

A Cultural Translator in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the relationship between Muslims and Americans, especially the post-9/11 period. It will also raise the issue of a Muslim woman struggles working against the stereotypes of the framing of Muslims perpetually. The objective of this research is to analyze, using Post-colonial framework and an approach informed by Feminist studies, Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, in order to come to some conclusions about depictions of a Muslim American woman and her role as a cultural translator between Muslims and Americans. The research centers on the protagonist's, Khadra, representations in Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and her role as a cultural translator and interpreter between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans. The questions of this paper are addressed as the following: 1) How is Khadra depicted in the novel? 2) What are the problems that she faces? 3) What aesthetic strategies that the writer uses in acting as a cultural translator?

In this story, Khadra, a Muslim activist, has an abortion and divorces her husband at a very young age; in response to these equally traumatic and transformative experiences, Khadra attempts to reinvent herself against the grain of traditional Muslim teaching and within the context of American liberal society. Simultaneously, Khadra also challenges the framing of Muslims in American society. By describing how a young Muslim American woman struggles to live in America and challenges the framing of Muslims, we glean a better understanding of Muslim life, which remain under "frame" because of certain political agenda and ideologies. Importantly, this Muslim story also represents other minorities who struggle to live and to achieve greater diversity in global mainstream society.

Keywords: Mohja Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, a Cultural Translator, Framing Muslims.

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Introduction

As the historical record reveals, America has long played host to multiple waves of Muslim immigration which can be traced back to before the United States was founded. From the earliest phase of the Spanish colonial era, when Muslims fled Spain for the New World after their expulsion from the Iberian peninsula in 1543, through the enforced migration of African Muslims who were brought to America as slaves during the pre-revolutionary period, to the influx of Muslims from the former Ottoman Empire following the American Civil War, the history of Muslim-American experience reveals a multitude of ethnicities and nationalities representing many different interpretations of Islam. More recently, the volume and intensity of Muslim immigration to America from Eastern Europe and the Middle East respectively has increased dramatically in response to devastating conflicts such as the Bosnian War (1992-95), Islamist militant movements such as the Taliban, or repressive regimes such as those of Saddam Hussein and Bashar Al-Assad. Moreover the recent “Arab Spring” pro-democracy movements sweeping the Middle East and North Africa are further examples of the complex web of history, politics, and culture at the heart of the Muslim diaspora. However, while many refugees displaced by these conflicts often look to the United States as a place of refuge, that sense of hope and liberty has been severely compromised in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent “War on Terror”.

Based on this critical stage, this chapter will focus on how a Muslim-American women writer, Mohja Kahf thematizes the struggles of Muslim women living in America by discussing her respective novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). The protagonist, Khadra fails to adapt to mainstream American society. Although she is American, she feels different from the mainstream society because of her Islamic culture and faith. Failure to adapt can be seen through the ways she is attacked by American extremists and how she lost her identities, which will be examined further in this paper. My argument is that the writer, Kahf, intends to help increase mutual understanding between Muslims and Americans, and thus attempt to be a cultural translator. It is necessary for the writer to be a cultural mediator because the tension between the Islamic and mainstream societies in the States has become critical, especially since 9/11 and the American invasion of Iraq.

In order to understand these strategies, it is necessary to summarize the novel’s content. Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a female Bildungsroman novel which takes as its focus the coming-of-age story of Khadra Shay, a Muslim woman living in America. In particular, the novel centers on the ways in which Khadra and her family attempt to assimilate into American society. Kahf presents her main character, Khadra, as a refugee child from Syria who flees to America with her parents because of the Syrian civil war. Khadra, a Muslim activist, has an abortion and divorces her husband at a very young age. In response to these traumatic and transformative experiences, Khadra attempts to reinvent

herself, going against the grain of traditional Muslim teaching and within the context of American liberal society.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are addressed as the following: 1) to investigate how a Muslim woman depicted in the novel, 2) to examine the issues that Muslim women challenges living in mainstream American society, and 3) to explore aesthetic strategies that the writer uses in acting as a cultural translator.

Conceptual Framework

Edward Said (1978) argues that America has the tendencies of “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”(p.3). Said (1978) critiques the history of American dominations that often use Orientalism to strengthen their identity by “setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self”(p.3). Based on this crucial issue, many Muslim-American writers produce their own identities and stories in order to combat American attempts to dominate Muslims through representation. Actually, they address both Muslim and American readers, providing a significant dialogue and a balanced perspective in representing Islam. Inevitably, Said’s works have inspired many Muslim writers worldwide.

