Relocating a Torn Identity and Asserting the Right of the Oppressed to be Heard and Liberated in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a rapid increase in the production of literary works written in English by female Arab writers who have brought more appreciation for the Arab women who are often perceived by the Western reader as exotic, eccentric and complex. The article deals with the 2006 novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Mohja Kahf, a Syrian-American poet and novelist, which presents the reader with a new borderland area occupied by young Arab-American Muslim women. The novel condemns distorted images of Muslims in America by local media and US foreign policy. The article aims to show the way the protagonist Khadra attempts to relocate an identity which has been lost between home and abroad and between a radical Islam and discerning secularism. Kahf offers the Western reader a unique portrayal of Muslim women, having developed a subjectivity of their own. The article also aims to show that by disclosing the journey—searching for the identity—of Khadra, Kahf enables her to come to terms with both her Arab and American identities where she creates a new identity for herself in order to be accepted and established in America. The new attitude of Muslim-American women resonates with the author's assertion of the right of the oppressed to be heard and liberated.

Keywords: relocation, borderland, diaspora, secularism, dogmatism

1. Introduction

Syrian American author Mohja Kahfa's 2006 novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* narrates the story of the Arab American protagonist Khadra Shamy's road to self-discovery and the assertion of identity. Although Khadra has been raised in a conservative Muslim society, her perception of own community and her identity shifts after she goes through various life-changing experiences which lead her closer to her own goal, opposing to the identity she, by default, has received from her parents. Through her journey, she is able to deterritorialise a borderland that suits both her Arabness and Americanness. Through Khadra and other female characters, Kahf also emphasises various barriers towards female aspiration and agency as they are victims of social, religious and gendered oppression. Kahf thus takes the risk of rewriting and rebuilding the identity of Muslim women in America from the position of an insider. Khadra being dislocated from her home and community, starts suffering from identity crisis. By undertaking a journey into her origin, Khadra tries to negotiate with the Arab and/or Muslim identity and the American identity, and ends up being reterritorialised. Again, setting the story in a Muslim community in Indianapolis, Kahf presents the reader with multiple versions of Islam and communal diversity. Khadra's exposure to various Muslim countries and her experiences of religious transformation after her encounter with various versions of Islam tremendously helps her reshape her identity.

The article deals with Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* which presents the reader with a new borderland area occupied by young Arab American Muslim women. The novel condemns distorted images of Muslims in America by local media and US foreign policy. The article aims to show the way the protagonist Khadra attempts to relocate an identity which has been lost between home and abroad and between a radical Islam and discerning secularism. Kahf offers the Western reader a unique portrayal of Muslim women, having developed a subjectivity of their own. The article also aims to show that by disclosing the journey—searching for the identity—of Khadra, Kahf enables her to come to terms with both her Arab and American identities where she creates a new identity for herself in order to be accepted and established in America. The new attitude of Muslim-American women resonates with the author's assertion of the right of the oppressed to be heard and liberated.

Anglophone Arab writers, particularly female writers, are aware of the conventional means of demonstrating Arab and Muslim women. Recently, Arab American female authors have attempted to give a voice to women who are silenced as Miriam Cooke (2000) opines, "During the past twenty-five years, women from the Arab world have been writing themselves into visibility at both national and international levels. Historically invisible, they are becoming agents of possible transformations in the societies in which their voices had traditionally not been heard" (p. 150). The fact that women have been playing a significant role in the transformation process is to a large extent because of their occupying the diasporic space. Clifford (1994) highlights the gendered perspective of diasporic experiences which, he believes, have enabled women to question their position and identity in the different social and cultural environments where they find themselves (p. 313-314). According to Arami (2018), "Contemporary Arab-American women, who have always been spoken for either by

their patriarchal home culture or the patronizing colonial host, make it their mission to contest and challenge the abounding stereotypical representations of their lives and identities in their writings" (p. 43). Anglophone Arab writers, particularly women writers, display different types of borderlands. Their border can be considered social where crossing the border of their birthplace means getting rid of patriarchal constraints and being able to become well-known writers. They also occupy cultural border since they have written from a marginalised standpoint in between two opposing cultures. Again, the border for Anglophone women Arab writers can be intellectual also. Getting rid of the ideological constraints imposed by some undemocratic countries in the Middle East and North America enables them to develop a new interest in the political scene of the region. For these female writers, it might be the English language itself which will give them an access to the outside world and enable them to reach a wider audience. The English language can be considered an instrument through which Anglophone female Arab authors carry two worlds together—the Western and the Arab.

