

Self-discovery in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006)

Walid Abdallah Abd El Salam Ahmed Rezk

A Lecturer in English language and literature

Faculty of Arts

English Department

Suez University

Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and shedding light on the issues of women in foreign and local communities. These issues are related to culture, religion, customs and traditions. It also analyses the conflict of identity, the division of belonging and the clashes between eastern and western norms. The writer tries to convey the shouts of help which her heroine "Khadra" releases but in vain. Khadra always suffers from self-alienation and a permanent feeling of being rejected and marginalized. This paper also aims at gaining sympathy, support and real understanding of the sufferings of the Arab and the Muslim woman and her struggle, as Khadra symbolizes the eastern woman in general and the female Muslim in particular. Her story is a shout of protest against the oppression and aggression which are regularly practiced against her and her hijab which is a symbol of her personality, belief and religion and her strong will to resist and not to submit any longer and to try hard to find and discover herself in the new society in which she has to cope with.

Keywords: gender, identity, feminism, self-alienation, protest, domination, emancipation, oppression, and submission.

اكتشاف الذات في رواية الفتاة ذات الوشاح البرتقالي 2006 لمهجة قحف

ملخص عربي

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تحليل رواية الفتاة ذات الوشاح البرتقالي 2006 للكاتبة السورية الامريكه مهجة قحف وتسليط الضوء على قضايا المرأة في المجتمعات المحلية والأجنبية من خلال بطله الرواية "خضرة". تتعرض هذه الرواية لموضوعات متعلقة بالثقافة والدين والعادات والتقاليد. كما تهدف الورقة البحثية الي التركيز علي قضية تضارب الهوية ومحاولة اكتشاف الذات، وتقسيم الانتماء، والصدام بين الأعراف الشرقية والغربية. وتحاول الكاتبة نقل صيحات الاستجداء التي تطلقها بطلتها "خضرة" دون جدوى. حيث تعاني خضرة دائما من الاغتراب والشعور الدائم بالرفض والتهميش. وتهدف هذه الورقة أيضا إلى كسب التعاطف والتأييد والفهم الحقيقي لمعاناة المرأة العربية المسلمة وكفاحها حيث ترمز خضرة إلى المرأة الشرقية بشكل عام والمسلمة بشكل خاص. قصتها إحتجاج على القمع والعدوان الذي يمارس ضدها وعلى حجابها الذي هو رمز لشخصيتها وعقيدها ودينها وإرادتها القوية في المقاومة وعدم الخضوع ومحاولة اكتشاف نفسها في المجتمع الجديد الذي عليها أن تتكيف عليه. الكلمات المفتاحية: اكتشاف الذات، الاغتراب الذاتي، والاحتجاج، والهيمنة، والتحرر، والقمع، والخضوع.

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Introduction

Mohja Kahf was born in 1967, Damascus, Syria. She is now recognized as an Arab-American poetess and author. Kahf left for the United States in 1971. Her family has been involved in opposing the Syrian regime, a theme that is reflected in the life of her main female character Khadra in her masterpiece *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*.

Kahf's work focuses on different themes of cultural dissension and disharmony between Muslim-American and other communities, on both sides of religion and secularism. Focusing on self, morality, Islam, gender and gender-relations, sexuality, politics, and especially identity are important aspects of her work.

Her first book of poetry, *E-mails from Scheherazad*, established her as a talented and promising poetess. Her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* was selected as Booksense Reading Group Favorite for 2007; as book of the year for the One Book, One Bloomington Series by the Bloomington Arts Council, Monroe County Public Library, Bloomington, Indiana, 2008; and became as a basic requirement summer reading for incoming first-year students at the College of Notre Dame, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008.

The study sheds light on how the main female character "Khadra" in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* sees herself, her homeland (Syria), and her new home (the United States). The study arouses and attempts answers to several questions, how does the heroine in this novel self-identifies despite having two countries with extremely different cultural heritages? How does she interact in a new community and how is she seen as an alien? How well does she melt into the dominant American cultural norms? How can she satisfy her parents by adapting to living in a new community with new customs and at the same time keeping her original ones? Does she identify herself as Arab or American? In answering these questions, we can imagine how the clash of civilizations and different cultures might have deep impact on the protagonist with torn identities.

