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Imagining hybrid identities in Mohja Kahf's "The girl in the tangerine scarf"

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Abstract:

This article proposes a reflection on the emergence of a literary sensibility that questions Arab-Muslim identities in Islamophobic states. The work in question is "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf" by Syrian American author Mohja Kahf. Kahf offers us a protagonist who questions her Arab-Muslim identity in a host country that is completely hostile to her religion; the United States of America. With remarkable caution not to fall into one of the dominant discourses, neo-colonialist and Islamist, the novelist invites us to follow the identity construction of her character and to measure the difficulties she faces in order to finally arrive at the conclusion that her Islamity is not opposed to her Americanness.

Keywords:

Islam, arabity, americanity, identity, hybridity.

Imaginer des identités hybrides dans "La fille à l'écharpe de mandarine" de Mohja Kahf

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Résumé :

Cet article propose une réflexion sur l'émergence d'une sensibilité littéraire qui interroge les identités arabo-musulmanes dans des états islamophobes. L'œuvre en question est "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf" de l'auteure syrienne américaine Mohja Kahf. Kahf nous propose une protagoniste qui s'interroge sur son identité arabo-musulmane dans un pays d'accueil entièrement hostile à sa religion ; les Etats Unis d'Amérique. Avec une prudence remarquable de ne pas tomber dans l'un des discours dominants, néo-colonialiste et islamiste, la romancière nous invite à suivre la construction identitaire de son personnage et à mesurer les difficultés auxquelles elle fait face pour en fin arriver à la conclusion que son islamité ne s'oppose pas à son américanité.

Mots-clés :

Islam, arabité, américanité, identité, hybridité.

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Originally from an Arab country, practicing the faith of Islam and living in the United States of America are disparate ingredients that render the conception of identity terminologically hard. Although Arabness is compatible with Islamness and that both can form a whole, the third ingredient i.e., Americanness is paradoxically unfamiliar to both. At the level of identity, Mohja Kahf's protagonist Khadra Shamy in The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf(1) is metonymic of the Arab Muslim American community. Although the three identifications are true of Khadra, they do not all happen at the same time.

Along the novel, Khadra Shamy strives to give meaning to her state of in-betweeness as she situates herself in three different cultural spaces, namely: Islamness, Americaness and Arabness. In cultural theory, Hybridity is an ambivalent term. In the 19th century, hybridity was a term of abuse for those who are products of miscegenation. However, linguist and cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin was the first to use the term to assume the positive, "yet disruptive and transforming power of multivocal language situations, and by extension, multivocal narratives"(2). Following the Bakhtinian conceptualization of hybridity, Homi Bhabha subverts earlier notions of static identity and assumes identity as a changing process as a result of cultural interactions. Bhabha believes that, "What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments of processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself"(3). The cultural meaning of hybridity is therefore created in a "third space" that exists on the borderlands between

binary identities. Bhabha further opines that "third space" is a space of both invention and intervention that allows history to proceed "beyond the instrumental hypotheis"(4). Therefore, a hybrid fiction writer does not only "invade, alarm, divide and dispossess, (but) also demonstrate the contemporary compulsion to move beyond; to turn the present into the "post"; or,… to touch the future on its hither side"(5).

In The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, Khadra Shamy moves from what Bhabha calls the pedagogial aspect of identification characterized by discrimination and exclusiveness to the "performative" stage of the articulation of identities that "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as homogenizing unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People"(6).

Khadra's pedagogical identification is revealed early in the novel. As a teenager and brought up in a strict Muslim community, Khadra comes to construct a black-and-white view of life and proceeds with her Manichean conception of identity. For Khadra, all that is Islamic is valid and ethically right and all that is not Islamic is demonic and ethically wrong, and hence her vigilance not to have anything in common with what her parents regard as "blasphemous" Americans. As an adolescent and through the trip she made to Saudi Arabia, Khadra was in the process of learning about both life codes that administer Islamic and Western societies.

The upsurge of one identity over the other is incident-dependent in Khadra's psyche. Throughout the many experiences of other characters in the novel, Khadra learns new things and starts constructing her own judgment on Western and Islamic norms independently of what her parents used to teach her. One example is when Zuhura, a Muslim female character in the novel, was raped and murdered. Her body was found near a bridge, she had cuts on her hands and her scarf and clothes were in rags. To Khadra's consternation, the Indianapolis Freeman called Zuhura:

"A young black woman" and didn't even mention that she was Muslim at all. On the other hand, the "Indianapolis Star" pretended like race wasn't there at all, calling Zuhura a "foreign woman" and "an IU international student", as if her family didn't live right there in town. The "Indianapolis News" article treated it like just some random crime, giving it one tiny paragraph in the back pages(7).

