

MUSLIM WOMEN IDENTITIES AND EXPERIENCES IN CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM FICTION IN ENGLISH: A STUDY OF MOHJA KAHFI'S THE GIRL IN THE TANGERINE SCARF

BY

Imam Abdulkadir: Kwara State College of Arabic and Islamic Legal Studies, Ilorin;

E-mail: [abdulkadironaimam@gmail.com](mailto:abdulkadironaimam@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

*This paper adopts post positivist realist approach to reading Mohja Kahf's The girl in the tangerine scarf with a view to foreground the lives and religious identities of Muslim women who are neither victims nor escapees of Islam but willingly committed to their faith. The paper explains how the text can be read as writing back to the often monolithic representations of Islam and Muslim women characteristics of mainstream Western texts. The work draws attention to the ways in which particular narrative techniques highlight the complexities of Muslim women's religious identities and experiences. This study therefore highlights the tensions and contradictions of women's Muslim identities in Western countries and addresses Western people's interests and prejudices in their encounter with Muslim women. Finally, given that various aspects of Muslim women's identities and experiences are typically elided in dominant representations, it is argued that a disruption of the stereotypes of Muslim women signals the potential for the compatibility of Muslim women's distinct identities with Western values.*

**Keywords:** *Muslim women, Distinct identities and Western values*

**Introduction**

*The girl in the tangerine scarf* is an important example of alternative representations of Muslim women's experience and identity in a Western context. In this paper my focus is on the main character, Khadra, a Syrian-American Muslim girl. The narrative works to persuade readers that Khadra's self-understanding and self-development to a great extent depend on her coming to terms with her religious identity. Khadra's religious upbringing produces her Muslimness as a salient facet of her identity, more important than, for example, her sense of national, racial or gender identity, and also affecting all other aspects of who she is. In addition to offering a representation of Islam that differs from its dominant discursive production in the West and challenging Western stereotypes about Islam and Muslim communities, the narrative importantly suggests that it is possible and desirable for a Muslim, on the one hand, to cherish Muslim identity and experiences, to love its characteristic symbols and to deem upholding this identity as vital to one's sense of well-being. On the other hand, the narrative also implies that such a devout Muslim can be critical and self-reflexive about Muslim identity and experiences and hold flexible views about them. In other words, the novel proposes that a Muslim can allow for the reflective evolution of her religious identity without weakening her bonds with the basic tenets of or lessening her emotional attachment to her religion.

**Representation of Religious Identity: Realism versus Experimentalism**

*The girl in the tangerine scarf* is a realist text. However, more experimental modes of writing such as, stream of consciousness and intertextuality are also integrated frequently and conspicuously. The dominant narrative mode is realism, which, with its emphasis on the unified individual, helps to show that identity is real and has consequences in the real world for the holders of identity. Certain aspects of Khadra and her community's Muslim identities and experiences are best demonstrated by the realist mode. For example, through depicting the lives of Khadra and her community in the realist style, the narrative represents how almost every thought and action in the life of Khadra's Muslim community is, in a way, related to their conception of their Muslim identity and their unique interpretation of Islam. The realist narrative also helps show how all through Khadra's life, her understanding of her religion and religious identity affects her worldview and her relationship with others. Also, the narrative represents how her life, both as a child and an adult, is affected by the fact that Muslims, a marginalized group in

American society, are stereotyped. The linear, realist narrative mode, better than any other style, can show the regularity and frequency of these states, events and actions in these people's lives.

### **An inflexible view of Religious Identity and its Drawbacks**

The narrative, at one level, suggests the drawbacks for people sticking rigidly to their understandings of religious identity, not allowing themselves to be critical about it and not allowing this identity to evolve. These negative effects include stereotyping others, developing feelings of superiority over others, sticking to the superficial rather than the spiritual side of religion, and exercising hypocrisy as a result of closing one's eyes to the problems characterising one's way of life. Khadra's community and family is especially representative of this rigidity in religion in the novel. Khadra's family and community's religiosity is represented as inflexible, closely associated with limits and borders. What they are really concerned about in relation to religion are strict observance of religious rules, exact definitions of a 'true' Muslim and the qualities of people they can communicate with. The religious rules they are extremely careful about include those related to purities and impurities; halal and haram objects and actions; the exact timing of prayer; and the exact ritual of performing ablutions before praying. All through the years in which their lives are depicted they show no development in their view about religion, no willingness to re-evaluate or be self-reflexive about their way of thinking and no enthusiasm to expand their circle of friends and acquaintances.