Mohja Kahf is one among many other Arab writers who immigrated to America in the second half of the 20th century. She started from her new home to write about her own experiences with the other and based her stories on the struggle between her first identity and that of the new country and which deal with the inner conflict between the old and the new culture, customs and traditions. She creates clear position for herself in her masterpiece *the Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). Since she is a postcolonial, feminist and Muslim Arab female writer who lived many years in America, it is argued that:

The purpose of her writings is to focus on the portrayal of Arab-Muslim society and its striving for modernization in a globalized world. She formulates this objective in the context of a specific understanding of culture, cultural identity and intercultural relationship” (Sindelarova 9).

Kahf can be identified both as a modern Arab-Muslim and postcolonial feminist writer since she is an Anglophone novelist born in Syria. “She is much more concerned with cross-cultural issues; her works are firmly established in the spheres of the Arab-Muslim literary canon as well as in the international scope of postcolonial literature” (Hassan, 159-160).

Having no place to call home, forever strangers, and being neither Arabs nor Americans, are examples of the many difficulties the characters in these novels encounter. By analyzing these characters, I attempt to demonstrate the diversity of Arab American women’s different experiences and the sufferings they must face throughout their lives in the United States as women with torn and marginalized identities. Furthermore, by choosing a novel whose heroine is a veiled girl in an open community, I hope to show the double discrimination that she must face for both being veiled and for being Muslim. In analyzing Kahf’s protagonist (Khadra), I argue that her representation in this novel challenges the Euro-American centric viewpoint of Arab/Muslim women as a monolithic group by focusing on their diverse experiences in addition to their capacity to undermine the dual of oppressed represented by the Arab Muslim female, and the oppressor represented by the Arab Muslim male along with both western males and females. I also focus on their complicated identities as Arab Americans that are further complicated by their parents’ teachings, their Arab relatives’ judgments, and the American rejection of them based on their physical appearance and religion.

Method of Study

The study is intended to analyze Kahf’s novel according to the concepts of feminist theory by shedding light on women’s issues and

addressing them in literature to attract more attention to the oppression imposed on women whether in their Arab countries or when they immigrate to other countries trying to find resort and haven for their sufferings.

In order to answer the questions of the study, the feminist approach will be adopted to highlight the rights of women in their quest of emancipation within the selected work of the study. Feminist theory, which originated from feminist movements, aims at grasping the nature of gender disparity by discussing women's social roles and lived experience within the community they live in, "it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender." (Chodorow 2)

The method applied in this study is based on tracing common features and causal continuities that might be there between the feminist style and the Kahf's novel. Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a direct reflection of the main principles of feminism which call for improving and elevating women's position in society by establishing and advocating equal civil, political, economic and social rights for them. Kahf's works add much to the feminist movement in the middle east because while writing *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, she was writing a great part of her personal experiences as a female Muslim who lived both in the east and the west. I think Mohja Kahf along with others like Nawal as-Saadawi, Hanan al-Shaykh, Fadia Faqir, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, and Salwa Bakr are the pioneers of feminist literature from the east and have achieved great success in presenting women issues and are able to change the stereotypical image of the Arab Muslim woman in her country and abroad.

For instance, Dalal Sarnou (2014) finds a growth of interest in the writings of Arab female writers whom she always calls Anglophone and hybrid. Interestingly, Sarnou shows that these writings, "mainly novels and short stories, have drawn great recognition and visibility to the Arab woman whose identity is perceived by the European readership as being different and complex, because of her portrayal in the media, as well as the books of early orientalist" (4).

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf tells the story of a female Muslim who has to leave her country Syria and live in the United States. This story is an autobiography in which the writer talks about personal experiences and lives in their home countries and in the new societies. Tarek Al Ariss notes:

Through the eyes of an earnest and strong-willed girl named Khadra, Kahf provides us with a kaleidoscopic view of growing up Muslim and female in America. Racial and religious prejudice, political developments in the US and in the Middle East, integration and activism, all these issues come together in a carefully constructed crucible, strategically situated in America's heartland. (444)

The title of the novel seems convenient as it shows the heroine who has an Islamic background and who puts on a scarf. The tangerine scarf which is mentioned in the title refers to a scarf given to Khadra by her father's aunt, Teta, and therefore symbolizes her legacy and her Islamic identity. We might suppose right from the beginning that there is no change of the inherited qualities of the heroine and no movement in any feminist track in the novel. However, the purpose of this paper is to show the scarf or the veil as a shifting symbol. In other words, the veil or the "purdah" becomes a shifting signifier with multiple meanings. By deconstructing the concept of the veil, we deconstruct the concept of strangeness in general, and the feminist strangeness in particular.

