

# Muslims in America: A Study of Family, Domestic Space and Hybridity in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

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## Abstract

*The focus of this paper is the representation of the 'lived' experience of the Muslim diasporic women in Mohja Kahf's The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf. This text makes a significant contribution to Muslim American Literature, a new genre flourished mostly in the twentieth century. The paper will address the struggles and successes of Muslim women, who migrated from their home countries, have created their own domestic space in America, the culture shock they receive, the freedom and empowerment they enjoy in the liberated social space of the U.S. helping them to acculturate in the new founded space. This paper will also examine how the second generation Muslim American women take part in the novel space, the gender roles they perform, how they negotiate with the essentialized identity labeled on them by the Western countries or even the Muslim orthodox society or how Islamic feminism impact and enable them to assert their own agency to mould their life. The episteme of 'generation', a substantial critical tool in diaspora, is used to gauge the participation of the Muslim American women in their domestic circuit.*

**Key words:-** Diaspora, domestic space, Mohja Kahf, Muslim American.

**Main Paper-** In diaspora, the domestic space is likely to be distinct from that in the homeland. The nature of participation of the family members in this space undergoes substantial changes as they have to negotiate two markedly different cultures. The family members from non-traditional countries need to adopt and adept to newer things in order to acculturate to the new environment. The gender role also changes significantly as men need to do domestic chores to help their spouses due to unavailability of supporting facilities which are available in the ancestral country. The interpersonal relationship in the family space too gets transformed due to the absence of relatives and community in the new space. Response to the domestic space in the diaspora also

differs from generation to generation. It is obvious as the process and degree of acculturation varies from first generation immigrants to second and subsequent generations.

This paper would deal with Mohja Kahf's novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Born in Damascus, Syria in 1967, Mohja Kahf immigrated to the U.S at a very tender age. Brought up in a devout Muslim family, Kahf's writings revolve around Muslim women's lived experience in America. Her texts deal with how they negotiate two opposite cultures, how they struggle to forge an identity, how they participate in the public space, and how they retain their Arab consciousness and at the same time claim America as their own.

Kahf's novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) traces the growing up years of Khadra Shamy, a second generation Syrian American girl in Indianapolis. Her parents, pious Muslims, shifted to work at the Dawah Center, a Muslim Community Centre, in Indianapolis. Life is not smooth for them. On the very first day of their arrival, they experienced racism when some boys threw glass bottles at their doorstep. The novel also speaks of their positive experience in the American secular space. Khadra's first dwelling place in America was Squire One, in the Rocky Mountains where her parents were university students. Khadra did not experience any discrimination in this place. Khadra's mother, Ebtahaj Qadri-Agha is the representative of the first generation immigrants. In spite of having a degree from American college, she chose to be a homemaker and most importantly, as Khadra's father says, the maker of "Good-quality Muslims" (21). The task of making 'Good-quality Muslims' begins at home. She takes care of the domestic space, trying to cope with the economic hardships as well as maintaining the Islamic way of life:

Their mother didn't work. At least, not outside the home. Inside she worked plenty, scrubbing things clean, getting spots out, refolding aluminum foil, deboning chicken to make it last several meals, stretching things out until the next paycheck. Making sure filth did not seep underfoot from the trickle around the toilet bowl and get carried to the rest of the house by the wet squishing soles of plastic bathroom slippers. *Don't wear the bathroom slippers outside the bathroom. Leave them at the door— you're tracking impurities— now we can't pray there until the carpet's shampooed and purified!* Making sure the kids did chores and didn't turn into lazy American children. (21)

These activities are typically non-Western ones. She ensures the physical space within the house both hygienic and 'pure' from spiritual point of view. Interestingly, the rooms are carpeted (which is typically American) but

they are cleaned according to the conventions of Arabs. Reenactment of ancestral values and cultures in the home space is done by the first generation immigrants. Since the public domain is very much unfamiliar and to some extent hostile to them, they make it a point to keep the cultural purity in the domestic space an absolute necessity. Religion enters the home space seamlessly. The religious teachings prescribed by the Dawah Center, is practised in the house.

Two things in America make Ejtehaj's life a bit difficult—one is pig meat which is completely forbidden in Islam. To avoid pig meat is a strenuous task as pig meat has various names such as bacon, sausage, bologna, ham or lard and is used in many food items, even loaf, salad, jell-O and candy etc. (12). So she has warned Khadra and Eyad not to have any food from *Kuffar* (i.e. non-believing Americans) if there is any possibility of its containing pork. She even avoids buying fresh 'deli' meat as it is cut with the same slicer used for pig meat. Finding *halal* meat in America is a source of worry for Muslim immigrants in general. "Thank God for the Jews", a story written by Pakistani American writer Tahira Naqvi, eloquently represents this problem for an old lady, Sakina, who visits the United States. The second big botheration that Ebtehaj has which creates difficulty in keeping the domestic space clean and sacred is the Americans' habit of keeping a dog as a pet. This is banned in Islam but Americans love their pets so much that they even share their bed with it. Ebtehaj asked Khadra to wash the clothes doubly as the washing machine may be previously used by any dog loving American.

