

‘Embroidering Dreams into Veils’: Negotiating Identity and Religious Tolerance via Art in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

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ABSTRACT: *The literary impetus of Arab Muslim female writers transcends the geographical borders where certain stereotypical ideas are being impinged on them in various historical periods. Fatima Tobing Rony points out that colonial ethnography has divided the world into ‘people without history, without writing, without civilization, without technology, without archives. Amidst myriad constraints that Arab Muslim female writers endured during the critical period’s no female cinema, confined domestic roles, a woman who speaks in a low voice behind the curtains, publishing their work in newspapers and magazines with their pseudonyms or initial letter only, artistic immobility has given a sense of belittlement when it comes to artistic creativity. The present essay takes a departure from past notions and encapsulates the rich journey of Syrian American female Muslim who negotiated her identity in a rich multiculturalist society by practicing and questioning the essence of Islam and finally pursuing a photography career. My paper also analyzes that the camera consciousness has a pivotal role in the enlargement of human perception for religious tolerance which can’t be achieved by the human eye. Moreover, the travel writing experience of Mohja Kahf, a Syrian American writer, also gives a palpable embodied experience to the literary texture of this novel that amplifies my paper’s critical aesthetics. By trespassing Gender Borderlands, the changing colors of the scarf of the Syrian Muslim female character in the novel synchronize with her psychic mobility. She explored the true essence of Islam by dismantling the beliefs her conservative family impinged in every inch of her life. Identity negotiation in the rich bifurcation of Islam and art is the cornerstone debate of my paper that reconfigure the aesthetic style and literary*

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representation of Arab Muslim female writing in academia and the world at large

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Our roots began by the sea
Took their first steps.

The foam borrowed salt from the earth
to bake the brine.

Built our parts there and ran
Before the birth of war.

The Mediterranean does not forget,
only let me think of myself as a
vessel on higher ground.

I climb mountains with monasteries
Named for the moon.

And a moon whispers
Secret to the tides

Here's the new beginning.

(Rizkallah 4)

The above verses have been extracted from the poem *Take a Left Here* written by a Lebanese American poet, Jess Rizkallah from her poetry collection, *The Magic My Body Becomes: Poems By*. The poem articulates the rejuvenation and mobility of the Muslim Arab American females who embarked on the journey of self-identity where stereotypical religious identities have impinged on them. The poem quintessentially captures the critical debate of my essay in my selected novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Mohja Kahf, where the Muslim Syrian American protagonist named Khadra has pursued the career of photography that paves the way for a new beginning of diluting acrimonious racial and religiously charged debate through the lens of a camera. Moreover, she also reconfigured her identity in true spirit by experiencing the religious contours herself instead of coloring her life with the stereotypical dictated Islamic space.

Arab feminism was associated with 'Third World Feminism' imbued with obsolete paradigms (Valassopoulos 8,12). It did not gain much attention until the world witnessed post 9/11 because that event was colored with Global Muslim hatred and profound abhorrence for Muslims all over the world from the Western eyes. In this midst of turmoil, the whole world was divided into a set of binaries 'good' or evil,' with us' or 'against us' (Maleh 93). The recent article titled *Smokers Corner: The Politics Behind the Veil* published in the DAWN Newspaper affirmed that all forms of veiling are asserting new identity among young Muslim females where their roles are not marginalized, and they may pursue different endeavors in alignment with Islam (Paracha 2021)

Moreover, they have been stigmatized with the term ‘yellow race’ and are considered worthless of doing any substantial thing to the world at large. The article voiced that Islam is a progressive faith and emphasized the modern education of females. In a nutshell, skin color, countenance and clothing particularly the veil and headscarf play an immense role in the process of inclusion and exclusion (Pirani 86).

The aim of the article is that it is enmeshed with the travel writing genre which is deeply interwoven into the very texture of the novel and it synchronizes with the theoretical underpinnings and adds more critical and contemporary aesthetics to the debate of religious tolerance, Islam, and reconciliation of identity in the West. Journey has a crucial meaning because it is not just an event, or personal experience but a communal meaning is also attached to it (Smith ix). Four theoretical orientations viz. Gender Borderlands, Camera Consciousness, Spatial Borders, and Psychic Mobility have been used in this article by contemporary critics to amplify the textual debate of my article that beautifully stitches the concept of art and Islam to foster religious tolerance.