2. Literature Review

Although Alkarawi & Bahar (2013) highlight Khadra's realisation that it is in America that she will enjoy more freedom, they do not clearly shed light on Khadra's identity crisis caused by patriarchal and religious restrictions and lack of cultural assimilation in America. Besides showing the factors behind her crisis, my article will also focus on the way her travel to Syria helps her find her own root and identity. This particular journey also enables Khadra to develop her own agency and subjectivity, thus providing an unseen depiction of Muslim women debunking the traditional one. Unlike Arami (2018) who depicts Khadra's journey to maturity as a political protest against colonial power, my analysis mainly focus on Khadra's denial of social, gendered and religious subjugation. The scope and analysis of my paper is broader and more comprehensive than that of Lin Ling (2019) which mainly focuses on Khadra's Islamic identity, including issues like Islamophobia. Unlike the mentioned articles, my paper shows how through a unique portrayal of Khadra, Kahf gives a voice to her protagonist and other female characters and enables them to share the stories of their marginalisation and to be emancipated. Therefore, it is Khadra's identity crisis and the way she reasserts her identity by finding her own voice and agency which is the main focus of my study.

3. Relocating a Lost Identity and (Re)Developing Own Subjectivity

Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* narrates the journey of self-discovery and identity formation of the protagonist Khadra Shamy who has been raised in a conservative Muslim community in Indianapolis, after her parents settle in the US, where people believe in a single version of Islam. As the novel progresses, she undergoes different experiences and her conception of her own community and religion also goes through changes. A lot of events of the novel occur in Indianapolis where Khadra's father moves so that he can work at the Muslim Community Centre (Dawah Centre) to reach closer to God and to support other Muslims. Khadra does not face any discrimination in Square One, the Rocky Mountain, her first living place in the US: "The American kids in Square One didn't seem to know yet that they were supposed to be better than the rest because it was their country. Their parents were all students at the same university" (Kahf, 2006, p. 10). However, the situation alters when they move to Indianapolis where in spite of its myth of ethnic diversity they face ethnic discrimination from local Americans: '"Liar,' she says to the highway sign that claims 'The People of Indiana Welcome You'" (p. 4).

Kahf writes about cultural differences faced by Muslims in America where she focuses on the conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims and both associations and disagreement among Muslims. Her depiction challenges the images of Arabs and attempts to review the mainstream representation of the culture. In the novel, Kahf depicts the struggle of victimisation of women with veil in the US and in many Muslim countries. She subverts the stereotypical and disparaging depiction of Muslim women in America and the novel's cover photo of a girl putting on a tangerine scarf can be a good example of this. It is widely admitted that in most of the conservative Muslim countries, women are not allowed to wear clothes with eye-catching colour. Nevertheless, the photograph of the Muslim woman on the cover page, wearing black T-shirt and blue jeans, represents the veil in a different manner and suggests Kahf's conveying many indirect messages about Muslim women residing in Western countries or in their Arab land. This cultural and religious amalgamation provides the Western reader a unique image of modern Muslim women who have attained some sort of hybrid subjectivities or identities of their own and conveys the symbol of the 'new mestiza'.

One of the most significant issues in the story is Khadra's growth of own self and her association with Muslim and non-Muslim friends in the USA. Over time, Khadra becomes more controlled about her life events, more focused about her identity issue and more liberal concerning her religious interpretation. However, Khadra's search for (re)defining her identity starts when she raises the question about her sense of belonging due to her encountering racial harassment and social and cultural othering in the USA and the rigid Islamic (and/or patriarchal) tradition in Saudi Arabia. As Berrebbah (2019) says,

> The social and cultural rejection she gets from the wider American society in the city of Indianapolis, and the struggle she goes through when encountering the Arab culture and strict Islamic conventions in Mecca, pave the way for her to embrace the choice of isolating herself into a space in which she could re-define her identity, re-consider her true belonging, and also re-examine her faith. (p. 65)

Khadra's identity is divided into many parts—Muslim, women and American—which ultimately makes it difficult for her to form a single identity as she herself sees through three different lenses.