Since childhood, Khadra, negotiates two lives – the domestic life and the public life. Even her public life has two distinctly separate spaces: one is her American school life where she experienced indifference from her fellow students and teachers. Secondly, the Muslim community life, at the Dawah Center where Khadra feels a close proximity to in her initial years: "the strong vibrations of the men's voices and the murmurs of the women made her feel safe. Sandwiched between them, she was right where she belonged. Everyone knew her, and who her mother and father were" (32-33). At the Dawah Center, Khadra and the other Muslim girls of her age get lessons on the preaching of the Quran and they learn that in the eyes of Allah, both men and women are equal (35). Khadra and her friends Hanifa and Tayiba, in their curiosity to know their religion well and their zeal to be rationalist, keep on asking questions that baffle their young mind. Some of these questions are related to issues of domestic space: "*Are birthdays haram? Mama said birthday parties are vainglorious. What is vainglorious? How come the Islamic year is only 1398? How come Muslim men can marry non-Muslim women but Muslim women can't marry non-Muslim men? Will all non-Muslims go to hell?*" (37; Emphases added) This is probably

the effect two things –one is their training in the American Schools which cultivate their faculties of reasoning and eloquence. And secondly, “like the sharp rational faculties of Aisha, the early Muslim woman beloved of Sunnis, they were good skills for the propagation of Islam, and the Dawah culture encouraged them, in girls as well as in boys” (44).

Khadra’s early life is marked by radical Islamist position. Inspired by her parents and other members of the Dawah Center, she exercises Islamic rites and rituals. Home space is where these are performed. It reflects in her urging to fast during Ramadan at a very early age. In case of veil too, she prefers the black one, “with a surge of religious austerity” (149). To recite and memorize the holy text is her favourite activity at home. Not only that, following the food habit of the prophet, she starts surviving on dates and water until her father makes her realize how expensive dates are in America and suggests, “the Prophet ate dates because they were the most abundant food of his land. You can emulate him by analogy. Not by being ridiculous” (154). This suggestion is very significant in a sense it talks about the urgency for acculturation. Following the habits of old countries blindly will thwart the acculturation process. So one must learn to balance between the norms of the old country and the demand of the new country.

The radicalism practised in the home space of Khadra gradually collapses with more exposure to the public space in general and to the domestic space of other Muslim Americans living outside the confines of the Dawah Center. Meeting her classmate, third generation Arab American, Joy Shelby’s family from Mishawaka, is an eye-opener for Khadra. Joy, the third generation Arab American, belongs to the early immigrant, working class family, as Khadra’s brother Eyad observes that Joy’s family is, “the assimilated kind, second- and third generation Americans descended from the turn-of-the-century Arab immigrants. They have failed to preserve their identity” (184). During a visit to Joy’s house, Khadra realizes how Joy’s family members negotiate both Islamic and American traits in their lives.

Another chapter of the domestic life opens up when Khadra is married. It is during the married life, Khadra becomes more conscious of sexism. This period has been a nightmare for her. Her husband Juma emerges as a patriarchal lord restricting Khadra’s freedom in every possible way in the name of religion, may it be riding cycle, taking part in “campus demonstration” (146) or not performing the strict gender activities. When Khadra fails to cook dinner one night, Juma accuses Khadra of not performing her role as a wife. Khadra tries to defend herself quoting from the *Hadith*. When she mentions how the Prophet used to help his wife in the household

chores, Juma infuriatingly remonstrates that the Prophet was not an engineering student with loads of study (145). It is interesting to note that following the history of the Prophet regarding *mehr* during marriage, when Khadra asks Juma to memorize a sura from the Quran instead of money, Juma happily agrees. But in the issue of household chores, he just ignores the Hadith to establish the patriarchal roles of the husband. It is not astonishing that women of older generation too conform to this practice. Rose, Joy's mother, in spite of being more assimilated than anyone in Khadra's family, asserts:

"Men should be men and women should be women,"..."I don't truck with all this women's lib business. What do we need libbing from? "..."It goes against religion, am I wrong or am I right... God created us a certain way and that's the way it's supposed to be. Tradition, hon. It works. You don't mess with what works" (192)

Khadra's protest on the ground that the Prophet participated in domestic works and Sitna Aisha faught a battle, does not hold much ground for Rose. The similar situation can be noticed in Tahira Naqvi's short story, "The Poor Boys", where the character, Halima Khala is shocked to see her son's friend Arif cleaning the dining table after the dinner when his wife Nadira is chatting with her. When Zenab, the narrator informs Halima Khala that nowadays husbands join hand with wife in household works, she retorts:

Girl, there's man's work and there's women's work. Your uncle is still taking care of the shop, but even if he weren't, he wouldn't be in the kitchen with me, or in the dining room clearing dishes, now, would he?" (47)

However, men like Arif and Zenab's husband Ali understand the demand of the new role playing in the new space. Even Eyad, Khadra's brother, helps his wife Omayma in managing two babies (385). So, many members of the second generation take the white American examples of participating in both public and domestic spaces together. This also conforms to the Islamic practice. So America is a space where Islamic feminist discourse and practices find a fertile ground.