I contend that the novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* captures the travel writing experience of the Syrian American writer, Mohja Kahf, and it is a kind of “postmodern collage”, a term voiced by Colin Thubron in the arena of travel writing where a mosaic of different pieces can be seen (Hulme and Youngs 10). Emphatically speaking, this novel as a travel text demonstrates ‘writingback’ from the empire where the identities of the Arab Muslim females were on the brink of marginalization have been given breathing intellectual space by observing the veil (Hulme and Youngs 10). It gives space not only to the writer who was labeled with the stigma of ‘yellow race’ but also fosters intellectual mobility in the mind of the main character Khadra in the novel who pursued photography and retrospectively analyzed religious tolerance pictorially and cognitively through the lens of her

camera. In this regard, art has been given paramount significance to speak of the external social reality where identities have been fractured (Caiani 120).

The article examines critical research questions in the novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, that the protagonist uses the art of photography as a means of self-expression and identity formation which has a significant impact on her relationship with her family and community. Through her artistic practice, the protagonist negotiates the complexities of religious and cultural hybridity, which inform her creative process. Moreover, the novel also challenges stereotypes of Muslim women, particularly about their relationship with art and creativity. By examining the role of art in promoting religious tolerance, this research seeks to shed light on how cultural and religious identity can be negotiated through creative practices.

Before probing into the rich critical matrix, I would like to add the literary flavor of the brief snapshot of my selected novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. The novel depicts the self-journey of the Syrian girl Khadra who immigrated to America and encountered people from different races and cultures. Her parents Wajdy and Ebtehaj were strict Muslims and they tried to impose an Islamic lifestyle on their children which they observed in true spirit in the antagonizing multiculturalist society. The novel richly delineates that her identity gets refashioned in true spirit by changing colors of her scarf from black to white, green, and tangerine. Written in the bildungsroman manner, the novel also encapsulates the motif of Islam and Art which was best understood by Khadra in pursuing the field of photography where she not only reconciled her identity but also contemplates the religious tolerance in the sea of abhorrence with the help of her camera that provides her the true lens to delve into the reality of the society.

Gender Borderlands

Against this backdrop, my primary argument is that by trespassing different borders, Syria and America, I argue that Khadra as a borderland subject is geographically 'torn' from the place of comfort or home and the circumstances necessitated new negotiations of self and society. Borrowing the term Gender Borderlands from Schimanski who contends that 'gender itself is a form of the border' (52), I contend that Khadra has crossed multiple epistemological borders where she reconciled her identity and foster religious tolerance in that myriad community that reshapes her self (Schimanski 56). At the heart of this discussion, it is pertinent to mention that "Objects have spatial status" (Bal 95). I contend that the inanimate objects also cross borders along with the subjects and they also have spatial orientation. This idea is synergized in the novel when Khadra carried Quran and camera with her to embark on her new journey. Therefore, I argue that the camera carries the spatial status that elevates her journey in the myriad orientations in understanding the multiethnic racially charged society at large and at the same time fosters religious tolerance through the pictorial art of photography.

Camera Consciousness: A Mystic Experience

Following Brakhage's idea of 'camera consciousness', I contend that the individual develops new modes of the cognitive lens with the camera lens. The camera serves as a "kino-eye which is more perfect than the human eye for the exploration of the visual phenomenon in chaos" (Utterson 101). The term 'kino eye' challenges the human visual representation of the world (Utterson 104). Furthermore, the personal camera eye transforms "physiological and psychic vision" (Quendler 165). This critical underpinning also underscores that

“personal vision is material and formal, individual and social, biographical and artistic (Quendler 164). In this debate, it is pertinent to mention that framing also plays a crucial role in the elevation of the “image, close, high or low level” (Bordwell 163). This critical underpinning gives emphatic texture to my arguments in the new breathing and creative perspective where visual photography is catching up with the momentum in fostering candid terms concerning cultural and religious cohesion. This theoretical underpinning which lies at the heart of my discussion is profusely enmeshed in *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf*. The female Muslim character named Khadra surveyed Damascus from her camera lens and identified that photography was meant for her (Kahf 187). She noticed from her camera lens that “Damascus demanded you see all religions as architectural layers of each other, gave you the tangible sense, real as the crumbling citadel steps beneath your feet[...]

religions are spokes on the same wheel. All are connected to the hub. All taking their turn in the wheeling of the great azure heavens” (Kahf 187). Her spiritual journey inside her was more rejuvenating because she brushed aside that religion where her family customized religion as per their own needs. She considered that her all previous prayers were just illusions and now she is connected to spirituality in true essence (Kahf 194).

Visual photography is the harbinger of new modes of self-consciousness (Barrett 53). Furthermore, Khadra loved nature, and social and architectural photography and found the mosque as the perfect locale to exhibit her creative energy. It is beautifully manifested in the novel as: “Khadra decides she will try low camera angles. It is not the prayer she will photograph, not from the outside, but what does the world look from inside this prayer” (Kahf 37). This idea is corroborated by the critical matrix that she has fostered camera consciousness in herself and made up her mind to view the social reality not from outer space but within the lens of her camera. It shows that art has become a fruitful mystic experience for Khadra (Conway 593). Holistically speaking, the novel *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf* captures the spirit of our postmodern times with this emphatic note jelled in the aesthetic texture of this very novel that it is high time to reframe our consciousness (Ascott 199).