The way the newspapers referred to Zuhura's murder maddened Khadra who meditated at Zuhura's funeral, "Maybe we don't belong here… Maybe she belonged in a place where she would not get shoved and called "raghead" every other day in the school hallway"(8). This incident widens the gap between Khadra and Americans as she constructs a racist xenophobic image of them. It eventually fosters a rapprochement between Khadra and the Muslim community at large at the detriment of the American one.

The incident of the limousine in Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, renders Khadra a renegade who claims Americanness as more liberating and less hypocritical than Islam (appropriated by Arabs) in the 20th and 21st centuries(9). Being invited to fornicate in a land that considers fornication as a sin urges Khadra to revise her conceptions and her parents' "lies" and take a detour in terms of identity. Being unable to marry her Islamness with her sense of Arabness, Khadra gives an opportunity to the second suitor i.e., Americanness however discordant it might be. In fact, the experience of the limousine makes drastic changes in Khadra's life and her new identification process. For the first time, Khadra starts considering the advantages of assimilation as she comes to view America as the most suitable homeland without fully compromising her Islamness.

Khadra's journey towards the "third space" begins with an emerging skepticism over the "purity" of the Muslim community as soon as she starts questioning her parents' behavior. One example of Khadra's disillusionment about her family's moral

codes is when she wanted to braid her hair in the African American style. Her mother rigidly "vetoed it" and Teta expressed her refusal with abominable racism when she opined, "such pretty hair, not that like repulsive hair of Abeed, all kinky and unnatural"(10). What is interesting in this scene is how Mohja Kahf exposes both polarities from an insider viewpoint which gradually drives her to the "third space".

The question that may arise at this level is: why does Khadra attempt to unite Americanness with Islamness and not Arabness? This is probably because the marriage of two cultures involves many impediments on account of the impossibility to unite two opposing sets into a whole. This is also because one's culture is identified through apparel that is considered a visible marker of cultural belonging(11). Imagine, for instance, the attempt to create a whole out of the typical dressing code of an Arab (abaya and turban) and the archetypal clothing style of a modern European (a suit)! The designer as well as the model will be ridiculed for the idea.

Although this is also true of religious identities being much of the time indicated by visible markers, they do not impose change as cultural ones do. What is more, cultures are territorially bound while religions are unterritorial, and that gives more fluidity to religious identities in terms of mobility. Moreover, the attempt to create a hybrid identity out of two cultures often generates clashes between the two since there are serious concessions to make by abandoning elements of one culture to adopt ingredients of the other. This in turn gives birth to an inferiority complex for the exile subject and an authority complex for the host member, what complicates further the process of forging a hybrid identity. Let us note that the ban on religious ostentatious markers is a recent story that is geopolitically well studied by detractors of immigration and transculturation. Independent of these political facts, the union between any culture and any religion is possible. An Algerian, for

instance, can be Muslim, Jew or Christian but he cannot be Algerian and French at the same time.

Mohja Kahf gives cute examples for such an argument through the character of Joe Thoreau, Zuhura's father, who is a white American from Nebraska married to a Kenyan Muslim: Aunt Ayesha. Joe later changed his name into Yusuf as he embraced Islam. He was the accountant of the Dawah Center and he regularly presented his "Why I embraced Islam" lectures at mosques(12). Trish, Omar Nabolsy's wife, is also an American convert who "didn't like it when people assumed she became a Muslim for her husband"(13). Although she was Muslim, she "was the only woman who didn't cover her hair, except during prayers"(14). Islam being the faith of characters of different origins in the novel: Kenyans, Americans, Palestinians, Pakistani and so on, is the author's way of saying: religion has no territorial referent and it may be accommodated in any cultural territory.

Therefore, after the various incidents that have opened Khadra's eyes on the ingredients of the identity she would later forge, Khadra chooses to amalgamate Americanness with Islamness. After getting American citizenship, Khadra became conscious that she was unavoidably American. On the one hand, the embrace of Islam by two American characters, Joe Thoreau and Trish, is representative of Islam as a religion open to all humanity and rejects the Arab's appropriation of Islam. On the other hand, Khadra's amalgamation of Islamness with Americanness is representative of a nation welcoming differences. This reciprocity in terms of adopting differences is the motif behind Khadra's choice of a hybrid identity. Although this utopian vision of hybridity is far from being real, hybridity might be the best solution offered to Muslim exiles in the United States.