Wail Hassan claims that Muslim-American writers not only work as a bridge between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans, but also between America and the Muslim world. He argues that Muslim writers “have positioned themselves not only as interpreter deters of the Orient to the Occident, but also as interpreters of the Occident both to itself and to the Orient—that is to say, as two-way translators” (Said, 1978, p.3). Hassan believes that Muslim American writers have a certain ability to empathize with the Muslim world in general through their own stories about being Muslims in America. At the same time they are able to alert Americans about the way they represent Muslims. Ideally, these writers are trying to represent both the Islamic world and the American world accurately for both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences in a worldwide environment.

Kahf’s *the Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* plays an important role to increase mutual understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans. Barbara Hampton examines three novels written by Muslim-Americans: Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*, Michael M. Knight’s *The Taqwacores*, and Mohja Kahf’s *the Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. She finds that the three novels are enable to reduce the Christians’ feeling of anxieties because none of the book describes its character imposes Islamic/ Sharia law in American mainstream

society. Hampton (2011) argues that these young protagonists have made American choices altogether, “some with dreadful consequences, others with less traumatic ones, but none that should cause us to the establishment of Sharia law and overthrow of our government. instead for increasing understanding of and engagement with our muslim neighbors” (p.245). This argument can also be seen through the protagonist of Khadra, who is active in Da’wah center in American mainstream society, but never attempts to establish Islamic law.

Hampton (2011) argues that “Muslim American fiction writers have the challenge of representing some of the varied stances toward the hijab” (p.255). Hampton suggests that some of the Muslim authors, including the Tangerine Scarf’s Mohja Kahf, are discovering new narratives modeled around the hijab. Similarly, Kahf challenges the representing of the veils as a symbol of oppression and men’s domination towards Muslim-American women. It can be seen through the way Khadra wears and takes off her veil because of her will and not because of male directives. Thus, the veil is also as a symbol of freedom to choose, instead of oppression.

Muslim women living in America not only tend to face discrimination in social environments, but also in professional atmospheres. Kathleen Moore (2014) claims that Muslim women feel worried and confused when they express their religious belief in the working place. Moore argues that “While religious liberty is a fundamental principle of the US Constitution, the very expression of religious belief evokes consternation when it overlaps with the work environment” (p.200). This quotation shows an irony in American Constitution, which emphasizes the freedom of its citizens to express their religious beliefs. However, in reality, certain minority group like Muslims, sometimes feel consternation when they exhibit their religious practice.

Moore further suggests that when Muslim women faced discrimination in their professional life, they can actually sue their employers for breaking their rights for religious discrimination. Moore argues that “when an employee is censored her religious expression at work, she may bring a lawsuit her employer for an infringement of her First Amendment rights or for discrimination on the basis of religion, which is prohibited under civil rights laws” (Moore, 2014, p.201). This indicates that in fact American constitution protects all its citizens, including a Muslim minority, for their First Amendment rights. Thus, if a Muslim woman faces a discrimination in her working place, she is able to sue her employer. For example in Oklahoma in 2011, a Muslim woman has been awarded \$20,000 in compensatory for not being hired to work at an Abercrombie Kids store because of her hijab.

One Muslim scholar, Samma Abdurraqib(2006) investigates Mohja Kahf’s work and claims that Kahf attempts to persuade mainstream American society to see the veil as parts of Multi-American culture. Abdurraqib argues that Mohja Kahf “sees veiling as a particular expression of Muslim-Americanness rather than foreignness” (p.62). Abdurraqib’s statement

shows how a Muslim woman writer, Kahf, struggles to convince American society to see the hijab as Muslim-American culture instead of an alien's culture. This case indicates that the veil as a symbol of ambiguity and a gap between old and new culture. If the veil can be seen as parts of Muslim-American culture, Muslim-American women will accomplish their freedom of expression and religion. However, the veil has been associated as oppressions and should be removed to make Muslim women free. This wrong perception among Americans should be corrected in order to see the veil in a different way, such as a symbol of modesty.

The future for Muslim women is connected to WEB Du Bois's theory of Double Consciousness. Du Bois (2007) defines double consciousness as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (p.1). Muslim women who wish to enter American society are required to see themselves through the eyes of Americans. Traditional Americans expect Muslim women to dress like American women. They tend to consider Muslim women as normal women if they dress like Americans. This suggests that Muslim women are unable to express their own cultural identity. They may face a dilemma and irony: in order to have a better life in America, Muslim women have to lose their own culture. Arguably, this irony demonstrates that the symbol of Muslim women's success in assimilating into American society can be seen through the way they dress: the more they dress like Americans, the easier they assimilate into the mainstream society. As a result, it can be seen in this story that the character has to give up her own faith and identity in order to be accepted.

