

Counter- Representational Discourse of Islam in Islamophobic States: The Case of Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in Tangerine Scarf* (2006)

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Abstract

Anglophone Arab literature in general and women in specific witnessed unprecedented change in content and quantity after the Twin Tower collapse. The September attacks of the 2011 brought about great political, social, cultural changes to the situation of Arabs in the West and America in particular since it destabilized their sense of belonging and created an agony and hostility against them. The experiences of social, political, and cultural marginality shape Arab Women's diaspora fiction which, in turn, attempts to produce a rhetoric of resistance to counter-balance discourses of hierarchies and cultural binaries (self/other, black/white man woman and so forth). In this respect, The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf (2006), written by Arab American, Mohja Kahf, functions as a mirror which reflects on the image of Islam, the veil and Arab-Muslim identities in Islamophobic states. This paper, therefore, offers an investigation of how, in border zone, Mohja Kahf attempts to correct the fallacies vis-à-vis Islam and Muslim and negotiates journeys of displacement and dislocation that Arab immigrants may experience.

I. INTRODUCTION

After the Twin Towers attack, there was an unprecedented increase in the quality of Anglophone Arab literature in general and women's literature in particular. The September attacks significantly altered the political, social, and cultural landscape for Arabs in the West, and especially in America, because they muddled their identities, undermined their feeling of belonging, and incited anguish and hate toward them. At the same time, it shaped their literary developments. Lisa Majaj as cited by Jameel Alghaberi in his article on "Arab Anglophone Fiction: A New Voice in Post-9/11 America (2018)" "affirms that, Arab Anglophone fiction "reflects in part the shifting historical, social, and political contexts that have pushed Anglophone Arab writers to the foreground, creating both new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression, as well as the flourishing creativity of these writers" (p.39). This new burgeoning literature stands as mirror that reflects Arab

immigrants' anguish, anxiety and unfulfillment as well as their quest for an identity which converges distinct cultures and languages. On the other hand, it presents a voice of truth which negotiates Orientalists' stereotypes and introduces Arabic culture to Western readers.

During the last decades, Anglophone literature was marked by the significant contribution of Arab women writers in carving out creative spaces to foster a better understanding of their experiences, lives and identities as immigrant Arab women from purely feminist and womanly perspectives. Diasporic Arab women writers committed themselves to reflect a genuine representation of women's lives, identities and experiences beyond the androcentric patriarchy and colonial models which demean Arab women as obedient, submissive, ignorant and under the mercy of men. They transform their marginal position into a space of resistance and strategically reflect their multiple

consciousness of the social, economic, and political corrupted values and attempt to change them.

Within the postcolonial and diaspora studies, Arab women's diasporic literature is ought to be read as a literature of resistance, exile, home and identity making. Speaking on the concept of 'Resistance' many critics within postcolonial studies argue that it constitutes any opposition to, or subversion of, dominant authorities. For instance, Raby Rebecca asserts in her article "What is Resistance?" (2005) that limiting the scopes of resistance entail more than defining it. Resistance for her "is an integral part of power relationships, of domination, subjugation and as such may be viewed from different ideological viewpoints." (p. 155) Resistance is a prevailing feature of most of the Arab female diasporic literature which, recently, knew phenomenal improvement and thematic changes that emanate from the author's social, economic, political and psychological status.

On the one hand, the selected author I examine in this study makes use her imaginings and creativity to resistance and transform the Western mythical discourse on Arab Muslim women. On the other hand, despite living in the diaspora, she imaginatively revisits her homeland and culture in an attempt to affirm her stance on the cultural stereotypes attached to Arab women in Arab culture as well as combat the dominant patriarchal institutions. In this article, resistance takes the form of consciousness raising and inflaming the intellectual world on the necessity to reread and revisit the typical definitions of otherness and traditional structures of power relations pertaining to gender, ethnicity, religion and culture. It aims to examine the ways in which Mohja Kahf, through the language of the dominant culture, resists the pre-conceived stereotypical Oriental discourses and its hostility against Third World female and, in this respect, language functions as a mode of transformation, subversion and resistance.