Another eye-opening experience representative of what Homi Bhabha calls "an interrogatory interstitial space" in which fixed polarities"(15) begin to unsettle is Khadra's experience with

her cousin Afaf in Saudi Arabia. Khadra and Afaf went to visit the latter's aunt Sheikha, she apologized for not being able to stay with them but offered them to explore her rich library. However Afaf proposes to Khadra to go out which they eventually did much to Khadra's consternation. After putting her makeup Afaf got into a limousine full of Saudi men and dragged Khadra in after her. Afaf's unislamic behavior when she started flirting with one the men infuriated Khadra who was also harassed sexually by one of the men. Khadra's experience with Afaf completely shatters her romantic view of home and helps her proceed towards the "third space".

Following the limousine incident, Khadra comes to regard her trip to Saudi Arabia as an experience that marks the end of what she calls "her black scarf days" and the beginning of her journey back in Islamic civilization with all its triumphs. Instead, Khadra starts a new identitarian phase represented by her new clothing style. After returning from Hajj, "Khadra put on a white scarf with tiny flowers like a village meadow in spring, and a pale blue blouse and soft floral skirt. Her broadcloth navy Jilbab and plain black scarves she shoved to the back of her closet"(16). After a long hesitation, this clothing style in turn is abandoned in Syria where Khadra decides to unveil describing the unveiling moment as follows, "Under the cherry-tree canopy it had felt fine having her scarf slip off. She was safe; she was among friends… The first few days without her life-long armor she felt wobbly, like a child on new legs"(17). The lexicon identifying hijab in this scene is related to the binary safety-insecurity. Similar to armor, Khadra views her hijab as a means of security protecting her against violent physical attacks (these may be in the form of sexual rape as was the case of Zuhura and Ebtehaj, or a scopophilic gaze). Unveiling under a tree represents Khadra's hesitation to unveil because she was always in need to be covered, and this explains her choice to unveil while always being partly veiled by the tree. Lastly, identifying as "a child on new legs" after the unveiling

scene explains Khadra's burial of her comparatively old identity, the one of "some other Khadra who accepted things she didn't really want, who didn't really know what she wanted and took whatever was foisted on her without examining it. Took whatever crappy unnourishing food for the soul was slopped in front of her and ate it up, becoming its spokesperson and foisting it on others. Ruining friendships for it. She loathed that girl, that Khadra. Despised her. Blamed her for it all. Wanted to scratch her face, to hurt her, wanted to cut her, she looked dully at a razor, one of Juma's, forgotten in the back of a bathroom drawer. Wanted her dead"[(18)].

Obsessed with burying the loathsome doppelganger that haunts her and everything that reminds her of it; Khadra even "stopped watering the maidenhair fern in her little living room and it died"[(19)]. By refusing to duplicate the identity of her parents, Khadra starts carving her own identity by way of replacing her parents' version of history with her version of "herstory". Let us note that contrary to the reader's expectation, unveiling does not take place in the United States of America, but in Syria. Had Khadra unveiled in the USA, because of the constraints of segregation, hybridity would not have been an option and nationalistic extremism would have been the result.

Back in Indiana, unveiling allows Khadra for more social mobility and opens for her a new horizon of friendships. Khadra's new identity now resembles Kibbeh making, the traditional Syrian food whose making "was a great and complex task, requiring a whole clan in the kitchen"[(20)]. In the same way Kibbeh making requires various ingredients and many persons, Khadra's identity construction invites various ingredients and many persons shaping her views and attitudes in the future. Furthermore, Khadra's move towards her new identity is represented by her new attitudes toward issues she had categorically rejected in her black-scarf days. Khadra learnt from her parents that a relationship with a boy outside the contours of marriage is haram

(meaning sinful) and eventually Khadra got married to Juma without even sharing one conversation before they got married. By the end of the novel, however, and after her divorce and unveiling, Khadra starts getting out with a Tunisian secular Muslim named Chrif. Although it was dating per se, Khadra preferred to name it "Islamic dating"[(21)] as she still held chastity as a moral religious principle. Khadra's laxity is also evident when she accepts, albeit disconcertingly, being introduced to Chrif's friends as his "Hoosier girlfriend"[(22)]. On the one hand, Hoosier refers to Khadra's Americanness, and girlfriend connotes her secular version of Islam. Identified as such, Khadra resembles the Mishawaka Muslims her parents used to criticize. Back from visiting a Mishawaka community, Wajdy explains: "They had one of the oldest mosques in America up there, founded by Arab Muslims who had come to America as far back as the 1870's. But slowly, over generations, they had mixed American things in with real Islam… none of the women up there wore hijab and none of the men had beards, they didn't even look like Muslims"[(23)].

Being more Muslim than Mishawaka Muslims and less Muslim than Muslims leads Khadra to the final conclusion that she was too religious for the secular men and too lax for the religious ones. Thus, Khadra locates herself between the secular and the religious thereby creating her own hybrid newness. By the end of the novel, Khadra repeatedly admits that she has forged a hybrid identity and this is because she could neglect neither her Islamness nor her Americanness. Khadra's name suggests her identitarian claim for Islamness and her settlement in the United States stands for her allegiance to the Western ideals of freedom of speech, democracy and equality.