The community's inflexibility of worldview and attitude is represented as leading to self-censorship and hypocrisy in the family and community. The narrative reveals that at least the members of the community try to stick to their principles and be good Muslims, the way they interpret being 'good Muslims'. However, the novel shows that no matter how hard they try, on several occasions they diverge from 'the right path', though, importantly, they do not confess or acknowledge doing so, pretending all the time that they are as good as their picture of an ideal Muslim. Delving into this issue is important because the narrative, through exposing the contradictions that Khadra's family close their eyes to, represents what type of mentality Khadra leaves behind later in the novel. Khadra's family and community are represented as having become masters of self-censorship and denial of the fact that they are ordinary human beings and not necessarily exemplars of religiosity and virtue. For example, the narrator explains that 'Khadra's parents felt that music, while not outright haram, tended toward frivolity and the forgetfulness of God'.

However, Khadra's father kept some music tapes, which he describes as the ones belonging to his 'jahilya days', before 'he [woke up] to Islamic consciousness' (p.77). Although Wajdy, Khadra's father, talks very negatively about his music tapes, we are told by the narrator that 'he couldn't bring himself to put them in the trash' and that 'in moments of weakness' he would listen to them 'in delight' and dance with them, of course 'in spite of himself', and that even Ebtehaj 'had been known to smile at moments like these and sway in Wajdy's open arms, in spite of herself' (p. 77). Here the narrator's tone is ironic with regard to how Ebtehaj and Wajdy believe they should think and act and how they do, in fact, think and act. Another example of the contradictions that exist between the principles they are passionate about and how Ebtehaj and Wajdy really think and act is their view of interracial marriages. The Dawah Centre insists that there is no racism in Islam. However, when Khadra's brother expresses his wish to marry a beautiful and educated Muslim girl from a good family who, however, is dark-skinned, the narrator describes how Wajdy and Ebtehaj cannot conceal their strong disagreement with this marriage because of the girl's skin colour. Nevertheless, their spontaneous remarks and reactions, revealing their racist bias, contradict the justifications they bring for their disagreement.

The gradual development of Khadra's identity, as she allows herself to be critical about her religious identity and her Muslim community, is represented by the linear realist style. The narrative shows that as Khadra grows older, she is able to see the cracks in the hard and beautiful shell of her parents and her community's religious world. When, for example, Hakim, her playmate and the African-American son of one of Dawah's families, protests that the slogan, 'no racism in Islam' is just a beautiful sentence that is

not observed by the Dawah community, the narrator tells us that Khadra admits as much to herself, though at this stage, she does not openly acknowledge this. After she rejects Hakim's claim that Dawah community members are racist toward black people, the narrator explains Khadra's inner acknowledgement of the racism of her community: 'she bit her lip, knowing he was right. Syrian Arabs like her parents sure didn't think black was beautiful' (p. 137). At this stage, Khadra can see glimpses of a reality, which of course, she tries to deny.

### **Evolution of Religious Identity, Moments of Epiphany**

Khadra's allowing herself to develop a critical eye results in her re-evaluating her religious views, beginning the process of her identity development. Still, her trust that there is more to Islam than her community represents saves her from abandoning her religion for good. Now that she no longer holds dogmatic views about religion, the narrative suggests, Khadra is more prepared to take the opportunities which enable her to redefine her relationship with religion. Thus, the second phase of Khadra's evolution of Muslim identity involves her going through spiritual experiences, triggered by situations that a dogmatic Khadra could never apprehend the significance of. In this way Khadra's religious identity is rebuilt in such a way that it keeps both its self-reflexivity and its deep spiritual and emotional bonds with Islam. The narrative, through the description of this second phase, also represents the other side of the metamorphosis of Khadra's identity, which is its intense transformation.

Interestingly, the narrative shows that for the depiction of this deep development of Khadra's identity, which is associated with spiritual moments, no other method but the experimental style of narrative can be used. Thus, the narrative employs the technique of stream of consciousness, and a quasi-poetic language rather than the linear realist method for such a representation. In the technique of stream of consciousness, there is no transition mark between sentences and the link between parts of a sentence is based on free association.

The first scene has to do with how Khadra returns to prayer. She had stopped praying, because she had realized that up to that point in her life she had been praying just to perform a duty. It is in Syria that she starts to pray again and it is just before she comes back to prayer that she experiences the deepest inner transformation and the most intense spiritual moments. And it is just then that the narrator tells us that Khadra, more strongly than ever, questions herself and her identity, suggesting that what she desires for herself is a rebirth: 'Who was she? What was she, what cells of matter, sewn up into this Khadra shape, this instar? Imagine!' (p.306). She begins to gasp then, 'Great gasping sobs poured out and wouldn't stop' (p.306).

