

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf: Constructing Diasporic Muslim Identities in a Coming-of-Age Narrative

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Abstract

*The paper explores the representation of diasporic Muslim identities in a coming-of-age narrative: Arab American female novelist Mojha Kahf's bestseller *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* published in 2006. It examines how the religious diasporic hybrid identity is mobilized within the female protagonist Khadra Shamy, including the ways she struggles to negotiate her identity across different cultural terrains and gendered, racialised, intergenerational configurations. It attempts to show how these literary representations construct – and help conceptualize – the ways we understand diasporic Muslims in the U.S.*

The individual experiences as narrated in the novel illuminate a series of essential socio-political questions facing the community as a religious minority in a secular context. This study will address these questions through the representation of cultural hybridity in the literary narrative within the framework of postcolonial theory. It focuses on three constructs of the novel central to the conceptualizing of a hybrid identity of the female protagonist: firstly, the mirror images and moral panics that generate cultural clashes in the East-West encounter, which foreground, secondly, the predicament of an ambivalent existence of the protagonist as a diasporic individual, and thirdly, the ways she forges her hybrid identity as a New Woman within the diasporic context.

Keywords: *hybrid identity, American Muslim, post-colonialism, coming-of-age narrative*

This study explores the representation of diasporic Muslim identities in a coming-of-age narrative: the Syrian American woman writer, Mojha Kahf's novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, published in 2006. It examines how the religious diasporic hybrid identity is mobilized within the female protagonist Khadra Shamy, including the ways she struggles to negotiate her identity across different cultural terrains and gendered, racialised, intergenerational configurations. It attempts to show how these literary representations construct – and help conceptualize—the ways we understand diasporic Muslims in the U.S.

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Mohja Kahf was born in Damascus, Syria to a family of practising Muslims and migrated to the United States in 1971 at the age of four. Brought up in Indianapolis, Kahf has experienced “some of the worst years of her life” (Koon 2007: 14). These are the hard times for many of the immigrants experiencing backlashes to the post-1965 immigration tide and growing racial tension. Such experience, however, has also led Kahf to finding a voice in her writing. This semi-autobiographical novel by Mohja Kahf is a coming-of-age story of a Syrian immigrant girl, Khadra Shamy, who grows up in a devoutly observant Muslim family in 1970s Indiana. The East-West culture clashes, along with her encounters with practicing and secular Muslim individuals within the community with varying interpretations of Islamic codes, has compelled her to continually explore the fault lines between “Muslims” and “Americans”. She goes through stages of teenage militancy, of uncertainty as her vision broadens, and of a short disastrous marriage to Juma, her overbearing Kuwaiti husband. Khadra then makes a trip to her homeland, Syria, where she begins her healing process and recovers her faith. On returning to America, she takes care to stay away from Indiana where the past traumatic experience still haunts her. Later, her job sends her back to Indiana to cover a national Islamic conference, whereby she finds signs of changes on the familiar ground and a bond with her old community.

The novel is not written as a sociological treatise intending to represent American Islam. Kahf, however, pulls us into a compelling story of the individual experience of a Muslim American girl as a triple minority in the American society. As Kim argues, “by collecting dispersed experiences and constructing them into a story, the experiences can be located as a signified unit in this society and history” (2012: 53). As such, Kahf’s story provides insights into the complexity of wider issues in the lives of Muslim American community: cultural clashes between Islamic and American social mores and norms, inter-generational conflicts between first-generation Muslim immigrants and subsequent generations, race relations among Muslims with differing cultural origins and theoretical allegiances, and the varying interpretations of Islamic codes among the community. Islam, once thought to be primarily a faith alien to the Judeo-Christian tradition of the American society, has grown to be one of the most prominent and rapidly-growing religious movements in America since the 1960s and the political and cultural life of American Muslims as a religious minority has received much scholarly attention. While a wide range of socio-political studies have revealed social contexts and statistical information about the community,

textual analysis of Muslim-authored literary works will provide a research paradigm that explores the individual Muslims' emotional responses to the diaspora experience.