The novel emphasises issues like racial conflict and Islamophobia that have a clearly negative impact on the life of Muslims in America. Khadra faces stereotyping, bigotry and violence because of her being othered as a Muslim. For example, because of her wearing veil,

Khadra experiences harassment at the hands of her schoolmates Brent and Kurtis who call her “raghead” and ask her to remove “the towel [veil] (Kahf, 2006, p. 87). Kurtis even cries, “‘Look, raghead’s got hair under that piece a shit’” (p. 87). These types of incidents force Khadra to see herself as someone othered and to question her origin. She thinks she will belong to place “where she would not get shoved and called ‘raghead’ every other day in the school hallway” (Kahf, 2006, p. 69). Again, the murder of Zuhura, an active college student and Khadra’s Muslim friend, also sheds light on the atmosphere of racism and Islamophobia even before the 9/11 attack. Although it is believed that Zuhura was brutally raped and murdered by the members of a white extremist gang on the way of her coming back home from college, the police, instead of finding the murderers, accuse her fiancé Luqman of honour-killing and expel him on the charge of visa violation. It can be argued that Khadra experiences discrimination and harassment because of the stereotyping of her identity. Stereotyping has been an instrument for the dominant cultures to sustain authority over the minority group. According to Homi Bhabha (1994), “Stereotypes construct the group or the individual as the other […] the stereotype is an ideological operation that aims to maintain authority and superiority over the oppressed groups and individuals” (p. 66). The widespread negative consequences of stereotypes are the possible reasons why Khadra adopts a non-assimilationist approach in America which is quite clear through her marriage with a Kuwaiti student and her plan to settle down in Kuwait. Even her parents Ebtehaj and Wajdy do not consider themselves Americans and are committed to keep a safe distance from White Americans and non-Muslims—an action which might result from their determination of maintaining their identities as Arab and Muslim.

The story also reveals the sexist attitudes of the people of the Dawah Centre (the religious meeting place of the Muslim community Zuhura and Khadra belong to) who seem to agree that Zuhura herself is responsible for her ill fate: ‘“She should not have been traipsing about the highways at midnight alone,’ […]. She had been asking for trouble. Sad as it made them to say it. And her family should’ve given her more guidance. You protected your daughters” (Kahf, 2006, p. 68-69). The attitude of Muslim men towards Muslim women is a clear evidence that Muslim women experience bigotry not only from people of other communities but also from their own community. Khadra herself is the victim of patriarchal dominance which is evident from the male-controlled attitudes of her husband and her being refused by the Dawah Centre to take part in a Quran reciting competition solely because of her gender. She also experiences patriarchal prejudices from Muslim males in Mecca while performing ‘Hajj’ (the Pilgrimage) with her family members. She is escorted back to home by some policemen only because she wants to say her ‘Fazr’ Prayer (Morning Prayer) in the mosque. She is not allowed to do so as women in Saudi Arabia are not permitted to pray inside the mosque. This particular event invokes gender discrimination and social prejudice. It is also a bewildering event for Khadra as it goes against the Islamic practices and the teaching of Prophet Mohammed.

Khadra also finds it ironical that she is not allowed to enter the mosque in the birth-place of the prophet while in America, the land of the non-Muslim, she has used the mosque not only as a prayer place but also as a meeting place. Khadra’s father and uncle do not understand her emotion and she realises that she is powerless against the patriarchal authority—an event that makes her “really angry-angry that they would treat her this way, and angry that she let them get inside her feelings-and she wanted to come out swinging” (Kahf, 2006, p. 117). In spite of her horrible experiences, Khadra realises that it is not Islam but rather a patriarchal and sexist social tradition where women are marginalised in the name of Islam. The shocking experiences of Khadra in Mecca make her realise that “[She should] appreciate the freedom she enjoys in America where she is free to practice her religion without persecution” (Alkarawi & Bahar, 2013, p. 104). Concerning Khadra’s realisation, Rasheed El-Enany (2006) comments, “the West to Arabs, with an emphasis on women, is no longer an oppressor but a saviour, a place of refuge from repression at home, a space of freedom with the promise of prosperity” (p. 186). Apart from the incidents in the USA and Saudi Arabia, Khadra, during her journey to Syria, comes to know from her grandmother about the oppression of Muslim women during the Baath regime when women were physically forced to remove their veils. Khadra’s experiences of stereotyping and discrimination in the USA, Saudi Arabia and Syria demonstrate the predicament of Muslim women all over the world. However, Sulaiman, Quayum & Abdul Manaf (2018) point out one vital difference between Khadra’s experiences in America and Saudi Arabia: “While Muslim women in America go through difficulties caused by racist individuals, this discrimination is not the result of state initiative. It is actually against the law of the country. In contrast, discrimination against women’s rights in Saudi Arabia is endorsed by the law of the country itself” (p. 55). From Khadra’s experiences and the previous statement, it can be claimed that some non-Muslim countries offer more congenial environment for Muslims than some Muslim countries.