Another instance in the novel when Khadra experiences a deeply spiritual moment, is again in Syria when she unveils outside the house for the first time. In this scene the language is again markedly poetic. If the coming back to prayer scene, described above, is associated with love for other human beings, in this scene what is remarkable about Khadra's religious experience is its unconventionality and its basis in spirituality, in this case, rather than in visible symbols and rituals. Here once again the narrator's discourse merges into Khadra's. From the beginning of the description of this scene of unveiling, an unorthodox practice according to many Muslims, the language used emphatically suggests that what is described is a religious act, as the way she is standing is likened to the first stand of prayer: 'Khadra paused, standing there in the fading rays with her palms spread, her hands spiralled up to the sky like question marks. She was in a position like the first stand of prayer' (p.309). Then we read:

A yellow butterfly fluttered by. The scarf was slipping off. She shrugged. The chiffon fell across her shoulders. She closed her eyes and let the sunshine 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* [a Quranic word which means certainty] that this was all right, a blessing on her shoulders. *Alhamdu, Alhamdulillah* (p.309).

At this moment, as the above lines indicate, she intuitively knows that unveiling is acceptable in the eyes of God. The continuation of the use of religious language such as a 'blessing' and the Quranic sentence '(Alhamdulillah)', which means 'Only God is worth worshipping', further implies that the narrative represents her unveiling as a religious act. The scene continues in a language that uses the metaphor of photography, Khadra's new passion, of a film developing under the light, in order to realise a spiritual experience visually. The Quranic sentences continue into this part as well: 'the sunshine on her head was a gift from God. Gratitude filled her. Sami allahu liman hamidah (Allah hears whoever praises Him). Here was an exposure, her soul an unmarked sheet shadowing into distinct shapes under the fluids. Fresh film. Her self-developing' (p. 309). The narrator tells us that at this moment Khadra sees Teta looking at her and feels that she understands her and understands as Khadra now understands, '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' (p. 309). In this scene, once again incorporating the film development metaphor, what the narrative depicts is unveiling, an unconventional act as far as religious precepts are concerned, which is nevertheless accompanied by a transformative spiritual experience.

In both these cases superbly satisfying spiritual pleasure for Khadra has been represented as an outcome of breaking free from religious orthodoxy. Thus, the narrative, variously and on different occasions, shows its preference for flexibility and the transformative potential of religious identity.

### **Emotional Attachment to Religious Identity, Symbols and Rituals**

Throughout the novel, the narrative suggests that religion and religious identity are important to Khadra, though it also suggests that it is only the flexible and self-reflexive engagement with religion that benefits Khadra morally and spiritually and results in any meaningful evolution of her religious identity. In this regard, Khadra understands the importance of privileging spirituality over the rituals and symbols of religion and over insistence on a rigid definition of Muslim identity. However, the narrative suggests that Khadra's religious identity and the symbols of Islam, which at one level distinguish Muslim from other religious identities, still matter to Khadra. The paper contend that Khadra feels an emotional attachment toward her religious identity and the rituals and symbols of Islam, an emotional attachment that does not contradict either her passion for the spirituality of religion nor her choice of the flexible practice of religion. Indeed, with regard to deep affection that Muslims may feel for their religion, Malak contends:

... living Islam is not merely a spiritual practice or theological adherence, but also an intellectual and emotional engagement ... Islam, however one conceives it, commands affection even from its own dissenters: Islam's values of justice and generosity, of courage and creativity, endow it with endearing and enduring loyalty. This loyalty is one of Islam's hallmarks that many outsiders miss, misunderstand or misinterpret (pp.152–153).

Interestingly, the narrative shows that the rituals and symbols of Islam form part of the attractions of Islam for Khadra. In this way, the novel goes beyond the celebration of spirituality without religion. Rather, it represents the pleasures of spiritual experience through formalized and ritualized religion. The narrative, on various occasions, shows that Muslim identity, though a mystery to Khadra, matters to her and the attachment that she feels toward her religious identity and its symbols and rituals are very important to her sense of well-being. The reader, for example, learns that Khadra, in Philadelphia and away from the Dawah community in Indiana, rarely goes to a mosque to pray, as she believes that she needs space to think through things for herself, alone. However, when her Teta dies, she needs to do something to mourn. When a Muslim dies, one of the ceremonies which is performed is the congregational prayer, with the dead body located in front of the congregation. Khadra finds an imam in a mosque who is prepared to do the absentee funeral prayer in the mosque for her grandmother. The narrator tells us how Khadra feels when the whole congregation prays for Teta:

Such a comfort for Khadra, the sound of their prayers and their breaths, and she didn't even mind that the women prayed on a secluded mezzanine. ... She felt the tenderness of being in a space she knew intimately, of hearing the collective "amen," of sharing the loss of her Teta in this prayer language (p.29).