As discussed in this paper, the individual experiences as narrated in the novel illuminate a series of essential socio-political questions facing the community as a religious minority in a secular context: How can they reconcile their Muslim identity with the host culture in their integration into the American society? How can the basic ethics and theology of Islam be made relevant to their current conditions? What are the fears, hopes and aspirations for their social life? This study will address these questions through the representation of cultural hybridity in the literary narrative within the framework of postcolonial theory. It focuses on three constructs of the novel central to the conceptualizing of a hybrid identity of the female protagonist: firstly, the mirror images and moral panics that generate cultural clashes in the East-West encounter, which foreground, secondly, the predicament of an ambivalent existence of the protagonist as a diasporic individual, and thirdly, the ways she forges her hybrid identity as a New Woman within the diasporic context.

East-West Encounter: Mirror Images and Moral Panics

Like many diasporic writings, the novel begins with the protagonist embarking on a journey, thus establishing immediately its preoccupation with place and displacement. The journey in this narrative is used to explore a sense of individual identity, where voyages over geographical space become a metaphor for the journey into the self. The narrative begins with Khadra Shamy going back to Indiana on a work assignment. The onset of the narrative presents the image of the protagonist as a secluded woman with anxiety of displacement and her journey back enacts the retrieval of the past.

As Khadra recalls growing up Muslim in Indiana as an immigrant, the narrative revolves around the journey of her family into settlement. The scenes surrounding the cultural clashes between the Shamys and their white neighbours following their settlement, however, problematize an idealized vision of America which promises the successful realization of cultural diversity. The culture clashes range from taunts of 'raghead' by the white boy Brian, and the white neighbour Vaughn throwing glasses at their doorsteps, to the shouts from Vaughn's father to "go back where you came from" (Kahf 2006: 6-7). At times, the conflict takes the form of organized social activism, as the anti-Islamic group the American Protectors of the Environs of

Simmons ville asserts that Muslim community “will destroy the character of our town” and charges with Immigration and Naturalization authorities that the Dawah Center of Khadra’s community harboured illegal immigrants (42-43). Anti-Islamism and racism become interspersed as part of everyday reality and culminate in the Ku Klux Klan violence that murders Khadra’s friend Zuhura, as well as vandalism of the Islamic Dawah Center during the Iranian Hostage Crisis. Through the lens of the Muslim immigrants, the novel charts the larger anti-assimilationist trend that gripped America in the 1970s.

The novel concurrently details the culture shock and lurking dangers felt by the Shamys as new Muslim immigrants to America. Fears arise when they discover that “pork was everywhere” and it is not “merely a matter of avoiding the meat of the pig”. Soon their eyes are opened to the fact that “pig meat came under other names and guises in this strange country” (12). The horror of little Khadra is detailed when she finds the candy corn her kindergarten teacher gives her to eat contains “pig”, as “pig” invariably implies filthiness and even health hazards in her Islamic upbringing. And there is also Khadra’s fear felt in her middle school when the bullies tear off her head scarf repeatedly, and her teachers pretend not to notice.

The contrast established between Islamic *codes* and American cultural norms is at the heart of East-West encounter narratives within the novel. This not only defines flashpoints of cultural clashes but generates a mirror image whereby Khadra’s parents as devout Muslims see themselves as morally superior to Americans. As mission-minded Muslims, Khada’s parents are devoted to their work for the local Dawah Center, aspiring to spread the word of the Prophet and to help fellow Muslims perfect their practice of Islam. They transported the ‘home space’ with them when they settled in the U.S. Like many similar emigrants, they seek to re-create nostalgically and reflectively the cultural and emotional particularities of locations and connections left behind. It does not matter to them if the practice of their religious rituals is incongruous with common practices of American society. In fact, the practices of Muslim families are portrayed as the models of a good society, which claim to represent the true essence of humanistic behaviour through a collective culture with a sense of cleanliness and morality. Khadra’s mother, Ebtehaj, in this sense, provides a model of womanhood of a devout first-generation Muslim immigrant. Her sense of moral superiority and resistance to American culture are manifest in her intolerance of dogs and beers in American life, which are treated as “impurities” in Islamic *codes*, and her constant efforts to ensure that kids “didn’t turn into lazy American