Going through emotional turbulence of identity crisis, Khadra assumes the role of a defying young woman who is looking for drastic action. She “donned black headscarves with a surge of righteous austerity that startled her parents [as they] thought a young girl should be wearing lighter colors” (Kahf, 2006, p. 103); she spends time with her Shia friends, “on purpose choosing to identify with the sect opposite her Sunni background” (p. 106); and she becomes “impatient with traditional Islamic scholarship, with its tedious, plodding chapters” on rituals, despising the “moderate Islamic revival movement” of her parents and the people in Dawah centre, “for it did not go far enough down the revolutionary path” (p. 103). The contradictory values of Khadra’s radical religious view is intertwined with her personal awareness in her resistance through the black scarf. According to Ling (2019), “Khadra, however, finds herself trapped in a predicament where she can no longer feel at ease with her Islamic upbringing or the sense of inclusion with her community while concurrently reacting against the host culture” (p. 99). Khadra’s sense of being torn between multiple cultures and identities is increased in a German Islamic Studies class conducted by Prof. Eschenbach who creates in her the awareness to detach herself from her religious belief and to observe it from some distance. It is horrific to learn that she is caught between two opposing strands of Islamic traditions—“the view of Islam she’d grown up knowing” and the one “she was catching glimpses of” in her lecture. It seems to her “as if she were standing atop two earth plates grinding as they moved in different directions” (Kahf, 2006, p. 162). According to Bhabha (1994),

this indicates the agony and embarrassment of a diasporic person who is "continually positioned in space between a range of contradictory places that coexist" (p. 47).

Through Khadra and other Muslim women, Kahf debunks various Islamic traditions and perceptions of Muslim women. Khadra gradually learns to deconstruct various traditional beliefs about Islam taught to her by her parents and other members of the community. As she becomes more and more experienced and gets in touch with different sects of American Muslim and non-Muslim friends, her perception of Islam and her own outlook gradually changes. Khadra's obsession with the notion of Islamic Revolution and the adoption of a more rigid life-style gives way to a more balanced personality after she becomes highly interested in the true Islamic teaching. Her view of, or attitude towards, other human beings, irrespective of their religious belief, becomes more comprehensive as she learns more and more about her own belief which subsequently enables her to lead a liberated life. Again, the novel depicts women in a quite different manner; the Muslim woman in the cover page with a coloured headscarf, a black top and a jeans trouser, staring assertively at the reader can be considered the representation of a new type of Muslim woman, contradicting the traditional portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed. As Sulaiman et al. (2018) opine, "The narrative also helps debunk stereotypes of Muslim women by giving a strong voice to Muslim women; it introduces active women who are proud of their Islamic heritage, yet are sufficiently confident to venture into the unknown space of a border life of cultural amalgamation" (p. 57). Therefore, the alternative portrayal of Muslim women increases the reader's understanding of the identities of Muslim women.

One distinctive feature of Kahf's novel is Khadra's attempt to apply her own analysis of Islamic guidelines and regulations based on her own understanding, in particular regarding women rights—to have an abortion and to unveil in public. Although the decision of abortion is a debatable topic in the novel, it can be considered a turning point in her life, enabling her to question the meaning of life: "Her self was a meager thing, scuttling behind a toilet, what she hadn't given over of it to Mama, to Juma. Too much, she has given away too much. She will not give the last inches of her body, will not let them fill her up with a life she does not want" (Kahf, 2006, p. 172). Khadra claims that her knowledge of Islamic Laws helps her to conclude that women are allowed to abort within the first four months of their pregnancy; she also demands her rights over her body and life. Khadra's viewpoint concurs with the arguments proposed by Miriam Cooke (2001) where she argues that in this modern era, women are given a chance to exert control over their bodies. They understand the way "the biological specificity of their foetus-carrying bodies forces them to be dependent on men" (p. 64). Cooke's statement thus questions the validity of men's dominance over women and asks for redefining men's position in connection with women. However, because of her decision of abortion, Khadra loses tie with her family and religious community and starts suffering from utter frustration, a psychological breakdown and self-isolation.