The words, 'comfort', 'tenderness' and 'intimately' explain Khadra's feelings during this congregational prayer. Importantly, the narrator tells us that at this moment, other questions, such as the separation of women from men in mosques, an issue that she has always criticised, do not matter to her. At this moment, she is overwhelmed by the tenderness, intimacy and security of being in a familiar space. In other words, her involvement with religion at this moment is on another level: the haven that religion provides. On another occasion, the narrative puts Khadra in a position where she needs to explain why being Muslim matters to her or why she cares for her identity as a Muslim. At this stage of her life, she has, of course, left the "Muslims are better" attitude behind, and believes that, as she tells her friend, 'Muslims aren't necessarily better spiritually than people in any other faith. They might be as close and even closer to God and not be Muslims', and 'maybe divine law manifests in many ways in the world. Maybe you don't always have to have it set in stone as the so-called "Islamic lifestyle". Maybe it's all about process' (p.402). Hearing such arguments from Khadra, her friend asks: 'Well, why are you Muslim then? If anything else is just as good' (p.402).

Khadra's answer is simple but important, an answer that many believers in any creed might be able to relate to: 'Khadra thinks for a minute. "Love," she says slowly. "Love and attachment. I love the Quran, for example. And the forms and rhythms of salah. I keep coming back to it. It has a resonance for me"' (p. 402). The novel clearly dramatizes the point, made by critics such as Bruce Baum (2006), that the emotional attachment people might have to their religion is often underestimated in many popular and scholarly discourses. The adherents of a religion can feel such an attachment to their religion both because of the spiritual and moral attractions of that religion and because of the fact that people can simply be habituated to the rituals and symbols of their religion and the spiritual and emotional responses that these rituals and symbols evoke.

### **Contradictions as both Possible and Desirable**

The narrative develops through the exploration of the apparent contradictions of the possibility of being attached to religious identity and being self-reflexive about it at the same time. The way Khadra's identity develops shows that these dimensions can exist side by side in a dialectic relationship, a point that Khadra ultimately understands with regard to her religious identity. Towards the end of the narrative, she is represented as being at peace with the idea that cherishing religious identity as she does not equal rigid adherence to religious precepts. It is an issue she needs to argue both with the secular and hyper-religious people in her life, two groups who are each orthodox in their own way. In a scene when Khadra is having a conversation with Chrif, a secular friend, we read:

Khadra sighed. She just wanted to make him admit that being Muslim wasn't such a straightjacket. It was the same argument she had with her mother. She didn't expect Chrif to be arguing for the same thing as her mother, that Islam was rigid and homogeneous. It's like they both wanted Islam to be this monolith, only for her mother it was good, for him bad. She knew it wasn't that simple (p,344).

However, having a flexible and self-reflexive orientation to Muslim identity can lead to other instabilities and contradictions in relation to one's understanding of religion. A Muslim who adheres to this way of thinking cannot easily settle once and for all with her religious identity. She is always asking about, always evaluating and always questioning it. She might be never sure what the 'true' path is. Nevertheless, the narrative suggests that being in a dynamic and dialectic engagement with religious identity is preferable to having a static view of it, the way Khadra's family and community do. It is on the last pages of the novel that Khadra thinking of her friend Hakim, points out the similarity between him and her: 'He's on some kind of journey, he's somewhere betwixt and between, like she is' (p.411). When Chrif refers to

this point about Khadra, Khadra replies, 'most people are ... full of contradictions' (p. 341). Apparently, to her, this way of being now seems to be more natural and acceptable than being rigid and inflexible.