II. RESISTING ORIENTALIST NARRATIVE OF THE POST 11/9 ERA

In this paper, I essentially apply a postcolonial feminist theory to examine the lives and experiences of Arab women Diasporas in both sides of the Atlantic and the challenges they face socially, culturally, politically and psychologically as postcolonial "Third World" immigrants. Prior to the exploration of the representation of Arab

Muslim women in Western various forms of knowledge, it is of much important to provide an overview on the concept of "Representation" as it is fundamental key concept to the investigation of Arab women's Image in western discourses. By definition, Representation⁵, as it is defined by Stuart Hall in his book *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (1997) defines is "using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent the world meaningfully" (p. 15) meaning that representation is a process whereby meaning is constructed about the concept represented. Stuart Hall, exploration, tends to delineate the ways in which the concept of representation connects meaning and language to culture distinguishing three theories that account for the accurate meaning and usages of representation. In fact, most postcolonial critics affirm the fact that representation is a discursive tool used to perpetuate and recycle stereotypes. In this regard, Edward Said upholds that:

Western representations of the Orient, no matter how well intentioned, have always been part of this damaging discourse. Wittingly or unwittingly, they have always been complicit with the workings of Western power. Even those Orientalists who are clearly in sympathy with Oriental peoples and their cultures cannot overcome their Eurocentric perspective and have unintentionally contributed to Western domination. ((Marandi and Shabanirad, 2015. p. 22).

A Strong expression of the contemporary images of resistance echo in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl In Tangerine Scarf* (2007) where she probes into the current discourses of Islamophobia and clash of civilizations the result of which the blatant binary oppositions of us and them triumphed. Kahf depicts the after math of the bombing of the world trade towers that dramatically changed the West-East relationships. Within the Western hemisphere, Muslim and Arab minority are seen as menace, extremists and terrorist particularly those who plainly exhibit their religious affiliation either in forms of veiling or beard for men. The hostility of Americans against Arab and Muslim communities is represented throughout the novel in an attempt to make visible the vilification of Arabs. "Hubbard was tall, gaunt man with crew cut and a limp who liked to wear his old army uniform; I'm not speaking from

⁵Representation is the production of meaning through language. The Shorter English Dictionary suggests tow relevant definitions for the word.

- To represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or imagination for example; in the sentence, this picture represents the murder of Abel by Cain.

- To represent also means to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen of, or to substitute for; as in the sentence, In Christianity; the Cross represents the suffering and crucifixion of Christ.

ignorance,” he’d said quietly. “I’ve lived in their countries, and I know. They *will* destroy the character of our town.” (Kahf, 2007, P. 42) Like most of Arab American Novelists, Mohja Kahf deals with the practice of Islam in the United States as Steven Salaita remarks that “In Kahf’s novel Islam is a primary theme, one that she explores as a highly diverse set of beliefs and customs. A poet, literary critic, and novelist, Kahf invests in writing about Islamic subject matters, depicting major challenges Muslims encounter in the U.S., through imaginatively recounting Muslim stories of integration and stories of troubled self-identification.” (Yaghi, 2015, p. 100). Kahf also scrutinizing troublesome issues of religious radicalism, gender role, patriarchy etc. She negotiates not only the complex state of being Muslim in America but also the complex interpretations and dimensions of Islam in Islamic countries where her fictional protagonist Khadra embark discovering. The writer also delves into defining the symbol of the veil beyond western feminist’s interpretations as a sign of oppression. This section, therefore, is devoted to analyses the way Mohja Kahf forges an Occidentlists discourse to counter-balance the Orientalist’s hegemonic ideologies and stereotypical depictions of Muslim veiled women in a hostile host society of US.

The Orientalist discourse is primarily based on the dichotomy of ‘us’ and them, the self and the other favoring the Western life styles, culture and modernity on the expense of other minor culture of many ethnic minorities living in the diaspora of the United States. These disparities and intolerance of other’s differences map out the dominating source of conflict basically between Muslims and non-Muslims. This so-called clash of civilization is elucidated in Kahf’s *The Girl in Tangerine Scarf* through the protagonist Khadra and her Shamy family and the American surroundings. When the Shamy Family fled injustice and lack of democracy in Syria towards the United States, their presence in there was not welcomed particularly with their exhibition of their Islamic background. The sensibilities of Americans towards Islam simply say to them “back where you came from” (p.7) The Shamy family lived first in Squire One in the Rocky Mountains where little Khadra and her brother Ayad learn the basics of Islam and learn the incompatibility of their Arab culture and religious to that of America.