children" (21). She keeps on ranting when the children are found to be dirty and wet after playing outside: "Do you think we are Americans? Do you think we have no limits? Do you think we leave our children wandering the streets?" Then "she sobbed, her face twisted in grief": "We are not Americans!" (67) In this context the voices of the Muslim community are constructed to make themselves as distinct from the host culture as possible. The Islamic codes as observed by Khadra's parents thus essentially serve as a marker of difference to set boundaries between "good" Muslims and "impure" Americans. These differences become elevated, as characteristics of the 'other', and the American indigenous culture is devalued as "shallow, wasteful and materialistic" while "Islam could solve many of their social ills, if they but knew" (68). This construction of binary oppositions derived from mirror images of the 'other' further unfolds in a moral panic felt by Ebtehaj in her perception of the Americans as "a crashing sea of unbelief in which the Dawah Center bobbed, a brave boat" (67). Years later, one of the aunties in the community explained to Khadra what it was like for her parents to attempt to build a safe Islamic haven in America as a strange land. She said, "We were scared, afraid of losing something precious...of being swallowed up by this land, reduced to nothing" (405). This fear of "being swallowed up" by a strange host culture epitomizes the totalizing view of Khadra's parents of "Americans", who are homogenized into disagreeable stereotypes while the cultural differences are essentialized at the expense of commonalities and parallels, thus constructing an image of "us" vs. "them" in opposite poles.

Cultural Hybridity: A Place of Ambivalent Existence

Against the backdrop of culture clashes in a world divided between "us" and "them", a self-image conceived by the protagonist as defender of her religious faith is revealed in the narrative:

...she'd been through at school, defending her identity against the jeering kids who vaunted America's superiority as the clincher put-down to everything she said, everything she was. Wasn't she supposed to be an Islamic warrior woman, a Nusayba, a Sumaya, an Um Slamah in exile, by the waters dark, of Babylon? (Kahf 2006: 141)

Khadra's doubts and anger reach new heights when her family goes to court for U.S. citizenship and to her, "taking citizenship felt like giving up, giving in" (141), much in the sense of betraying her Islamic identity. To Khadra's

parents, however, the decision is anything but a sharp turn. Khadra's father, for his support of the Islamic movement that sought to overthrow the Syrian dictator, was hunted as a political convict by the Syrian government and the family's 'dream of return' to homeland was thwarted downright by the political upheaval and massacre back there. In a flashback, the novel recounts the emotional turmoil Khadra goes through:

...eleven years away from the girl who cried into her pillow at the defeat the day the U.S. citizenship papers came, caught between homesick parents and a land that didn't want her. Not just didn't want her, but actively hated her, spit her, made her defiant in her difference, yet at the same time made her unfit to live anywhere else. (391)

For Khadra, it is a moment of crisis to become conscious, more than ever, of being caught in a place of ambivalent belonging and existence – a place of origin on the one hand and a place of displacement on the other. A hyphenated identity of an Arabian American Muslim forces its way in to dismantle her self-image as an Arabian Muslim brought to America for the cause of Dawah.

While going through the emotional turmoil of identity crisis, Khadra poses as a rebellious young woman seeking radical actions. She "donned black headscarves with a surge of righteous austerity that startled her parents" as they thought a young girl "should be wearing lighter colours" (149); she hangs out with her Shia friends, "on purpose choosing to identify with the sect opposite her Sunni background" (153); and she grows "impatient with traditional Islamic scholarship, with its tedious, plodding chapters" on rituals and scorned the "moderate Islamic revival movement" of her parents and the Dawah people "for it did not go far enough down the revolutionary path" (150). In these narratives the conflicting values of her religious radicalism become entwined at the site of her individual consciousness, only under the disguise of her black-scarf defiance. As Hussain argues, "in order for hybridity to merge two cultures, a narcissistic sense of inclusion (contentment with identity) and a transgressive sense of extension (adapting to surroundings) are prerequisite conditions" (2005: 12). Khadra, however, finds herself trapped in a predicament where she can no longer feel contentment with her Islamic upbringing or the sense of inclusion with her community while concurrently reacting against the host culture.

Within the novel, Khadra's feeling of being suspended in-between cultures is further captured in her experience in the German Islamic studies

professor's class, which makes her aware that the belief system of her parents and their circle, including the Dawah Center, is "just one point on a whole spectrum of Islamic faith" and "just one little corner of it" (Kahf 2006: 232). It is "terrifying" for her, however, to find herself being caught in a flux between two conflicting sets of Islamic teachings, "the view of Islam she'd grown up knowing" and the one that "she was catching glimpses of" in her college class; she feels "as if she were standing atop two earth plates grinding as they moved in different directions" (234). As discussed in *The Location of Culture*, this is revealing of the pain and awkwardness of a diasporic individual being "continually positioned in space between a range of contradictory places that coexist" (Bhabha 1994: 47).