The key dialogue between Muslims and Christians was established on October 13, 2007. Pater Makari (2014) argues that a major invitation to Muslim-Christian dialogue was called "a Common Word between Us and You, the letter carries a clear invitation to the Christian world to renew efforts to build peaceful relations together" (p.367). He adds that the Christian and Muslim communities in the US have developed over the past three decades and asserted "that striving together as people who would seek to be peacemakers—as Christians and Muslims, and also in cooperation with people of other religious traditions—for fairness, justice and mutual goodwill is indeed necessary for dialogue and engagement" (Makari, 2014, p.369). Makari suggests that this dialogue also motivates local and regional churches not only to conduct similar dialogue but also as an additional teaching resources in various Christian surroundings about the beliefs of Islam and the Muslim zest to develop and build closer relations with Christians. This major dialogue is also an example of how the global context can impact the US setting in a positive way.

Research Methodology

1. Population or Samples design

The population or sample design of this research is a novel written by a Muslim-American woman. The title of the novel is *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* written by Mohja Kahf.

2. Measurement and Data collection design

The data of this research is a novel written by a Muslim-American woman writer, Mohja Kahf., entitled *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf*.

3. Analytical Design

In analyzing the novel, Mohja Kahf' *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, this research uses Post-colonial framework and an approach informed by Cultural studies, in order to come to some conclusions about depictions of a Muslim American woman and her role as a cultural translator between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans.

Results and Discussion

The following discussion examines the strategies the writer uses as a cultural translator by confronting the stereotypes of Muslim women who are framed negatively as passive and under control by men. The protagonist is depicted as an active woman who has her own career and is independent, without men in her live. Simultaneously, in the Muslim context, the writer contests the attitudes of a patriarchal society, which tends to hold certain jobs, such as photographers, journalists, and lawyers, should be held by men. Kahf's protagonist is as a photographer. Khadra's career as a photographer can be seen in an incident in *the Tangerine Scarf*:

Through her business contacts, Khadra was invited to photograph the Philadelphia Muslim Ladies' Luncheon, an annual affair hosted by the Warith Deen community, held in a grand banquet room. She felt a rush when she found herself in the high-ceilinged room filled with the energies of elegant, eloquent black and brown women. I miss this, Khadra thought. A lawyer named Maryam Jameelah Jones spoke at the event, so wittily and intelligently that she couldn't help but feel Teta would have liked her. (Kahf, 2006, p.329)

Thus in Kahf's book, it is evident that Muslim women are independent who work as a photographer and lawyer. In addition, the lines above show that the author concerns of another minority, African-Americans, who are also active in public spheres. Kahf describes, African Americans have "the energies of elegant, eloquent black and brown women" (p.329). This segment aims to demonstrate that women of color also are articulate and have their own voices. The character Maryam Jameelah introduced in this quotation, is an intelligent lawyer who also happens to be Muslim. Like many members of her community in this story, she has a professional career; others hold positions in law enforcement, medicine, and academia.

From the above scene, it is evident that the author is attempting to act as a cultural translator. In her work, Kahf encourages Americans to sympathize with Muslims who are discriminated against. Khadra struggles against the prejudice towards Muslim women by dealing with injustice and discrimination. In *the Tangerine Scarf*, Khadra suffers bullying at the hands of her American friends, Brent and Curtis. At one point in the novel, Brent and Curtis violently insult Khadra because of her faith and hijab: "Brent stepped back, waving a piece of scarf. Khadra lunged—tried to grab it—her scarf was torn in two, one strip in Brent's hand, the other wound tightly around her neck" (p.124). Brent and Curtis represent American extremists who cannot accept a diversity. Particularly after 9/11, the media typically portrayed Muslims as terrorists, which in turn influenced American prejudices toward Islam. Therefore, it is not surprising that Brent and Curtis attack Khadra, since they believe the wrong information about Islam. Another example is when Curtis calls Khadra "a psycho" (p.125). He points out that the extremist Americans consider Muslims abnormal since they have different identities from them. To change this attitude, the author attempts to increase Americans' sympathy through the portrayal of her protagonist's struggles against injustice and oppression.