Later, when the Shamy family moves to Indianapolis and joins the Dawah Center, a Muslim community, to contribute the strengthening of Arab presence in American and “to find solutions to the ways in which living in a kuffar land made practicing Islam hard” which they consider a “noble jihad in kuffar land” (P.13). However, despite the fact that there is some “freedom of religion in America, the practice of Islam and the attempts

to elevate its presence in US is extremely battled. Mohja Kahf shows the extreme sensibility against Islam in her saying “America was mad at Khadra personally, Shamy family, and all the other Muslims of Indianapolis” (P.14) because of their anti-Americanization attitude. In Indianapolis Dawah Center, Khadra begins her identity and self-refashioning under the supervision of Islamic teachings demeaning American life style yet she always believes that she is an American until her first encounter with racism at her school. When Khadra starts to wear the hijab, out of her own choice, she couldn’t live in harmony with her American friends to whom she seems exotic, and strange. this reminds us of Edward Said (1978) statement that “Arabs, for example, are thought of as camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization.” (P.5)

Khadra shamy’s classmates keep criticizing her “Even if I am hot, same as anyone on a hot day, I’d no sooner take off my hijab than you’d take off your house in the middle of the street, livvy,” she said to her American friend.” (113) Khadra is not only exposed to the American condemnation but also to their oral harassment and physical assaults that is proved through the Protagonist of the novel. While at school, khadra has to bear her schoolmates who harass her because of the way she dresses “oops”, said a voice behind her. She whirled. Brent Lott and Curtis Stephenson. She was cornered; the whole school was at the rally in the gym. She could hear the pep squad’s war whoops in the distance. Curtis grabbed Malcom X off the puke floor” (P. 124).

Khadra’s schoolmates believe that it their duty to stop khadra from wearing the hijab and they want to eradicate the possibility of her walking with the veil at school. They do not only orally assault her Take off your towel first rag head but they dear to physically violate her right to dress the way she pleases as the following statement manifests “Brent Lott’s hammy hand clamped on the nape of her neck, yanking her backward. The scarf went down around her shoulders.” (p.125) It is not surprising that kids attack Khadra and try to remove her hijab since as Jack Shaheen (1983) elaborates that American Mass-media presents deformed and negative portrayal of Arabs in Disney Animation and other forms of knowledge that accompany children from an early age and teach them that Arabs are different from ‘us’ American. In *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Shaheen (2001) exposed how the entertainment industry manufactured a prejudiced image of Arabs, Shaheen emphasizes that Hollywood’s presentation of Arabs as a pestilential threat was wildly alienating, he writes:

More recently, image-makers are offering

other caricatures of Muslim women: covered in black from head toe, they appear as uneducated, unattractive and enslaved beings, slowly attending man, they follow several paces behind abusive sheiks. (P.67)

Unquestionably, the stereotypical attributes attached to Arabs and Muslims in the US news media and commercial film industry is translated into agonistic behavior against Arab Muslim communities in American particularly. *The Girl in Tangerine Scarf* scrutinizes the core of American Orientalism. That demeans Arabs as villain other. “khadra is an “other” in many aspects. First, because she originally comes from Arab country, i.e, Syria, she is thus culturally considered as backward. Second, she is a Muslim woman who ardently believes in the practice of hijab and chooses to veil. She is thus regarded by Americans as a debased woman who submits to the patriarchal norms of Muslim societies by her own volition. For these reasons, Khadra’s community constitutes a civilizational threat within the American nation.” (Berrezoug, 2015, p.25)

With regard to the relationship between the Arab Muslims and the Western Orientalist discourse Mohja Kahf points out to counter occidentalists’ discourse that is symbolized through the Shamy family and Indianapolis Muslim community’s accidentalist attitudes that counterbalance the Americanisation and westernization tendencies. In the novel, Khadra’s parents believe that America is mere “Kufar’s land” and that American life style is no better than their Arab Islamic culture. Americans believe the individual was more important than the family, and money was more important than anything. Khadra’s dad said