Much of the female protagonist's story of being torn between Islamic and American social constructions of gendered identity, revolves around the *hijab*, the emblem of Islamic womanhood. The narrative of the novel exposes how the veil is fetishized and politicized in dominant Western discourses as a sign of disempowerment and oppression of Muslim women. The *hijab*, as a stark marker of Islamic womanhood, tend to create binary positions - the veiled position and the feminist position, each of which has exposed sharply contrasted views on both sides of the debate. In this debate, there is no power of ambiguity or hybridity for the *hijab*: the veiled woman is either 'virtuous' subscribing to Islamic values or 'oppressed' in colonial discourse. And it is not the veil per se that is oppressive, but the way it is portrayed and reinforced in people's imaginary. One of the growing-up experiences in America that Khadra continues to recall is when she was harassed and mocked repeatedly at school for veiling. These narratives represent the dominant cultural gaze that constructs the gendered identity of the protagonist as a veiled woman in dichotomous terms.

Juxtaposed with the scenes of East-West culture clashes is the encounter between Khadra and her Iranian-American roommate, Bitsy, who freaks out when she sees Khadra wearing her veil and asks her "You're not one of those fanatics, are you?" (Kahf 2006: 363). Later it became clear to Khadra that Bitsy's parents were both killed in the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the very scene of being surrounded by Muslim women in *hijabs* with "Islamic phrases ringing out all around" her was embedded in little Bitsy's memory as "the scariest time" of her life (375). This account conveys the message that the Islamophobia is in fact rooted in a homogenized image of the Muslim community, which would invariably revitalize a politicized, monolithic stereotype of veiled Muslim women.

The Muslim veil has almost invariably become a defining feature of Muslim female subjectivity, despite the fact that it is not the only distinctive emblem of Muslim identity, nor do the majority of Muslim women wear the veil. (Scott 2007: 4). Many Americans view the Islamic head covering as the hallmark of a controversial and repressive religion (Chan-Malik 2011: 112). In dichotomous terms of neo-orientalist discourse, Muslim women are ‘othered’ through the fabricated images of the veil as a sign of disempowerment and oppression. On the other hand, there is a view among practising Muslims that Muslim women are valued only if they observe Muslim female dress codes. In these binary conceptions, mandatory acts of veiling and unveiling have become representations of the irreconcilable values of the old world versus the modern. Kahf works towards the unsettling of these binary constructions within the novel. Kahf challenges such neo-orientalist discourse by exploring a new narrative that “includes veiling as a particular expression of Muslim Americanness, rather than foreignness” (Addurraqib 2006: 63). A defining moment for the protagonist was during her journey to Syria when she decided to exercise the autonomy over veiling, as she realized that:

The covered and the uncovered, each mode of being had its moment. She embraced them both. Going out without *hijab* meant she would have to manifest the quality of modesty in her behaviour, she realized one day, with a jolt. It’s in how I act, how I move, what I choose, every minute (Kahf 2006: 312).

In this narrative, acts of veiling and unveiling represent different stages in the maturation of the protagonist as a Muslim woman, and the veil is no longer associated with the sign of a “moral badge” (Ahmad 2008: 100). As Ahmad points out, the problem with the veil as an emblem of moral distinction, is its exclusion of unveiled Muslims, no matter how devout they might be. Freeing herself from the routine commitment of veiling, however, heightens Khadra’s emotional attachment to the *hijab* as a sign of Islamic heritage whereby she would claim her religious identity in pride on the American land:

She wanted them to know at Customs, at the re-entry checkpoint, she wanted them to know at O’Hare, that she was coming in under one of the many signs of the heritage. And she wanted her heart to remember, in the dappled ruffle and rustle of veiling and unveiling. How precious is the heritage! A treasure fire cannot eat. (Kahf 2006: 313).