In her illuminating book, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, the feminist Sara Ahmed explains that Western institutions, such as feminism, universalize the experience of women, or what Ahmed names "stranger fetishism," (2). For instance, Western feminists have a concept, Ahmed notes, of attacking the veil of Muslims, which is seen as a sign of female oppression:

However, universalism could also be read as a fantasy of closeness. For, at one level, reading the 'veiled woman' as an oppressed woman who is sexually controlled includes a fantasy that one can inhabit the place of the other and know what 'the other' intends and therefore needs. To put it differently, the focus on the universal wrong of the 'purdah' (and the supposition of women's right 'not to wear the veil'), involves the fantasy that one can 'get inside the skin of the other' (and speak for her). (Ahmed 166)

J. W. Scott mentions in his book *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (2011) the different reasons for wearing hijab or veil:

Many women insist that they have chosen to wear the veil as a way of signifying their religious commitments. Others admit that they have succumbed to pressure from Islamists in their communities. Still others have a more explicit political agenda: For them the veil is a way of rejecting the materialism of the Western capitalism and endorsing a program of social justice. (118)

For Khadra her hijab or veil represents her identity and her personality that's why throughout the novel she never goes out without it. Although it causes trouble to her from time to time, she feels proud to wear it. She never has the feeling that her veil covers her mind as well as her head as she always hears from people in the streets, Ahmed states that:

Hijab for Khadra was a crown on her head. She went forth lightly and went forth heavily into the world, carrying the weight of a new grace. [. . .] hijab soon grew to feel as natural to her as a second skin, without which if she ventured into the outside world she felt naked. (112-113)

Kahf tries to show an ideal Muslim family that try hard to keep their values and principles as pure and clean as they were since they travelled to the new world. They do their best to be a good model for all the people in the area in which they live. She also focuses on the manner other people from different races and religions adopt in treating their women, Al Ariss notes that:

Modelled on that of early converts such as Khadija and Abu-Bakr, Khadra's community is made up of Muslim pioneers in the Midwest, missionaries who set up shop in Indianapolis in the 1970s. Holding on to a "pure" Islam, which they reinvented along the way, they sought to shield it and themselves from corruption, jadedness, and the political. In shedding light on this life of simple devotion, Kahf examines the community's views on the Americanized Muslims or "McMuslims" (186), on Christians and Jews, and on the treatment of women and of African-American Muslims especially who traveled to the US." (444)

Kahf focuses on the cultural clashes of Muslim life in America, including discrimination among Muslims and bigotry by non-Muslim Americans who see Muslims as Aliens or lower creatures. Kahf conveys her sufferings through Khadra in her masterpiece. Walid Abdallah's Book *Shout of Silence* (2015), explores the torn lives of different Muslim females that have to leave their original country and live in the western world and their suffering in coping with the new customs and traditions, he says "She sheds light on how society looks at the Muslim female. How she was able to survive as an outcast in a place in which she must live, communicate and interact." (45). In fact, Kahf's novel tells the story of every immigrant Arab or Muslim female. She uses Khadra to convey her shout to the outer world and tries to teach every lady to make her shout be heard in any society in which they must live or stay.

In order not to feel as if they lived in isolation from the environment in which they live, Khadra's family decided to wander about the streets and districts to develop Islamic awareness:

Khadra's father and the other center workers took the Dawah on the road. They drove to chapters across the country, developing Islamic awareness. Ebtehaj was just involved in organizing local Muslim women's groups, although she was not a salaried center employee like Wajdy. So, the whole family piled into the station wagon for these mission trips" (Kahf 99)