Khadra's tale of being conflicted between gendered identity, both Islamic (and/or Arab) and American construction, is centered on veil, the symbol of Islamic womanhood, which is politicised in the Western discourses. Whereas veiled women are seen as virtuous in Islamic culture, they are considered oppressed in Western discourse. Muslim women are othered by the Westerners as their veil is considered a sign of helplessness and disempowerment. Therefore, it is not the veil itself which is a symbol of oppression but rather how it is painted and built up in people's mind. Apart from the cultural clash between the East and the West, there is also the meeting between Khadra and her Iranian American friend Bitsy who, seeing Khadra wearing veils, asks, "You're not one of those fanatics, are you?" (Kahf, 2006, p. 252). Ling (2019) associates Islamophobia with the homogenization of Islamic community and says, "This account conveys the message that Islamophobia is in fact rooted in a homogenized image of the Muslim community, which invariably revitalizes the politicized, monolithic stereotype of veiled Muslim women" (p. 100).

Kahf comes up with an alternative facet of 'hijab' (veil), explaining the attempts of a Muslim woman to settle the issue of Identity and belongingness. She challenges the orientalist discourse through an alternative description which "includes veiling as a particular expression of Muslim Americanness, rather than foreignness" (Abdurraqib, 2006, p. 63). A determining moment for Khadra takes place in Syria when she takes a clear decision about veiling:

> The scarf was slipping off. The chiffon fell across her shoulders. She closed her eyes and let the 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, alhamdulilah*. The sunlight on her head was a gift from God. Gratitude filled her. … Here, was an exposure, her soul an unmarked sheet shadowing into distinct shapes under the fluids. Fresh film. Her self, developing. (Kahf, 2006, p. 214)

Interestingly, Khadra's act of unveiling is not the result of rebellion against God or Islamic teaching, but rather the realisation that God is benevolent to her by allowing the sunshine to penetrate her skin without any barrier. As Droogsma (2007) opines that the veil serves as "an impetus for self-definition within a framework that allows women to be both Muslim and independent" (p. 296). When she realises, "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. 214-215), she no longer sees veiling and unveiling as binary oppositions, but rather as a sign of agency and independence and a step towards enlightenment and maturity. Khadra realises if veiling separates her from other human beings, then it is meaningless. Again, if veiling is supposed to be for humility, then it is more imperative for one to be humble and the veil appears to be a piece of clothing, categorising her as a Muslim who maintains humbleness. Apart from this, if the veil is an instrument of asserting one's identity, then unveiling is a way of supporting the West that always considers Muslim a sign of subjugation. Here, Khadra's decision of keeping veil becomes a tool of resistance for her. Heath (2008) claims that nowadays veiling symbolises protest against religious, cultural and ethnic bigotry: "When the veil is forcibly stripped from its wearer, that too, is

subjugation, not emancipation" (p. 3).

Khadra creates a new space for her where she attempts to establish a new version of herself by deciding to erase the slightest touch of anything that reminds her of her past—all that "twenty-one years of useless head-clutter. It all had to go. All those polished surfaces posing as spiritual guidance. All that smug knowledge. […] it needed to be cleared out so she could find out for herself this time" (Kahf, 2006, p. 181). As a result, Khadra challenges the Islamic teaching she learnt since childhood; she stops praying and starts addressing God in a disrespectful manner. Due to her loss of faith, Khadra starts suffering from some sort of existentialist crisis which ultimately causes a feeling of loss and depression and even instigates her to commit suicide and to put an end to her miserable self. Khadra's psychological turmoil significantly influences her identity-forming process. About identity and identity crisis, Erikson (1963) argues that individual identity formation and self-understanding is greatly influenced by social, psychological and cultural contexts: "What impressed me most was the loss […] of a sense of identity. … There was a central disturbance in what I then started to call ego identity" (p. 36). According to Berrebbah (2019), "This strongly reflects Khadra's tripartite nature of reality that encompasses her gender as a reflection of biology, psychology as a product of faith development and traumatizing experiences, and also social environment as projected through Muslim and American communities in both Mecca and Indianapolis respectively" (p. 72-73). Khadra's condition can be described by her 'central disturbance' or 'ego identity', reflecting her lack of self-apprehension. It can be surmised from Erikson that psychologically traumatising experiences severely affect the individuals' quest for his/her identity and self-awareness.

