

## The Symbol of the Veil in Mohja Kahf's *the Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

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### Abstract

*This paper discusses the symbol of the veil in Mohja Kahf's The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf from a postcolonial critical perspective. It argues that the symbol of the veil is not universal as many Western theorists and feminists aver. The veil is not a sign of oppression but rather a shifting signifier with multiple meanings. In the novel, it does not stand only for heritage and Islamic identity, but also it is a feminist, political, idealistic, and a revolutionary symbol as well as a symbol of love. The veil's symbolic meaning varies according to the protagonist's geographical and psychological experience. Moreover, the rhythmic fluctuation between veiling and unveiling resembles her oscillation between different identities. By deconstructing the concept of the veil, we actually deconstruct the concept of strangeness in general, and the feminist strangeness in particular.*

**Keyword:** Arab-American Contemporary Fiction, Feminism, Mohja Kahf, Muslim Women, Postcolonialism, Veil.

An Arab American poet and feminist, Mohja Kahf wrote about the experience of American women of Arabic origin. She successfully wrote about one of these women in her novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. The novel is about a female *bildungsroman*, Khadra Shamy, who emigrated from Syria to Indianapolis in the 70's when she was still a child because of her father's political orientations. Khadra comes from a religious family consisting of her dad, mum, her brother Eyad, and a younger brother Jihad. They are part of "Dawah Center," a strict Muslim community whose mission is to spread the "correct" Islam and to keep away from the contamination of the American society. Khadra depicts the clashes that ensue within her between herself as part of this community and the bigotry and racism of the Indiana Americans, the Hoosiers. She also describes the conflict between the narrow understanding of her community to Islam and its more modern interpretations. These conflicts start a series of questions about Khadra's identity. To answer them, she embarks on a journey from Indiana to Saudi Arabia to Syria to Philadelphia back to Indiana. It is a journey from innocence, which her name implies (Khadra means green and young), to experience.

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

In her illuminating book, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, the feminist and theorist Sara Ahmed explains that Western institutions, such as feminism, universalize the experience of women, or what Ahmed calls "stranger fetishism," (S. Ahmed, 2000, p. 2). For example, Western feminists have a tradition, Ahmed argues, of attacking the veil, which is looked at as a sign of female oppression:

However, universalism could also be read as a fantasy of proximity. For, at one level, reading the 'veiled woman' as an oppressed woman who is sexually controlled involves a fantasy that one can inhabit the place of the other that one already knows what 'the other' means and therefore needs.

Or, to put it differently, the emphasis on the universal wrong of the 'purdah' (and the assumption of women's right 'not to wear the veil'), involves the fantasy that one can 'get inside the skin of the other' (and speak for her). (S. Ahmed, 2000, p.166)

Another feminist who rejects the unified meaning of the veil is Leila Ahmed in her *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America*. In listing some of the motivations that lead women to veil, Leila proves that the veil's meaning is never one.

Scott summarizes some of these motivations:

Many women insist that they have chosen to wear the veil as a way of signifying their religious commitments. Others admit that they have succumbed to pressure from Islamists in their communities. Still others have a more explicit political agenda: For them the veil is a way of rejecting the materialism of the Western capitalism and endorsing a program of social justice. (Scott, 2011, p. 118)

If the veil is "a second skin" as Carole Naggar suggests (Yegenoglu, 1998, p. 164), then this "fleshly interface between bodies and worlds" (S. Ahmed & Stacy, 2001, p.1) not only becomes "open to being read" but also to "being read differently" (S. Ahmed & Stacy, 2001, p.1).

In addition, Abu-Lughod, who contends that "we have to resist the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom," (Abu-Lughod, 2006, p.4) protests about the Westerner's obsession with the image of the veiled Muslim woman in her article "The Muslim Woman: The power of Image and the Danger of Pity." She writes:

Isn't it a gross violation of women's own understandings of what they are doing to simply denounce the burqa as a medieval or patriarchal imposition? Second, we shouldn't reduce the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing. Perhaps it is time to give up the black and white Western obsession with the veil and focus on some serious issues that feminists and others concerned with women's lives should indeed be concerned with. (Abu-Lughod, 2006, p. 4) Concurring with the above theorists, this paper does not see the veil as a universal object with a universal meaning, but one which is more dynamic and fluid.