Given the scope of my essay, I contend that the personal vision of Khadra with her camera lens is social, biographical, and artistic and this is enmeshed in the critical contours of the novel when she recalled her bitter acrimonious experience of her crunched married life where her existence was marred to invisibility. I also argue that the embodied experience with her camera also makes her more reflective of her past acrimonious memories. At the social level, her profound taste for the field of photography enabled her to mingle with different spectrums of people from conservative to liberal people in covering different photographic shoots.

Spatial Borders & Color Mobility of Veil: Harbinger of Religious Tolerance

My argument is also premised that not only Khaadra transcends geographical borders but also her scarf (veil) transcends borders in terms of colors_black, white, green, and tangerine cultivating spiritual harmony. The changing colors of her scarf also cultivate the inner landscape of her mental outlook where she exercised her Islamic sensibility in her way and pursued her career in the terrain of photography. The word hijab is derived from the Arabic root word *hub* which means to hide, to guard, to prevent which also establishes a border (Hamzeh 1). According to Arab-American Muslim feminist Fatima Mernissi, the hijab has multidimensional contours visual, spatial, ethical, and spiritual (Hamzeh 1). However, I contend that the spatial hijab also cultivates mobility of the female Muslims in public spaces (Hamzeh 2). However, Hijab is viewed with contemptuous eyes and it is considered as a source of the stereotypical image of the assumed backwardness of Islam as a religion (Lazreg 53-66). It is a "heavily charged site in Western media and culture" (Behiery 130). I argue that the color mobility of Khadra's scarf further changed from Green to Tangerine color, on her way to Chicago which further consolidates that religious tolerance coupled with spiritual harmony was profusely enmeshed in her self (Kahf 197). Furthermore, she

cultivated religious tolerance in pursuing a career in photography at the Art Institute of Philadelphia when she interacted with multi-ethnic people like Blu who celebrated Ramzan iftar with her (Khaf 202). She also practiced Nature, forensic and wedding photography by interacting with people of different races exhibiting religious tolerance by retaining her tangerine scarf and observing prayers (Kahf 204). In a nutshell, Khadra was going through the process of spiritual nourishment, and her new self and identity were reconfigured which complements the critical voice of Mestiza Consciousness.

At the heart of Syrian-American discussion, the critical trajectory of Islamic Feminism can never be overlooked. My essay deviates from the traditional stereotypical notions and highlights how the female Syrian character Khadra rises above the normal by equipping herself with spiritual rejuvenation that promotes her literary career and religious tolerance. Khadra, an immigrant Syrian girl, on her way to the West, carried Quran and camera with her (Kahf). Her religious parents worked at Dawah Center helped in erecting mosques and other religious matters that the Muslim community may benefit from that center in the West. They were cautiously concerned about Halal and Haram, not allowing their children to eat candy and pork. During her black scarf phase, Khadra observed the Islamic lifestyle by observing the veil, reciting Quran, and observing Ramadan. Moreover, Islamic entertainment concerts were held in true junction with the Dawah center (Kahf 38). “Khadra loves being in the forest of women in Hijab” (Kahf 37). Her parents tried to foster a spirit of Islam by giving the sketch of American people that they are shallow and materialistic people who throw out their parents in old nurseries and they have broken families giving importance not to individuals but to their dogs (Khaf 45). Instead of music, they listened to the melodious Quranic citadels (Kahf 50). Hijab act as a natural skin to Khadra that makes a distinction between the inner and outer world (Kahf 72). This idea is linked with the notion of Islamic feminism by Mirium Cooke who asserted that “To be a Muslim, one must be born

in a Muslim country and rituals are based on Islam that calls an individual 'Muslim'. Islamic and religious identity is to participate in an Islamic culture" (Cooke 60).

However, I argue that Khadra stepped out from the fixed identity and explored the pictorial art of photography. She loved nature, social and architectural photography and found the mosque as the perfect locale to exhibit her creative energy. It is manifested in the novel as: "Khadra decides she will try low camera angles. It is not the prayer she will photograph, not from the outside, but what does the world look from inside this prayer" (Kahf 37). The title of my article reflects the color mobility of the scarf of Khadra. I argue that now her journey has taken a new turn from black scarf to white scarf religious matrix in life was observed in totality during her black scarf phase but now her identity has taken a new shape by observing the white scarf. During her white scarf phase, she put aside Muslim revolutionary tracts and books and explored her university library for different Hadith books (Kahf 122). She was trying to reconfigure her identity by exploring things on her own and this idea is best captured by the critical underpinning of Islamic feminism which asserts that identity is not fixed but creates a new contingent subject position (Cooke 59).