Through drawing attention to different discourses influential in the development of Khadra's Muslim identity, the narrative suggests in another way why Khadra's religious identity cannot escape being many-sided or dynamic. Throughout the narrative, the reader sees how Khadra is exposed both to discourses rooted in her American upbringing and to those rooted in her Islamic upbringing, to show the dialectical relationship of these discourses in the formation of Khadra's identity, the narrative uses the technique of intertextuality. The epigraphs of different chapters of the novel, for example, carry excerpts from both Western and Eastern sources, old and new, including the Quran and literary and scientific books. Each extract is somehow related to the theme of the chapter. In this way the narrative locates the themes of the novel in a wider context and suggests that the main character lives in a polyphonic world and is exposed to different discourses and ideologies. More directly related to the delineation of religious identity and experience is the way the narrative blends American slang, phrases from American literature and pop music with Quranic verses and Muslim themes. Sometimes these phrases appear in the least likely situations. It is, for example, noteworthy that the narrative shows that Khadra, on first seeing the sacred Kaba in Mecca, cannot stop her mind from thinking of the lines of a Phil Collins's song, 'I can feel it coming in the air tonight, oh Lo-ord... I've been waiting for this moment for all my life, oh Lo-ord...' (p.162). This scene suggests that Khadra's identity formation is affected by various discourses, including those from both her Muslim and her American cultural backgrounds. No identity, as both the poststructuralists and post positivists agree, is really shaped by a singular discourse.

Importantly, towards the end of the novel, there is another scene which shows Khadra's contradictions, this time, in passing judgement on the Muslim community of her childhood: here we see that she cannot come to any final conclusions when judging them. The discussion of this section also offers a fitting conclusion to the discussion of this novel. As one of the final representations of Khadra's feelings about her religious identity, we see Khadra as possessing of a contradictory, complex religious identity, an identity that as intensely loves its religion, religious symbols, religious practices and religious communities as it views them critically. However, she is represented to be accepting of and at peace with this identity and also accepting of other people with even different views, whom she has learnt not to judge because of their views but to love because of their humanity:

Here, they are then, she thinks, during salah. My beloved community... My God, they're still pottering along the same way, the same old tired language, the same old restrictive ideas and crabbed beliefs. Oh, sure, some people thought about changing the old mentality. Sure, sure, it was significant ... And, of course, the people of Dawah weren't all the same. Some were really quite freethinking, on their own, when it came down to it. But the Dawah as an institution is still what it is. Institutions tend to be like that, holding on to systems and perpetuating them. And it's so—limited and cramped and—she sighs—just out-and-out wrong. Always stressing the wrong side of religion, the fear-God side instead of love-God. Always stressing the outer forms over the inner light ... Well, now wait, Khadra pauses, in the last rakat. How arrogant of me. Do I know that for sure? Maybe they're right after all, on some other level I am not aware of. A right principle wrongly applied, or something. Could be. Yeah, uh, I don't think so honey, an ironic voice inside her says. Stop making excuses for them. That's what the poet would say, Khadra thinks drily. Okay. Fine. They're dead wrong. Yeah. They really are. My God. About God and everything. God is not an asshole. Alhamdulillah ... But still, Khadra reflects, after salam. Why not? If all paths lead to God, this one also leads to God. There is inner light here, too. Wrong they may or may not be, but still I would not have a single one of them harmed. I'd—I'd—I'd give my life to protect any of them, if it came to that! Well, or something ... Wrong and mulish they could be, but dear to her, and maddening and conformist and awful, but full of surprising beauty sometimes, and kindness, and, then, just as full of ugliness and pettiness and, overall, really quite mediocre mostly. But no, some were really quite remarkable, possessed of nobility and courage—yet the pride, the pride of holding

themselves above the way they do, and thinking they know. In the end, then, they were just so very human and vulnerable, like anyone else. Really, so vulnerable, when you think about it. Especially now, Khadra realizes. Especially now (pp.421– 423).

As the extended extract above shows, Khadra has ambivalent feelings toward these people. She is not sure whether they are right or wrong, but she is sure they are ordinary human beings and combine a complex of positive and negative qualities. She is also sure that these vulnerable, fallible, narrow-minded people, who still have some very endearing qualities, are important to her. Khadra's checking herself after making any definitive statement and her frequent use of 'but', 'yet' and the use of positive and negative qualities together, such as 'nobility' and 'ugliness', attributed to the same people, all show the tension in Khadra's mind and the complexity of her feelings and attitudes toward them. Tension, complexity, contradiction and attachment are terms that help us define Khadra's relationship with her religion, Islam, as well.

In conclusion, the paper argued that the stereotype of the Muslim woman as a miserable victim is still firmly entrenched in many Western representations, a predicament that undermines the complexities of Muslim women's identities and experiences. Also, the continuing infliction of terrorist acts by extremist groups who profess Islamic faith such as the 2011 attacks on churches in Egypt has arguably exacerbated the fear and suspicion of Western people of Islam and Muslims and further strengthened the stereotypes held in the West about Islam.

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