The veil first appears in the novel as a symbol of idealism for the Muslim community and as a symbol of oppression for the American society. For Aunt Khadija, a black woman who is a member of the Dawah Center, it is a symbol of anti-slavery. While Khadija was tying Khadra's scarf for prayer, she shocked the latter by telling her to imagine standing naked in front of a whole bunch of people the way it was back in slavery times on the auction block. By this Khadija wanted to stress the importance of *hijab* to Khadra. Khadija says, "Covering up is a strong thing" (25). Moreover, Khadra expresses her fondness of being "in this forest of women in hijab, their Khimars and saris and jilbabs and thobes and depattas fluttering and sweeping the floor and reaching out to everything" (55). In contrast, the attire of Western women, for her, does not "reach out to anything." Khadra's first real *hijab* is also described in idealistic terms:

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

However, the cliché that Khadra faces when she works for *Alternative Americas* is "Muslim woman looking inscrutable and oppressed in a voluminous veil" (48). When the boss of the magazine knew of her connection to the Muslim community, he was excited to make news about their "hidden" world "behind the veil" (48). This shows that the beginning of the story puts *hijab* in two extreme polar positions like binary oppositions, the ideal and the oppressed.

The border that is created between the two factions, the Muslim community and the Indiana society, is itself like a veil, a wall of segregation and racism as much as a wall of security. The veil of racism is clear in the bullying of the members of the Muslim community by their neighbors, children and adults. But the most shocking act of racism in the novel is killing one of Khadra's friends, Zuhra, an African-American Muslim, most probably by the Ku Klux Klan, who was never caught. In turn, the Muslim community avoids their neighbors and the whole homogeneous society of Indianapolis. This is why we see a lot of rituals of purification from the part of this community to wash off the dirtiness of what they call *Kuffar*. When Khadra describes her first hijab, she symbolically describes the racist border between these two worlds: "Even though it went off and on at the door several times a day, hung on a hook marking the threshold between inner and outer worlds" (113).

Killing the friend from the Dawah center was the first event that changed Khadra's life and views about her identity. Zuhra was a clever, strong, independent, and free-thinking young woman. She used to argue everything with the grownups. She once reminded the zoning inspector that "zoning law has often been used as a tool to keep people of other races out"(43). Khadra tells us, "Zuhra was not accustomed to being brushed aside. [. . .]. She was likely to question you, man or woman, even if you had an air of authority, and she did so with an attitude that assumed her objections would be addressed" (43). To everyone's shock, Zuhra was murdered and raped by the "Protectors" only some days after her engagement party. There were "Cuts on her hands, her hijab and clothes in shreds" (93). Although it was a rape, the attack is not sexual as much as it is political. It was a religious bigotry, as her community deduced, against an African and a Muslim woman, which the shredding of the veil stands for. The national media, which had to be neutral, seemed to stand on the side of the white murderers. They never mentioned in the news, for example, that the victim was a Muslim girl or even an African rather they described her as a "foreign woman," not an American resident but an "IU international student," not a big woman as everyone knew her but "little" (95). They even accused her middle Eastern fiancé of honor killing insinuating the "oppression of women in Islam" (97). All this caused Khadra, who identifies with Zuhra, to question her identity. Not being a "pure" American or being from a "different" religion made you "other" than an American.

Khadra's community was not less racist than the Indiana society. For example, they condemned Zuhra silently and doubted her when she was lost. Before finding her, they said that if she is found alive, she is ruined (92). They whispered that her parents should have given her more guidance and that she asked for trouble because of her liberal attitude (96). In the same way, the community gossiped about Khadra and her parents did not talk to her when she had an abortion. Although she was in the first months of her pregnancy and abortion was allowed in these months by the Islamic law, as she explained to a friend (224-225), her community refused the act. The sexism of Khadra's community shows clearly when Khadra, in many events of the novel, is excluded from different Islamic activities with the pretext of religion. Hypocrisy on the part of her Muslim community is also seen when her brother, Eyad, wanted to marry a very religious, educated, beautiful, and a clever young woman. However, the bride was not suitable for his family just because "she's black as coal!" (139).

Both the American society and Khadra's smaller community destroyed her ideals. The Indiana society's racism was a kind of a rape for Khadra like that of Zuhra. The latter's rape scene was repeated symbolically everywhere in the novel. For instance, in her school, Khadra was attacked by a bunch of boys. One of them took off her veil in a scene that reminds us of Zuhra's shredded veil. On one hand, Khadra immediately thought of her parents' condemnation for uncovering her hair. On the other hand, she thought of the racist and ideological meaning behind the action. She wondered what will happen "if Mindy Oberholtzer's little pleated cheerleader skirt had been ripped off, so that she's been rendered half-naked right in the middle of school" (124). Khadra insisted on holding on to her veil although it was torn into pieces. Covering her hair with a dirty torn scarf here becomes a symbol of challenge and rebellion: "She didn't want to give anyone in this building [of the school] the satisfaction of seeing her bareheaded" (125).