My argument is fairly straight forward that Khadra reconfigured her identity through the different color phases of her scarf journey and the discussion of the veil is of crucial concern at the heart of my secondary argument i.e., Islamic Feminism. The textual engagement gives a vivid voice that Khadra visited different shops with her parents to select the best chiffon fabric for her scarf and that becomes the visual repository of her Muslim identity which is opposite from the world of fashion (Abdurraqib 59). Borrowing the scarf modalities in three dimensions i.e., visual, spatial, and ethical by Fatima Mernissi, I argue that the changing colors of Khadra's scarf black, white, green, and tangerine transcend geographical spaces and her identity, spiritual enlightenment, religious tolerance also refashioned with new creative and reflective energy.

Psychic Mobility: A Reflective Inner Experience

To navigate the rich tapestry of the present debate, my tertiary argument is emblematic of my previous arguments. Borrowing the term Psychic Mobility from Daniel Lerner in the realm of Mobility Studies perfectly captures the palpable literary matrix of the novel intertwined with Khadra's ontological inner existence with the changing vibrant colors of her scarf. I argue that her mind travels amidst the acrimonious experiences and the stories which she heard meticulously by crossing different borders. She becomes a 'mobile personality' who enlarges her vision and identity with the environment imbued with binaries of culture and thought (Smith 77). The contemporary critical trajectory of Mobility is ubiquitous; it is everywhere. It is found in everything but precisely speaking it must always be born about someone or something. Mobility is particular 'structure of feeling'; an orientation to oneself, to others, and the world as voiced by Nigel Thrift (Adey 1), and it is manifested in the novel where Khadra not only re-orientes her own identity but also promotes religious tolerance to the world by the lens of her camera. The notion of mobility is important because it constructs space and

the individual learns the cultural habitus of that place (Petee 70). This critical contour of mobility has been enriched because it is also shaped by surveillance (Petee 72) which lies in the critical discussion of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* where her parents didn't allow her to stay with her friends at night.

“Mobility also exists in the pages of the books...in thought and the imagination” (Adey 1). Mobility is ubiquitous and it takes various myriad meanings in the critical arena of Humanities and the Social Sciences. Contemporary mobility is not only restricted to the movement of people from one place to another, it includes the movement of ideas as well. Tim Creswell has identified three important dimensions of mobility. The first is physical mobility which includes the movement of people in different countries. The second category is the embodied experience which is attached to mobility to make a meaningful experience of any space. The last one is that physical movement can manifest in the form of opportunity or threat (Martin & Wood 37- 56). The novel *Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is imbued with all three critical orientations as voiced by Creswell. The main Muslim female character Khaadra has undergone the three modalities in full essence and the end mobility appeared in the form of opportunity because she cascaded her dream of photography with this mobility

My essay contends that as a result of her physical mobility, her mind travels in the complex web of embodied and empathetic experiences which turned into a reflective one that helps her reconfigure her identity. Hearing the story of her mother's molestation at the hands of her teacher in France from her grandmother, her own embodied experience when her scarf was ripped by American boys in school, got divorced from her husband named Juma who just admired her Arabian looks not giving space in his life in totality (Kahf 80). In a nutshell, she asserted her identity by reflecting on her embodied experiences in Islamic and cultural life (Kahf 231).

Concluding Thoughts

'Embroidering Dreams into Veils': Negotiating Identity and Religious Tolerance via Art in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a critical and aesthetic endeavor to articulate the creative and dynamic story of the Syrian American girl who embraced and negotiated her identity as an Arab-Muslim American by bridging the religious and cultural animosity by the pictorial art of photography and the changing colors of her scarf make her journey more emphatic. Arjun Appadurai suggests that the world has lost its fixity and the process of 'delocalization' has rendered the formation of identity more complex (Abdurraqib 57). Emphatically speaking, the travel journey of Khadra with the changing colors of her scarf _black, white, green, and tangerine makes her more reflective because of her embodied experiences in the West that help her to re-orient her inner self and cultivated religious tolerance to the outside world with the career of photography. Last but not least, I contend that the black, white, and green colors of Khadra's scarf resonate with the flag color of the Islamic Republic of Syria where the green color is in greater proportion stands for peace, harmony, and spiritual enlightenment and the novel beautifully captures the green scarf phase Khadra where she rejuvenates herself more spiritually and creatively by pursuing photography.

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