4. Creating a New Identity and Attitude of Arab American Women: The Quest for Self-discovery

In order to overcome her identity crisis, caused by social and cultural displacement and her shifting attitudes towards religion, Khadra undertakes a number of journeys in the search of her true belonging. Since she has been raised in a Muslim community, comprising of Muslims from different national and ethnic background, she mainly considers herself a Muslim. Although she lives in America with her parents, for her, becoming an American is synonymous to betraying her identity as an Arab and Muslim. Interestingly, Khadra does not consider America, but rather counties like Syria and Saudi Arabia as her real home due to the emphasis on religion. Although she visits Mecca with her family members to perform the 'Hajj' and where she believes she will find the true sense of home, it is this particular journey which gives her the biggest shock by altering all her concepts of home, nation, identity and belonging. When the plane lands in Saudi Arabia, she thinks, "At last, […] someplace where we really belong. It's the land of the Prophet. The land of all Muslims" (Kahf, 2006, p. 110). Ironically, it is in Mecca that she, who grows up in the US but always considers herself an Arab Muslim woman, finds herself a misfit, an outsider.

The first clash between Khadra's Islamic belief and the Islamic practices in Mecca takes place when she goes to the nearby mosque to say 'Fajr' prayer but is caught and brought back to home, guarded by two Saudi policemen as if she was a vagrant or thief of some kind. When she tries to defend herself by quoting some hadiths from the Prophet that '"You must never prevent the female servants of God from attending the houses of God'", they make fun of him "Like she was a joke, like what she said didn't event matter" (Kahf, 2006, p. 116). Ironically and shockingly, Khadra realises that she is not permitted to say her prayers in the middle of Mecca the way she wishes; however, she can pray at any mosque she likes in America—the land of 'kuffar'. Another revealing moment for Khadra takes place when she is sexually molested and verbally abused by some young male Arabs who are the friends of Afaaf, the daughter of her host. These young Arabs view her as a sexual object coming from America although Khadra introduces her as an Arab, speaks proper Arabic and does not accept the proposal to remove her veil or to consume alcohol. The statement of the guy who sexually assaults Khadra—'"[…] you grew up in America-don't tell me you never do stuff like this in America'" (p. 123)—reveals the way Saudi young people think of American people, Muslim or non-Muslim, as without having any morality. Afaaf shows the same attitude when she asks, "'What is your problem? … What's the matter, is this not as fun as what you do in America?'" (p. 123). Khadra is shocked and shaken at this experience and for her, America no longer seems to be the ultimate other. She finds herself closer to Islam in America than in the land of the Prophet. Therefore, Khadra's attempt to find space and peace in Mecca and to reclaim her identity in connection to it suffers to a huge extent.

Khadra's getting married with Juma, a Kuwaiti lad from the same university, can be considered a crucial moment in her life, which ultimately compels her to embark on travelling in her quest for an individual self. She gets married in a traditional way but ultimately the marriage proves dysfunctional. Her pregnancy and the decision of abortion makes the situation more uncomfortable for her. As Arami (2018) writes, "Khadra's real problem is not with Juma, as a person, but with the demands he makes of her as an Arab Muslim woman, what is, for him, supposed to be part and parcel of who she is" (p. 48): "She was an Arab girl, familiar with Arab customs. He hadn't expected her to be doing things that would embarrass him. If he'd wanted to have to explain every limit of proper behavior, he'd have married an American" (Kahf, 2006, p. 158). Khadra finds herself bothered between the way patriarchal society view Muslim women and the way she as an individual views female roles in family. Because of her decision of abortion, her identity as a Muslim woman is questioned and her 'immoral' act is considered dangerous for the morals of the entire community. Her family members and friends argue that she rejects her conventional and religious responsibility as mother—giving birth to more Muslims. Her decision of abortion not only causes her divorce but also alienates her from her own family and her Muslim community in Indianapolis—all the markers of her identity are shaken. However, the reader can sense the formation of a strong sense of ego and individuality in her.