As Khadra grows older, her tranquil world and its values come gradually under inspection. The turning point in her life happens, when she accompanies her family to Mecca for pilgrimage. On this trip, the American Islam of the Dawah Center meets "real" Islam, the Islam of Hajj, and of Saudi Arabia more specifically. The integration of the religion, experienced and sustained by the immigrant in the diaspora, is violently exposed in this context. She was arrested by the Saudi vice police on her way to the Mosque for Fajr prayer (prohibited to women in Saudi Arabia). She was shocked when she was harassed by her cousin's Saudi friends. Khadra becomes aware of the weakness of her idyllic world. "And even though she was in [...] the Muslim country where Islam started, she had never felt so far from home. There was a nip in the air all of a sudden." (Al Ariss 444)

Khadra felt confused of what she passed through her experience in Saudi Arabia. She remembers her talking with her aunt about the true meaning of Islam. How and when a person can be a true Muslim:

What is a real Muslim, Khadra?" Aunt Khadija said finally. "When you do the five pillars," Khadra shrugged, "you know, and follow the Quran and the prophet and wear hijab and follow the Islamic way of life and"

Aunt Khadija said gently, "Shahada. That's all. Belief that God is one. When that enters your heart and you surrender to it, you are a Muslim.

Khadra felt alarm. It wasn't that simple. Her parents said so. You have to practice Islam to be a real Muslim." (Kahf 24)

Khadra felt alienated with the man she falls in love with (Juma) and proposes to her though the beginning was quite different. She never felt that her relationship with her husband would add to her sufferings in stead of being a source of support and comfort to her torn soul.

Juma asked to go home with Eyad (her brother) and Khadra one day. From where Khadra sat, she had a view of the back of Juma's head, his lush black hair, and his deep bronze complexion. Juma's lips as he turned to talk to Eyad were large

and exquisitely chiseled, the lower lip wide and curved like a Kuwaiti dhow. The scent of sandalwood subtly invaded her senses.

When it became clear during his visit that he was there to ask her parents and, by their permission, her, to consider a proposal of marriage from him, it was not entirely a surprise, even though he and Khadra had never exchanged a word beyond that phone call without Eyad in the middle.”(Kahf 205)

Although Juma originally was charismatic, a keen husband, and a good friend, after a short while Khadra saw his true nature and his hidden personality. He was very obstinate in his religious and gender-role tendencies which was personified by using his husband's right to forbid “Khadra from riding her bike because, eventually, it embarrassed him. It is hard to imagine how she must have felt when Juma would leave, sometimes for days on end, when he was upset.” (Al Ariss 444). It was his illogical way of doing things which ultimately broke Khadra down and tore her a part especially when she tried to ride the bike at that day for

example:
“Finally, Juma pulled rank. “I forbid you.” He said, laying his hand on the bike seat. “As your husband I forbid you.”
Khadra recoiled. She couldn't believe he would say that, even if it was Islamically valid. Her father never said things like that to her mother. It was Alien to everything she felt and knew.

But eventually, in order to live in peace of mind regardless of her comfort, she gives up and “she put the bike in the resident storage area of their building's basement. Such a little thing, a bike. In the overall picture of a marriage, what was a bike? The gears rusted and the tires lost air. Something inside her rusted a little, too.” (Kahf 230)

It was the first time for Khadra to feel oppressed and marginalized, but she had nothing to do but to submit, in fact being married to Juma, he began to kill her ambitions and hopes:

Juma reached the end of his degree. He couldn't extend his visa.

“What about me? Khadra said “I've got one year to go.” They were driving to Indianapolis.

“You can finish at the University of Kuwait,” he said. “It's nice really.”

“You could apply for US citizenship. You're married to a citizen. They will let you stay.”

“I don't need American citizenship. I am Kuwaiti, not Palestinian.

I don't have a problem getting around with my passport.”

“Or-what-if-we could live apart for a year. It’d be one year. You could go on to Kuwait, and I could stay on my own.”

Juma laughed. “You’re joking, right? Leave my wife in America?” (Kahf 243)

Khadra's marriage seemed perfect in the beginning because she got married to a committed Muslim man who would bring peace to her life and help her get rid of the racism she felt in the outside “American” world. However, Khadra who was seen too Muslim by the Americans was seen too American and too feminist by her family and her husband alike. In her marriage, she refused to do traditional feminine tasks as getting her degree seemed much more important to her. Moreover, she refused to quit riding her bike to the university and stop campus demonstrations the way her husband wanted. Above all and most shocking to Juma, Khadra had an abortion against all expectations and against the Islam he adopts. Juma did not like her Western style of life, so they got a divorce and Khadra felt relieved: “can't go on in the marriage without killing off the 'me' that I am” (242).