In its extreme, Khadra's veil becomes political and revolutionary. For example, the black veil which she wore during her teen age years was a revolution against "traditional Islamic scholarship, with its tedious, plodding chapters on categories of water purity and how to determine the exact end of menses" (150). Khadra, "[s]tern in dress and gaze"(149), was contended that "Islam is action in the world!" (150). For her, there had to be a "revolutionary path" instead of "the moderate Islamic revival movement" of her parents (150). At the time of wearing the black scarf, she and her friends started to applaud assassinations, cheer the Iranian Revolution, and hail the ideas of martyrdom. It seemed that Khadra wanted to be like this "one scarf-wearing woman" who took, with other men, some American hostages during the revolution (119). Khadra's black veil, in this period, was an expression for hating America and a willingness to attack it.

After visiting Mecca during Hajj, Khadra's veil and perspective to life changed drastically. When she was in Saudi Arabia, she was shocked by the version of Islam seen there. Although she had a unique spiritual experience there, she was faced with some sexist acts. For example, she discovered that women were not allowed to pray in the mosque. She was also sexually harassed by Saudi teenagers for being an American. As a result, when she came back from Saudi Arabia, her decision was to change her dark hijab to a white one with tiny flowers. She shoved her black scarf with other dark clothes to the back of the closet and got rid of all the political and revolutionary books and cassettes she had. She also started to see what she once called "McMuslims"(186). She began to wear the white hijab particularly when she liked one boy, a brother of a friend.

Therefore, this lighter scarf was a symbol of love and understanding, and so indicated the end of a “neoclassical phase” (195). This period ended with accepting marriage from a Kuwaiti man, Juma.

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

When Khadra's identity was collapsing, she went to Syria to recollect herself. There, she became more aware of her identity through the characters of the women of her family. In Damascus, she stayed with Teta, a strong and a loving woman, almost a feminist in her liberal attitude. Khadra seemed to identify with her more than with her own mother. Khadra, however, discovered through the stories told to her by Teta and others the closeness of her character to her mother. Ebtihaj, Khadra's mother, had to fight for her veil against her step mother's wishes to remove it. Ebtihaj's rebellious attitude ended with a trip to France where she was raped. While Ebtihaj changed to a stricter attitude as a reaction to her dramatic life (she and her Khadra's father were accused by her uncle of politicizing the hijab), Teta kept it more balanced.

Teta led her to new experiences that made her more understanding. Unlike her closed community and the racism of the Indiana people, she witnessed in Syria a harmony that she never encountered before. For example, Teta had a Jewish friend. Furthermore, she visited Sufi mosques with Teta exposing herself to the “faint rhythms of dhikrs”(292). She realized at that moment that life has not got one color or the other; it is not either black or white. It was more like the arch work of the mosque “Dark brick, white stone, dark flesh and white side by side [ . . . ] as it did everywhere in Damascus's traditional architecture” (292). This is the same rhythm she finds in her prayer: “Palm, palm, knee, knee, foot, foot, and forehead” (33). It is because of this rhythmic experience that she started to see, like in her *Sujood*, “the underbelly of things” 54), and because of it, “A cavernous desire for beauty opened inside her. Rhythm, color, texture [ . . . ]”(293). In fact, Kahf stated in a radio interview that prayer is the “secret embedded structure of the novel” (Bose, 2009, p. 90). The whole novel becomes about this rhythm. One of the important scenes where this rhythm is at its most is when she stopped in the place where Zuhra was murdered crying:

She is just this gaping wail, drawing breath drawing then the wail comes again, enormous. And again. Alternating silence and sound, veiling and unveiling, again and again. It has its own rhythm and its own demand for breath. No one has taught her to do this. The body does it with its own will. The body becomes a reed for the sound to blow through. Hearken, hearken to the body's reed. The throat gives it its tone, and the stomach and the diaphragm and the root give it depth. (428)

Khadra's body itself becomes rhythmic like the movement of the car driven by her friend Hanifa at the end of the novel, a rhythm oscillating between surrender and no-surrender. It is immediately after that capturing moment in the mosque that Teta bought a tangerine, silk scarf for Khadra from the traditional *Hamadiya* market. Although the scarf stands for heritage and tradition since it was a gift from Teta and it came from a traditional market, it has other meanings. Its extremely silky softness stands for the flexibility that she acquired in her new experience towards life and the other. The color of the scarf is the color of youth, as Teta comments. It is a light color that symbolizes liberty and change. It is like the color of the tangerine candy she bought somewhere else in the novel, all sweetness with a flavor of love. Later in the novel, she confesses to her friend Tayiba that it is love above all that makes her Muslim. The tangerine scarf embodies the beauty that her heart opened to in color, texture, and rhythm, “the covered and uncovered modes” (373).