Khadra stresses on the importance of travelling to new places to regain from the anxiety and depression incurred by her divorce: a fresh beginning is absolutely necessary for her to reunite with herself. Khadra realises that to find answers to all his questions, it is time for her to go "[b]ack where she came from: Syria" (Kahf, 2006, p. 184). Although the idea of going back to Syria might be a dangerous one as her parents were once political activists there, she believes that her experiences there will help her change her worldviews. In Syria, she

meets her grandmother (aunt to his father) Téta who, after seeing her, explains that she has been waiting for her to arrive and recites a verse from the Holy Quran, emphasising the importance of travelling: “Glory be to God who hath taken His servant on a journey throught the night” (Kahf, 2006, p. 186). Kahf seems to have linked Khadra’s trip to Syria with the Prophet’s journey to Jerusalem to highlight its significance in her life. Carol Fadda-Conrey (2014) explains, “the journeys to an Arab homeland … are often instigated by a desire to return to the geographical and national roots of diasporic Arab identities, or to what is simply defined as familiar” (p. 66). This particular journey is significant as it enables her to see things through different lenses.

In the entire process of self-discovery during her journey to Syria, Khadra is greatly helped by her grandmother Téta—a character disrupting the stereotypical image of Arab women—who provides her with all sorts of assistance to reconcile with her past. Khadra learns from Téta that in her youth she worked as a “telephone operator” (Kahf, 2006, p. 188) for a communication company where she fell in love with an immigrant from Palestine. Since the family did not agree on their marriage on the ground that he was a dirty gipsy, they had to elope to Haifa where her husband was eventually killed by the Zionist militia. Khadra is also surprised to learn that one of Téta’s childhood best friends was a Jew—a revelation which makes her realise that the generation of Téta was, and probably still is, more tolerant to difference, be it social, cultural or religious, than she thought or herself has been. She also learns the secrets of her mother from Aunt Razanne, who reveals that contrary to Khadra’s belief, her mother Ebtehaj was not religious. She did not say her prayer or put on veil until she was raped by one of her teachers during a school trip to Paris. This story explains her mother’s over-protective attitude towards religion and Khadra. Ebtehaj’s story of suffering in a Muslim country changes Khadra’s understanding of the past and makes her “to appreciate the freedom she enjoys in America where she is able to practise her religion without persecution” (Alkarawi & Bahar, 2013, p. 104). This is the way her journey to Syria helps her to change her understanding of her parents and her country and to come to terms with her torn identity. Her journey is a source of adjustment and knowledge as Fadda-Conrey (2014) says, “[S]imilar to Mecca trip, Khadra’s journey to Syria as a place of origin(s) is crucial for her revised self-understanding” (p. 75). Apart from giving her the opportunity to look at things through a new lens, Khadra’s journey to Syria also provides her the scope to contemplate on her future plan. During a tour to Mount Qasyoon in Syria, Khadra realises that photography gives her delight and she, therefore, plans to go for higher studies in photography and to take it as her profession. For her, her camera becomes a symbol of her alternative way(s) of looking at and understanding things.

In her journey to Syria, Khadra meets a mysterious poet figure at the top of Mount Qasyoon who asks her about her belief:

> “Why do you spend so much time worrying about what God thinks of you?” […] [H]is low voice seemed to come right out of her own gut. She didn’t think she’d shared that much of her state of confusion. “It’s the other way around, you know. God is what you think of God, you know.” (Kahf, 2006, p. 208-209)

Meeting a Rabbi at a synagogue causes Khadra to breakdown and makes her realise the arbitrary nature of the borders that she has drawn between her(self) and people from other religions, between right and wrong—the border that has initiated all the contradiction, crisis and suffering in her life: “It was suddenly too much. She began to gasp. Great gasping sobs poured out and wouldn’t stop” (p. 211-212). After returning to her grandmother’s house, she undergoes an excruciating transformation where she feels as if she was connected with all the people she met in various places in her life, othered and ignored: “All that had been lost was returning. All that had been disconnected was connected again” (p. 214).