Americans threw out their sons and daughters when they turned eighteen unless they could pay the rent—to their own parents. In addition, at the other end, they threw their parents into nursing homes when they got old. This, although they took slavish care of mere dogs. Overall, Americans led shallow, wasteful, materialistic lives. (p. 68)

In this view, all Americans are essentialized under homogenized unlikable peculiarities given that they favor individuality over communality, self-interests and self-promotion on the expense of the general interest of the community. These characteristics of Americans subvert and reverses the superiority/ inferiority dichotomy and reconstruct a different contradictory image of ‘us’ Muslims

better than ‘them’ the filthy and impure, non-Muslim American.

Kahf also deals with many aspects of American culture, which appears to be inappropriate and incompatible with Arab culture and religion. Many of the practice that Americans values of Americans consider aspect of American modernity and liberty are condemned in the novel given that Khadra’s father considers them as immoral. He could not understand how “Americans allowed their kids to do this thing called “dating” boggled his mind. How could any decent father hand his daughter over to a boy and tell them, go on, go out into night, hold hands, touch each other?” (pp. 86-87) The anti-Americanism evinced in the attitudes of Indianapolis Muslims towards westernization given that they defend their original culture and national life style through Islam that functions as a defensive mechanism. Kahf expresses the rejection of American culture in Arab Muslims’ prohibition of their kids to adopt American’s culture “roaming streets” that they allege immoral and impure. When khadra and Eyad were hanging out and return back home “their father dragged (them) by their ears to the door” and their mother “looked she was about to cry, but what she did was scream. “Do you think we are Americans? Do you think we have no limits? Do you think we leave our children wandering in the streets? Is that what you think we are? We are not Americans! She sobbed; her face twisted in grief. “We are not Americans” (p.67).

In this respect “Islam in the hands of the Shamy functions more as a defensive mechanism against the new culture than a possibility to reach a better understanding of both the self and the other. In other words, Islam, here, is mostly used as a means to an end which is strengthening of sameness and demonization of otherness.

As I have noted previously, *The Girl in Tangerine Scarf* covers a variety of subjects ranging from the most private and personal to the most public and political. The novel studied here focuses on the conflicting representations of veiled women with the intention to subvert the western imagination and interpretations, narration and constructions of the veil as a sign of oppression, submission and obedience to the patriarchal norms. Ultimately, from an Islamic feminist’s stand point, Mohja Kahf foregrounds the problem of representation not only to challenge western narratives and western feminism’s generalizations but also more crucially to defend her rights as a Muslim Arab woman against patriarchal configuration of Arab women’s identity.

The general conception of the veil in western narratives is essentialised into a symbol of oppression, violence and backwardness of Islamic religion. Because the hijab is a prominent sign of the Islamic faith, Muslim

women who wear the hijab are sometimes treated as terrorists, fanatics and backward and other time are pitied for being victims of Islam and patriarchy, debased and in need of liberation. Miriam cooke coined the term "Muslimwoman" to refer to the denigrating practices and aggressed Muslim women as a homogeneous object. "In an attempt to make sense of a growing problem confronting Muslim women I, too, have coined a neologism, "Muslimwoman." My concern was to find a way to draw attention to the post-9/11 collapse of religion and gender into a singular and imposed political category." (As cited in Merdinova, 2013, p. 83) According to Miriam cook , the neologism "Muslimwomen" highlights the discursive construction of Muslim women both those who wear the veil and those who do not as a homogenous category that denies them of their difference and diversity. Muslim women in western feminist thought, additionally, are labeled under an essentialist ahistorical identity. "Muslim women today that veiled, and even unveiled, women are no longer thought of as individuals: collective they have become the Muslimwomen... /This identification is created for Muslim women by outside forces." (p. 83) In the same vein, through strategic narration, Mohja Kahf unveils the reality of the Western representations of the veil that have been politically construed to serve colonial and imperial projects.