Khadra concludes that she is fit only in the USA no matter how she feels about it, she even admits that she is "caught between homesick parents and a land that… hated her, spit her… yet at the same time made her unfit to live anywhere else"[(24)]. She also confesses that all overseas trips she had undertaken

"enabled her to see that she was irrevocably American"[25]. Likewise, Khadra is not ready to abandon her Islamness, metonymically represented by the veil, as she lately admits, "Of the covered and uncovered, she preferred the covered, after all, and she wore it more often than not"[26].

The color of the scarf she starts wearing in America: tangerine, is also highly symbolic and acts as a reminder of her Arabness. The tangerine scarf connects her to Téta, in particular, and Syria, in general. The narrator informs us that, "Khadra cut it in half and had the hems finished with a rolled edge at a tailor shop. Two magnificent scarves resulted"[27]. Khadra keeps one for herself and offers the other half to Téta thereby rendering the tangerine scarf a deep reminder of Syria and Téta. What is more "a brilliant tangerine color (was) Téta's favorite"[28]. Choosing to wear the tangerine scarf and wiling "to pull it on tighter, not take it off the way Seemi keeps suggesting she do after every Middle Eastern crisis dredges up more American hate"[29] represent Khadra's new tolerant attitude towards her hyphenated self. The bright and attention grabbing tangerine color shows that Khadra is no more bashful to be identified as a Muslim and proudly accepts all aspects of her subaltern identity in an islamophobic country. Khadra does not only preach hybridity throughout wearing the scarf in an unislamic country but also claims hybridity within Islam throughout her new apparel i.e., a scarf and jeans. By so doing, Khadra displays the possibility of being a Muslim and a modern person at the same time in a country that has long regarded Islam as a backward religion.

Claiming more explicitly her hybrid identity, Khadra sums up her life as an attempt to get at a hybrid self as she confesses to Hakim, "I guess what I've been doing is trying to get to a place where I could reconnect the two, and be a whole person"[30]. After all, this fusion of Islamness with Americanness resembles the fusion of the yellow and red colors into the tangerine hybrid color.

Notes:

1 - Mohja Kahf: The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, Caroll & Graf editions, USA, 2006.
2 - Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin: The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures, Routledge, London 1989, p. 118.
3 - Homi K. Bhabha: The Location of Culture, Routledge, London and New York 1994, p. 2.
4 - Ibid., p. 12.
5 - Ibid., p. 26.
6 - Homi K. Bhabha: Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences, The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, Ed. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, Routledge, New York 2003, (206–212), p. 208.
7 - Mohja Kahf : The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, p. 95.
8 - Ibid., p. 97.
9 - Mohja Kahf: op. cit., p. 75.
10 - Frantz Fanon argues in this concern, "It is by their apparel that types of society first become known. Whether through written accounts and photographic records or motion pictures. Thus, there are civilizations without neckties, civilizations with loin-cloths, and others without hats. The fact of belonging to a given cultural group is usually revealed by clothing traditions. In the Arab world, for example, the veil worn by women is at once noticed by the tourist...". Frantz Fanon: "Algeria Unveiled" 1959, Veil, Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art. Ed. David Bailey and Gilane Tawadros Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003: (72-85), p. 74.
11 - For example, a Muslim woman identified because of the veil, a Christian identified because of the crucifix, a Jewish identified because of the skullcap.
12 - Mohja Kahf: op. cit., p. 28.
13 - Ibid., p. 42.
14 - Ibid.
15 - Homi K. Bhabha: op. cit., p. 5.
16 - Mohja Kahf: op. cit., p. 193.
17 - Ibid., p. 310.
18 - Ibid., pp. 263-264.
19 - Ibid., p. 264.
20 - Ibid., p. 189.
21 - Ibid., p. 353.
22 - Ibid., p. 342.
23 - Ibid., p. 103.
24 - Ibid., p. 391.

25 - Ibid.
26 - Ibid., p. 373.
27 - Ibid., p. 293.
28 - Ibid.
29 - Ibid., p. 424.
30 - Ibid., p. 395.

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1 - Ashcroft, Bill et al.: The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures, Routledge, London 1989.
2 - Bhabha, Homi K.: Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences, The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, Ed. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, Routledge, New York 2003.
3 - Bhabha, Homi K.: The Location of Culture, Routledge, London and New York 1994.
4 - Fanon, Frantz: "Algeria Unveiled" 1959, Veil, Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art. Ed. David Bailey and Gilane Tawadros Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003.
5 - Kahf, Mohja: The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, Caroll & Graf editions, USA, 2006.