This is the same scarf with which she decided to visit Zuhra's grave back in America: “her tangerine depatta draped loosely over her shoulder and fluttering over Zuhra's grave stone”(404). The scarf is an important announcement of the new ideas Khadra assumed. It is like a flag expressing victory upon a castle, and that castle is none but the grave of her brave friend who was a victim of racism. Khadra becomes as strong and as understanding as her deceased friend. She was even more optimistic and more open towards future. Khadra's new identity is stressed when Aunt Ayesha, Zuhra's mother, who came with Khadra to Zuhra's grave, asked the latter to forgive her and other adults for imposing their identities on her and the other children of the Dawah Center:

“And we were idealistic, oof! Full of zeal! But we put it all on you. Too much. Wanting you to carry our vision for us, our identity – our entire identity, on *your* heads, imagine!” (405).

Another important event that helped Khadra's transformation was meeting a poet (most probably an imaginative poet) on Mount Qasyoon in Syria. The poet represents the other within Khadra, a secular voice that seems to “come right out of her gut”(301). The voice accused her of getting away from God: “your veil is very revealing, you know,” although it insisted, “but veiling is important, definitely”(302). It is significant that a poet was chosen for such a voice as it emphasized the importance of not veiling one's face and expression, that whether veiled or not, she was loved by God, that her heart was the place of real religion, and that “Better lost than false”(302). The poet, or Khadra's poetic voice for that matter, encouraged her to see her inner true skeptical self. Later in the novel, she saw that poet in a dream holding a baby, a symbol of her spiritual growth and productivity.

Despite Khadra's consecutive veiling and unveiling, Khadra did not quit her ideals: “She was beginning to see that, of the covered and uncovered modes, she preferred the covered”(373). In the rhythmic process of covering/uncovering, she was just experimenting the new and multiple meanings of life, which has many “surfaces like the thousand sides of the eye of a fly”(357). Once, Khadra explained to a friend, Seemi, the different meanings that Hijab meant to her. She confesses that it connects her to her heritage and her people, it acts as an armor of protection in danger, and it is an outer sign of an inner quality she wants to be reminded of (424-425). Moreover, the veil could be a Christian symbol. In the beginning of the novel, a suicidal man confused Khadra's mother holding her little son with Santa Maria. After all, “Madonna in the blue robe. Madonna with the angelic child! Madonna of the mountain!” looked more like Ebtihaj than any other American woman (100). Khadra seems to love this multiplicity rather the assumptions given to the veil and thus to her identity as a whole:

What if she'd been just a regular Muslim girl trying to make her way through the obstacle course—through the impossible, contradictory hopes the Muslim community had for her, and the infuriating, confining assumptions the Americans put on her? A girl looking for a way to be, just *be*, outside that tug-of-war? (358)

It is precisely this multiplicity of meaning given to her veil is what makes her reject assigning meaning to the veil. When Hakim, her childhood neighbor and a potential husband, started to describe his sister as the first Muslim woman to drive race cars, Khadra protested against the use of any act done by her community as a representation of something. It should not have a certain meaning:

Don't say it. Don't put it on her. I'm so tired of everyone putting that on us. Every single thing we do has to 'represent' for the community. Zuhra having to Represent this and represent that. Everyone had to put their meaning on her. Just let her be, for God's sake. For the prophet's sake, just let us *be*. (399)

Khadra's protest definitely applies for the veil. For her, the veil which has multiple representations is free of a certain representation. Meaning at the end of the novel becomes circular, like a Sufi love, without end, reaching “pure surrender” (441).

In conclusion, through Khadra's experience that is variant geographically and psychologically, we see the veil in different positions representing different meanings. It stands for idealism, freedom and revolution, political issues and eventually for love. The veil encompasses those meanings through a rhythmic shifting between veiling and unveiling. Khadra's feminist self resembles this fluctuation between her different worlds. And nothing in the world can circumscribe all her contradictions except love.

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