Constructing "Fanonist approach of resistance", Kahf chronicles various events of dearly attempt to unveil Muslim women. This historical event is recycled in the novel as the

author intends to show that veiling has always been a historically troublesome issue. This means that, the veil has been a challenge for the colonialist program as it presents a barrier which hinders the dominance of Algerian women in specific and Veiled Arab women in general. In the novel, the story repeats itself as the attempt to unveil veiled Muslim Arab women. Thus, in the novel, Khadra was exposed to violent attempt of unveiling by her American schoolmates which symbolically connotes colonial attempts of unveiling the Algerian women. Surprisingly, Mr. Eggleston, is a witness of the physical assault, yet, instead of coming to rescue Khadra, "he shook his head, gave her a mild disapproval look and went back inside" (Mohja Kahf, the Girl in Tangerine Scarf. p.125.) On the one hand, the teacher did not consider Khadra as a victim but a sinful for wearing the veil and on the other hand, he does not condemn this action because he believes that Khadra is being liberated by her fellow Americans. Nonetheless, Khadra loves being in this forest of women in hijab, their khimars and saris and *jilbabs*." (p. 126) The veil for Khadra symbolizes a protection and a defense mechanism against the American boys' scopophilia curiosity to ascertain what is behind the

veil. This action of unveiling Khadra metaphorically recalls obsession of the French colonizer with Algerian women 's veil that in itself represented a barrier that hindered the envision of Algeria. That is, Khadra "didn't want to give anyone in the building the satisfaction of seeing her barehead" (p. 125) At this moment, Khadra felt extreme misidentification to America and she start to reflect upon her identity as an American particularly when her friend Zuhura is found murdered. Zuhura was an active member of Indianapolis Dawah Centre who starts to hold meeting on the issues of Islam, gender and politics, was found murder in mysterious circumstances.

Back in Syria, Khadra learns that she is not exceptional in her experience of unveiling discourse given that her mother and Syrian women in the 1982 were subject to the same political doctrine. When Khadra paid a visit to her Aunt in Syria, she got to know that the government banned wearing the hijab in public and those who refuse to unveil were threaten "to get a gun to your head" (pp. 281.282)

Additionally, Khadra learned that her parents resisted theses governmental attempts and instead of confirming to the status quo of Assad, they decided to" stay(ed) true to themselves, and had not twisted their mind to fit into a cramped space" (p. 282) Khadra's mind couldn't help but reel at this. At least her parents had stayed true to themselves. Wajdy and Ibtihaj stood taller in her sight. They had not stooped. Had not twisted their minds to fit into a cramped space, had not shrunk themselves like poor Uncle Mazen and Aunt Razanne. Her parents had fled, even if it means leaving everything, everyone they know." (p. 283). This makes Khadra proud of her parents at the same time empowers her to continuo the battle against the Western imagination of the veil and to defend her Islamic agency as an Arab Muslim woman.

III. CONCLUSION

The importance of Mohja Kahf's debut novel appears in its attempt to give some answers to a couple of significant questions related to racism, marginalization and bigotry faced by Arab Muslim in the USA and Europe mainly after the terrorist's attack of the 11/9. Safest to say that Mohja Kahf embarks a double critique of both Orientalism and sexism, two hegemonic discourses that render Arab Muslim women inferior. Kahf devoted the first half of her novel *The Girl in Tangerine Scarf* to readdress the current issues of Islamophobia, and Western imagination and representation of the veil particularly in post 9/11 era paying considerable attention to the extent to which Arab American lives are profoundly affected. By so doing, Kahf

builds an Occidentalist narration to counter-balance Orientalism where the veil functions a symbol of resistance. However, in the second half of her novel, Kahf goes through a liminal experience like many Arab Americans while refashioning their identities. Kahf shows how her protagonist Khadra is caught between her American identity and her Arab Muslim identity fluctuating between two distinct cultures. In this respect, Kahf foregrounds the challenges Arab women face in Arab regarding the veil and as it is explored in the coming section, the author continues her double critique portraying Khadra as a resistance character who refuses also to adhere to her Islamic patriarchal culture. *The Girl in Tangerine Scarf* opens another venue for reclaiming Muslim women's agency.

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