When Khadra comes to the realization that “veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle ... both are necessary” (309), she is no longer trapped in the gulf between veiling and unveiling as binary oppositions. Rather, she finds herself in an in-between space where the true spirit of religion exists and is more at peace with her inner self. This space of ambivalent existence has afforded emancipating power for her to forge hybridity -- she becomes anew by using the power of ambivalence to create an identity that is intercultural, fluid, and potentially empowering:

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 (309).

The veil, in this sense, functions as an “impetus for self-definition within a framework that allows women to be both Muslim and independent” (Droogsma 2007: 296). The protagonist, as a young woman living in a nexus between two cultures and as a member of a minority faith in the American society, is carving out a space for the development of an autonomous self with the use of this potent religious symbol. As Rhys Williams and Gira Aashi points out,

Hijab carves out a cultural space for young Muslim women to live lives their mothers could barely have imagined... and still to be publicly Muslim. These young women are active agents and are able, to some degree, to create their own lives (2007: 283).

For Khadra, the act of veiling and unveiling works as a sign of autonomy and marks a step towards her maturity as an independent woman.

The Diasporic New Woman

The feminist ideal of the “New Woman” emerged in the late 19th Century and constituted a cultural and literary arm of feminist activism of the early 20th-Century America. The term “New Woman” in literary textual configuration depicted the changing image of women from the established and accepted role-model to a more radical figure. It referred to women “who exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social, or economic” (Bordin 1993: 2). Often positioned in a late 19th and early 20th century context, the term “New Woman” is also applicable to the reading of *The Girl in the Tangerine*

Scarf. The protagonist Khadra becomes a “New Woman” as she recognizes herself as an individual and chooses a strategy to overcome the pressure to conform to the role others want to see her enact. The strategy used by the protagonist as a “New Woman” involves a journey into herself, within both a psychological and a geographical context, questioning convention and tradition (Hussain 2008: 60). As a diasporic religious individual, moreover, Khadra’s quest for self-identity entails negotiating differences across cultures and an exploration of her religious faith in the changing cultural contexts.

The protagonist’s idealized vision of Islamic practices gradually comes under scrutiny as she grows older. The important encounter occurs during Khadra’s pilgrimage to Mecca with her family. The idealization of the religion, experienced and sustained by the immigrants in the diaspora, is much exposed in this context where the Islam of the Dawah Center comes to an encounter with the Islam of Haj, and of Saudi Arabia more specifically. Khadra awakens one morning to the Adhan to a dawn prayer in a Mosque “as if to the call of love” (Kahf 2006: 166); however, she is restricted by the guards from entering the mosque because only men are allowed to pray there and women must worship at home. For Khadra, “the *Hajj* morphs from a spiritual journey into a cultural journey: she has visited the true homeland for Muslims, and she has found that she is an unwanted stranger” (Lashley 2013: 53). What further increased her sense of alienation and estrangement is the joy ride experience with her cousin’s Saudi friends. They pulled off her *hijab*, harassed her and threw taunts on her, “What is it... what is the big *deal*... we’re not doing anything you have to worry about... you grew up in *America* ... don’t tell me you never do stuff like this in America.” (Kahf 2006: 177). As a girl brought up in America, she was thus ‘othered’ with “internalized negative stereotypes concerning American women”, with “the assumption that she is American and therefore immoral and sexually permissive.” (Lashley 2013, 54) These encounters on the land of Haj have brought Khadra to an awareness of the vulnerability of her idyllic world:

And even though she was in a Muslim country at this moment, and not just any Muslim country but 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 (Kahf 2006: 177).

As Khadra becomes aware that the wider practice of Islam is in fact divorced from her idealized vision, she begins her quest for an equilibrium that allows her to hold on to her faith while acknowledging the limitations and the

contradictions at the heart of its many practices. The novel further captures the ambivalence of her cultural hybridity that has come to the fore during her pilgrimage. For Khadra, changes in her Islamic consciousness necessarily entail realigning her conception of American identity. As she recalls later, “going overseas was what enabled her to see that she was irrevocably American”, as the way she was labelled by her Saudi counterparts would constantly remind her of her American identity, although it is what “in some way she couldn’t pin down” (391).