Khadra’s trip to Syria also provides her the scope to reexamine her association with the veil. Her choice of veil before and after her trip demonstrates the development in her character. Before, she used to wear one-colour veil which symbolises her one-dimensional view on life and things. Her wearing a tangerine scarf in Syria symbolically connects her to her mother, her origin and the growth of her self. Going back to America, Khadra prefers to wear the veil but in a different style—“Not tightly, the way Ebtehaj wore it. Loosely, so it moved and slipped about her face and touched her cheek, like the hand of a lover” (p. 217)—which symbolises her acceptance of things and ideas which she earlier negated and emphasises her new-found peace with her hybrid identity. By combining different elements from her cultural background, Khadra Adds depth and elegance in her personality. Therefore, it is her journey to Syria which helps her find comfort in wearing veil. By finding comfort and confidence in veiling herself, she actually challenges the negative idea of the Westerners concerning veil and the way it is considered a sign of subjugation for Muslim women.

In returning from Syria, Khadra realises that her embarking on different journeys have transformed her identity and worldview and that it is America which is her only home. She accepts her Americanness—the part she used to negate in the past— and reassesses her own notion of home and belonging. For Khadra, “Going overseas was what enabled her to see that she was irrevocably American” and she should learn how to handle this (Kahf, 2006, p. 270). Khadra’s travelling to Syria enables her to accept and to unite different features of her hybrid(ised) identity—a realisation which echoes Stuart Hall’s views that identity is not an “already accomplished fact [but rather a] production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation” (Hall, 1990, p. 392). In spite of the fact that Khadra’s identity has gone through changes after her trip to Syria, she does not feel like settling in Indianapolis among her family members and Muslim community. She rather decides to isolate herself, restart her life in Philadelphia and to be self-dependent. Fadda-Conrey (2014) says again, “Khadra’s return to Indiana as an adult becomes an entryway into reassessing the trajectories of belonging to the places and homes to which she has imaginatively and physically connected throughout her life” (p. 70). After grieving over the death of her close friend Zuhura, she realises,

> She looks around at the white people, too–the Americans–no wait, she’s American now – the other Americans. …

> Midwesterners–Hoosiers–set in their ways, hardworking, steady, valuing God and family. Suspicious of change. In a funny way, Khadra realizes suddenly, as she surveys the crowd: they're us, and we're them. Hah! My folks are the perfect Hoosiers! (Kahf, 2006, p. 304)

By the end of the novel, Khadra surely knows about her true-self, identity and achievement. Khadra, whose name means 'the green one' and symbolises naivety and innocence, is more matured and experienced after her return from the journeys.

5. Conclusion

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf presents Khadra as an enlightened and independent woman who wears veil in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries as she strongly believes in what it truly represents. However, it should also be noticed that through her journey of displacement, in searching for true identity, she exposes many unpleasant facts about extreme Islam and authoritarian secular regime. Although the clear understanding of veiling and unveiling plays a significant role in Khadra's search for identity, what is more important in the novel is the emancipation of the marginalised and the search for a space where both autonomy and agency are greatly admired. The reader observe the way Khadra refuses to fit in with either the convention of a Western society which is secular but prejudiced, or the Muslim countries which are extremely patriarchal and which do not provide any freedom of choice to Muslim women. By exploring the journey of an Arab American in search of an identity, Khadra attempts to negotiate her Islamic or Arab identity and American identity and ultimately becomes reterritorialised in space/land which differs significantly from her parents' in terms of culture and religion. Kahf also created an overlapping zone for Muslim women who find an alternative way of living with Islam, a way they consider more fitting for their hyphenated identity. The alternative portrayal of Muslim American women in the novel reflects Kahf's assertion of the right of the marginalised to speak, to be heard and emancipated. Khadra's journey to her motherland enables her to initiate her soul-searching process and paves the way for her to find an attachment with God, and love for human kind and her own self which will be incorporated in establishing "a Téta-mosque" where '"You'd pray, then you'd listen to music and poetry and wisdom from all over the world. You'd go walking arm in arm with your counterpart in every other religion and just relate as humans under the sun. Everyone would be beautiful-there'd be a special sort of lamplight that made you beautiful"' (Kahf, 2006, p. 227).

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