Similar to their life situations, a Muslim woman in this story face discriminations in her professional environments. The protagonist, Khadra, is forced to discard her hijab in order to earn money and to survive. In *the Tangerine Scarf*, Khadra is made to take off her hijab if she wants to get a job as a photographer. Kahf describes Khadra "wasn't even wearing a scarf" (p.322) on the day she had a job interview.

The protagonist in this story faces discrimination because she wears different clothing, the veil. This indicates that the hijab has become problematic for Muslim women living in America since it is difficult for the extremists to understand the veil. The extremists may see the hijab as something mysterious and unknown, which is, therefore, frightening and must be destroyed. This mysterious feeling can drive the extremists to attack Muslim women, especially those wearing their hijabs. In reality, the veil is only a piece of clothing which should not arouse fear. Thus, it is necessary to open up dialogue to discuss why it is important for Muslims to wear the hijab in order to reduce prejudice against discrimination towards Muslim women.

The way Muslim women lose their identity will be harder and face two layers of “double consciousness” for those who are both Muslims and African Americans, for instance, Zuhura, Khadra’s friend, represents the African American Muslim woman in that she faces double oppressions because of her hijab and her coloured skin. Zuhura is killed by the white supremacist movement, Ku Klux Klan, because she actively recounts Muslim women’s real stories. Khadra says, “Days later, Zuhura’s body was found in a ravine near Bean Blossom Bridge. Murdered. Raped. Cuts on her hands, her hijab and clothes in shreds” (p.93). Kahf describes that Zuhura was killed because she was an activist and vocal in an Islamic student organization. Zuhura was additionally highlighted in the college paper for being the first woman to lead the African-American Muslim students Organization at Indiana University. However, her successful career ends her life in this regard; just because of her veil, which cannot be accepted by American extremists.

In *the Tangerine Scarf*, Kahf negotiates the veil by making an analogy of Muslim clothing with non-Muslim clothing. By doing so, Kahf not only criticizes the American extremists who tend to be biased against Muslim women who are wearing their veils, she also contests the Arab fundamentalists who tend to misjudge American women with their open clothing. Kahf suggests that Arab women should also understand the styles of American women’s open clothing. Through Khadra’s mother, Ebtehaj, Kahf requests the traditional Arab to also respect American women’s choice of clothing. Ebtehaj explains to Aunt Saweem that they have a neighbor who “was as modest as [her] or [Ebtehaj] in order to initiate her relatives that not all American “had to be sluts” just because “from the way they dressed” (p. 170). This scene suggests that the Islamic world also needs to understand and respect the fact that fashion in the West is tied to notions of personal liberty. This mutual understanding about clothing should be increased rather than questioned by each of the two groups. The mutual understanding about clothing may help to reduce prejudice, which is often exposed through the media.

Conclusion

Kahf's career as a novelist is indicative of the ways in which a Muslim American author can function as a cultural translator through her understanding of both cultures and thus creating areas of common ground. She plays this role through her representative work, which tries to increase mutual understanding not only between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans, but also between the Islamic world and American mainstream society. This paper has analyzed the ways in which Kahf acts as a cultural translator to ease the strains between Muslims and Americans neither of which are seemingly familiar with their respective cultures and/or religions. The first part of this paper focuses on how the character fails to assimilate into mainstream American society. This failure indicates how the relationship between Muslims and other Americans is in a critical state.

In conclusion, the writer, Kahf, critically describes how a Muslim American woman negotiates the challenges of assimilation into American society. The protagonist, Khadra, faces obstacles living in America: she is bullied, insulted, attacked, and one of Khadra's friend is killed by American extremists. Although Khadra ultimately fails to assimilate, the writer depicts her heroine's experiences in such a way so as to create mutual understanding. The writer also implies that the relationship between the two mainstream groups is in a critical state because hatred and selfishness have become all too common.

By reflecting on how Kahf acts as a cultural translator challenging both Muslims and Americans, we advance a mutual understanding of each culture. We glean a better understanding of the subjects she represents but also other minorities who struggle as "others." Furthermore, the novel represents a more accurate vision of the plurality of the American experience and suggests to us that it is possible to live side by side, maintain cultural identity, and not simply assimilate into mainstream culture.

Suggestions

This paper demonstrates that dialogue and open discussion between diverse cultures is of central importance to Kahf. In this sense, the novel such as Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* functions as a means by which to talk about sensitive issues such as religious practices and beliefs, instead of avoiding or superficially pretending to understand them. Dialogue transforms different opinions from dead end perspectives into a process like a circular cul-de-sac, into which different perspectives can enter and re-emerge with better understanding.

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