The novel presents heterogeneous images of the Muslim women of different cultural origins by exposing the protagonist to a variety of lifestyles of practicing and secular Muslim individuals. Black Muslim convert Aunt Khadija who came to Orthodox Islam by way of Nation of Islam, for instance, contests little Khadra’s idea that “You have to *practice* Islam to be a real Muslim” and holds that when *Shahadah*, Declaration of Faith and Belief in Oneness of God, “enters your heart and you surrender to it, you are a Muslim” (24). There is Tayiba, a hybrid of a white American convert and a Black Muslim, who works as a volunteer for a Mosque and half a dozen Dawah committees while appearing to be a “mod” or modernist look Muslim girl in Khadra’s eyes. And Hanifa, Khadra’s neighbour, as the first Muslim woman in Indianapolis to be a professional driver in a car race, represents an alternative image that challenges Khadra’s notion of Islamic womanhood. Among Khadra’s friends, Maryam, an independent and successful assistant public defender, had “mapped Muslim space in a way new to Khadra”. In Maryam’s conviction, “service to the poor is service to God. That’s the *Sunna*” and she does not have to be working only with Muslim issues. She believes that she is “manifesting Muslim values” in her life “by representing impoverished defendants”. She contends with what her father embraces as the separatist “Do for self” philosophy of Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam¹ and stands up for an integration of black Muslims into American life (367). These models of Islamic womanhood are set within the novel as reference groups for the protagonist, which has added to her knowledge of varying paths to Muslim life in America and opened up spaces for her to explore, beyond the confines of her Islamic upbringing, her own interpretation of Islamic codes in the American context.

The protagonist’s quest of individual self as a diasporic New Woman is best manifested in the account of her marriage, where she finds her life torn between the patriarchal outlook on Muslim womanhood and her own definition of gender roles in family. This dichotomy of difference constitutes

the basis for the turmoil in her marriage. The reader is witness to the awakening of a strong ego in her as she reflects on her family life:

Where was it, this will of hers, this misshapen self? She needs to know it...It was not vain-glorious to have a self. It was not the same as selfish individualism, no. You have to have a self to even start on a journey to God... She had not taken even a baby step in that direction. Her self was a meagre 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. (248)

The conflict between individualism and communalism, however, builds on Khadra's resistance to the assigned gender role. She finds herself positioned against her Muslim community by initiating a divorce with Juma after choosing abortion as she is convinced that she cannot "stay with Juma without changing who I am. Who I essentially deep-down am." (243) The whole community seems to have turned its back on her for her defiance as she senses "their whispers feather around her" and "Dawah Center poster girl had fallen" (Kah, 2006: 251), which leaves her feeling "in a free fall, unmoored, safety net gone, and nothing nothing to anchor" her (265).

As R. Radhakrishnan argues, for a diasporic individual, the feeling of being impoverished and abandoned in the host country will inevitably evoke in him a homing desire, a dream of return to home (1996: 208). When Khadra felt the first part of her life "is coming to an end", and she does not know "what is yet unborn inside" (Kahf 2006: 265), she embarks on a journey to Syria, the ancestral mystical home in her memories, as distant as what she imagined in her childhood as "where the sky touches the ground" (16). A gradual metamorphosis occurs in Khadra during her journey to the shelter of her cultural roots. There Khadra comes to learn about her mother Ebtehaj from Teta, her great-aunt in Syria, who reveals stories unknown to her. Ebtehaj's secular stepmother had been harsh on her for the veil because during those times, as Teta recalls, "The city was against it, the tide was against it" (275). Teta narrates "she tried everything - she'd yank it right off her head. I heard she put it in the pot and shat on it" and she is so embarrassed to be seen in public with her veiled stepdaughter that she makes Ebtehaj walk on the other side of the street. She does not allow Ebtehaj to continue with her Quran circle and tries to force her into marrying a man "who drank and whored, just to make her misery lifelong" (276). The

