imagination as well as in academic circles. Kahf herself has pointed out in her academic works that the Muslim woman in contemporary discourses falls within the spectrum of two Eurocentric regressive stereotypes- the victim and the escapee ("On being a Muslim Woman Writer"). Against this context of monochromatic representation of Muslim women, Kahf's novel narrate an alternate story about the Muslim woman and her gradually evolving relationship with her faith.

Compared to other popular Muslim novels, Kahf does not present a monochromatic view of Muslims by portraying black and white characters who are either too good or too bad. The negatives and positives of the community exist side by side in her novel. While the racism, prejudices, and narrow-mindedness of members of her community are exposed and criticized, there is also a celebration and validation of Muslim culture and way of life. Yet in her criticism, she is careful not to vilify or dehumanize the characters and through careful narrative methods, she portrays the characters with nuance, understanding that presents them as complex human beings negotiating life in all its complexities and contradictions. The important point that Kahf seems to emphasize here is that the Muslims in all their diversities and complexities have a right to be represented and acknowledged. Khadra, in her response to friend Seemi's accusation that she is soft towards narrow-minded Muslims calmly explains, "I'm not defending their views. I'm defending their right to have their views...I'm

humanizing them” (p.334). These lines from novel can best sum up Kahf’s literary oeuvre, that is to give voice to the Muslim experience and create awareness among the readers about the complexities, contradictions and inconsistencies that make up the American Muslim experience.

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