When Khadra’s identity broke down, she traveled to Syria to recollect herself. There, she began to feel more aware of her identity through the females in her family. In Damascus, she stayed with Teta, a strong and a loving woman, almost a feminist in her liberal attitude and style of life. Khadra seemed to identify with her more than she does with her own mother. Khadra, however, discovered through the stories told to her by Teta and others the closeness of her character to her mother. Ebtihaj, Khadra’s mother, had to fight for her veil against her stepmother’s desires to remove it. Ebtihaj’s rebellions ended with a trip to France where she was raped. While Ebtihaj changed to a stricter version of her character as a reaction to her tragic life (she and her Khadra’s father were accused of politicizing the hijab by her uncle), but Teta kept it more balanced.

There is another example of a not so perfect marriage: Abu Abdallah with his two separate wives. The first marriage, with Aunt Fatma, was based solely on love. She says that she has given him “pure gold” but he didn’t know how to handle that treasure and instead got another marriage. I believe he let her love “slip between his fingers” (412) because he is such a generous person and strives to make everyone happy that he got carried away and neglected what truly mattered to him, but he doesn’t realize that.

All the time Khadra remembers the many obstacles and challenges in her life such as racism in the Midwest which becomes more violent especially after the events of the Iranian hostage crisis which ended with accusing of all Muslims. She also remembers the bad names her neighbors used to call her such as “rag-head”. These incidents formed her

thought and made her realize that being Muslim would make her different from others. She is torn apart even within her Muslim community as she sees contradictions and differences in religious beliefs and values. She knows other families who are not as strict as hers especially in the matter of wearing hijab. She has different views with her family concerning her life like divorce and abortion. Khadra's biggest challenge is finding her lost identity in the new world. All over the novel, Khadra must face challenges and obstacles and by overcoming them, she helps herself form her personality as a human being. Finally, she realizes most of her goals and finds some answers to her torn soul.

Mohja Kahf focuses on women's social, economic, political and inner troubles. She shows her main female characters as being lost, depressed, oppressed and weak because of their cultural customs and social norms they were brought up on. Consequently, they believe they are inferior to men and submissive to them. Furthermore, the way the Muslim woman lives in her own context and that one she lives in America is found in story, for as being an Arab Muslim woman, she writes about women and the Muslims' misbehavior towards women. She describes, as well, those Americans who insult and laugh at Muslim women because of their clothing or the way they behave.

Although women are granted rights to different aspects like; education, economy, inheritance and property rights, many of them face several obstacles to get such rights as they live in a male dominated society where patriarchy is the norm. Such society does not respect or welcome women's rights and just disregard their ability to learn, work and succeed in several fields. Muslim women living in America suffer from being marginalized, rejected and oppressed in the way that they are not welcome among Americans because of their religion in addition to the way they dress. As the Muslim woman goes out with a veil in public, the Americans show religious racism throughout their behaviors and believe that veiling is a result of gender inequality. They also face the evil of discrimination in schools and when asking for employment which leads to some Islamophobic incidents. In other words, women who cover themselves cannot learn comfortably and have no right to get a job, the cliché that Khadra faces when she works for *Alternative Americas* is "Muslim woman looking inscrutable and oppressed in a voluminous veil" (48). When the boss of the magazine knew of her relation to the Muslim community, he was delighted to make news about their "hidden" world "behind the veil" (48). This shows that the beginning of the story puts *hijab* in two extreme polar positions like binary oppositions, the ideal and the oppressed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, throughout the novel Khadra's experience that is diverse geographically and psychologically, we see the hijab in different positions representing different meanings. It stands for her identity, freedom, idealism, and revolution, political issues and eventually for love. The hijab embodies all those meanings through a rhythmic shifting between veiling and unveiling. Khadra's feminist self resembles this fluctuation between her various worlds. And nothing in the world can curbs all her contradictions except love of herself when she eventually discovers her identity and proves to herself first and the world outside that she is able to adapt to the different worlds she has to live in.

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