revealing of the past brings Khadra to a better appreciation of her mother, who had gone through such agonies to hold on to the veil and her faith no matter what the trend was at the time. To Khadra, the veil loaded with stories of the past goes beyond a mere marker of Muslim womanhood to incarnate a heritage of Islam, “a treasure fire cannot eat” (313). As such, Khaf’s attachment to her homeland and its cultural heritage is exemplified in Khadra’s conception of the veil. As Regina Lee emphasizes, diasporic people, whose exile can be voluntary or forced, can display two types of consciousness in their writings. The first type is “homeland idealism”, a strong attachment to their country of origin. The second type is the diasporic subjects’ consciousness of being ‘exotic’ or ‘other’. Given the minority status of the diasporic people, they may “sometimes play up the fact of their differences, highlighting their visibility” as a means to gain social acceptance and cultural identification (Lee 2004: 54) Khaf’s narrative is characterized by this double consciousness as she takes pride in the cultural heritage of her homeland while expressing her difference as a strategy for acceptance. *Hijab* is inserted into this complex relationship between home, diaspora and identity to personify the problem of negotiating Muslim immigrant identity in an American context. During her journey, Khadra comes to a strong bond with Teta, whose past experience sheds a new perspective on her life. Teta had been a telephone operator among “the very first wave of working women” in Syria. Resisting the then public discourse that “a telephone girl’s job was a bad thing, a thing for floozies”, she joins her fellow workers in solidarity asserting their aspirations “to be the New Woman”, “women who cherish themselves, women who are cherished” (Kahf 2006: 271-272). Teta reveals to Khadra how she defied her parents’ disapproval of her marriage with a non-Arab immigrant and how she had witnessed the upheaval in Syria in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 when she lost her husband. Teta’s narration of history shows on Khadra the virtue of fraternity and human bond as paths to God. In this context, the journey to the protagonist’s country of origin is constructed as a means of self-discovery, not only through re-entry into a collective historical experience, but also an exploration of self. This journey allows Khadra to finally begin her healing process in soul-searching and leads her into finding an association with God, humanity, and self, which would be embodied in her ideal of building “a Teta-mosque” in which:

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 (328).

This idealistic picture of worship and revelation that builds on interfaith dialogues and human bonds, however, is juxtaposed with Khadra's haunting memories of anti-Islamism and racism that culminated in the murder of Zuhura in Klan violence in the 1970s. The narratives of Khadra wailing aloud on the very site of the murder years later, on her way back to Bloomington, incorporate images of dark night, broken moon, muddy creek bank with night crawlers into a scene of horror and shadowy misery. This wailing scene becomes a metaphor for Khadra's mourning over "all of the hate and hardness" that lead to culture clashes as she comes to the understanding that "there is no Oneness" of God "in all that hard separation" (429) between cultures.

Awakening in this inner light, Khadra sheds the negative feeling of being caught in the flux between cultures and moves towards an appreciation of both. With the historical setting of the narrative evolving into the 1990s, Khadra sees that there have been signs of change towards multiculturalism in American society in the new decade as school teachers are "into this new multiculturalism curriculum" and "words like 'celebrating diversity' and 'tolerance' tripped off their tongues" (378). On the other hand, there is also a movement within her old community towards social integration and further, with the second-generation Muslim immigrants coming of age, interfaith communication and ties are strengthened, which is symbolized by Khadra's younger brother Jihad's interfaith band "the Clash of Civilizations" with a mix of Mormons and Muslims. She is also aware, however, that there has always been resistance to such changes just as "every Middle Eastern crisis dredges up more American hate" (424). This reference in the narrative is particularly revealing of the impact of 9/11 on the American Muslim community. In an America traumatized by 9/11, "Muslim women who wore the *hijab* bore the consequences of blatant stereotyping." (Haddad 2007: 263). Despite the backlashes to the Muslim community, in the post-9/11 context, many Muslim women adopted the practice in an effort to represent Islam, to assume a public Islamic identity, or to define what it means to be a Muslim living in a pluralistic society. (Westfall 2016: 772). In fact, as anti-Muslim rhetoric and incidents have increased since 9/11, American Muslim women have increasingly been wearing the *hijab*. (Smith 2009: 108) During those hard times, the protagonist would not let go her *hijab* as "it was the outer sign of an inner quality she wants to be reminded of" (Kahf 2006: 425). She realizes

that it takes time for cultural boundaries to be tested before cultures and faiths are able to coincide in mutual respect. She emerges as a strong New Woman defining her true self as she acknowledges the importance of East and West to forging her identity.

Note

1. Nation of Islam was established in the 1930s as a semi-religious Black Nationalist organization with its members known as "Black Muslims". Since the early 1970s, under the new leadership of Wallace Muhammad, Nation of Islam has evolved from its original radical separatist stance to Orthodox Islam and integrationist Americanism with its name changed into "the American Mission".

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