Tired of making compromises one after another, Khadra finally revolted and went through an abortion to get rid of her undesired pregnancy. This step is an exceptional one, especially for a Muslim woman. It defies the patriarchal model of the institutions of family, marriage and traditional religion. She has grown up learning that these institutions are priorities in a woman's life. Though her parents and the community disapprove her action, she knows from her own understanding of the religion that it is not un-Islamic. She tells her friend that abortion at an early stage (120 days) is permissible in Islam on certain conditions (224-225). Drawing from the Islamic

theologian of classical period, Al- Ghazali, Khadra says, no emergency reason is required for abortion within the first four months (225), In general Islamic convention, abortion at any stage is allowed if there is health risk for the mother. This unwanted pregnancy would certainly cause harm to Khadra's mental health as she thinks "[s]he will not give the last inches of her body, will not let them fill her up with a life she does not want. Feral, it was not a word but a spasm, the snarl of a fanged thing gnawing at a trap: no. No, no, no, no, no, no" (248). Herein lies the role of Islamic Feminism. She includes 'mind' into the periphery of 'health' as mentioned in the scripture. Khadra is convinced that one can take the decision of abortion if her mind is not willing. This is a momentous step as she establishes her own rights to her body. It is from where Khadra starts her journey towards the third space, abandoning her dependence on others:

She wanted to abort the Dawah Center and its entire community. ... Twenty one years of useless head-clutter. It all had to go. ... All that smug knowledge. Islam is this, Islam is that. Maybe she believed some of it, maybe she didn't – but it needed to be cleared out so she could find for herself this time. Not as a given. Not ladled on her plate and she had to eat it just because it was there. (231-32)

According to Shahnaz Khan (quoted in Karim 171), the third space resists both Islamic conservatism propounded by the members of their own religious community in the home country and Orientalist discourses on Muslim identity evident everywhere. Khadra is evidently in the third space, the comparatively liberated space. It allows her to carve out her life both in the domestic and the public domain as per her own understanding of the religion and negotiation with other cultures.

During the post divorce phase, Khadra goes through remarkable transformations. She learns to adjust and to appreciate other people who are not like her. First of all, she accepts America as her home. She shares room with an unknown Iranian girl, Bitsy who hates the Arabs. The rented flat or hostel is an extension of the domestic space. One has to maintain all the necessities of the household but this domestic space lacks the parent figures and continuous monitoring by them. Thus, one has to be the guardian of one's own, taking all decisions on one's own. Here, within the physical space of a house, one needs to negotiate with people who are not related by blood or nuptial ties. For this, one needs maturity and openness of mind. The hostel or the rented flat is thus an in-between space, a liminal one. Khadra and Bitsy would not be room-mates in their home country, but in diasporic existence, they need to resolve to share a flat. Bisty's love for pork is a reflection of her hatred towards Arabs. While ordering food, she even orders pepperoni pizza in spite of knowing the fact that Khadra

does not consume it. Since Khadra has no money left to order any other food, she removes the pepperoni from the pizza and survives on the pizza for the two days (367). This is a sure sign of adaptability to new cultural norms in a new space.

Meeting the family of her friend, Maryam, assimilated American Muslims of the Warith Deen community in Philadelphia, broadens the horizon of Khadra's outlook and makes her realize that Islam is all about faith, it cannot be "way of life" as there are so many communities coming from different cultural backgrounds:

Dinner at the Joneses' home was a formal affair, very different from the chaotic dinner scenes of Khadra's childhood. Here, you sat at a long mahogany table and waited for Maryam's mother to be seated. After she gave the signal, Maryam's father said the blessing. There was a sense of solid tradition at their house, *a Muslim American life enduring in this way over the long haul*. Yet there were things-- the frugality, the family-and-God-centered life, and the ethic of hard and diligent—that were the same here as back in Indiana. (365; Emphasis added)

Khadra's own domestic space sees transformation too when her younger brother Zihad expresses her love for Sariah Whitcomb, a white American Christian girl, and he wants to settle with her, she does not react adversely. She rather expresses her delight and gives him word that she will break the news to their parents (433). She too accepts an African American boy from the Dawah Center community. She accepts Hakim's proposal to 'get to know each other again, as adults' (439) in spite of her parents' dislike for black people. At the end of the novel, the Shamy family shows promise of emerging as a truly multi-cultural American family incorporating African American Muslim as well as white American Christian members in the family.

This paper, thus, shows how Muslim Americans are displaying unmistakable signs of reforming the domestic space in America. They are slowly, but surely, moving forward to establish gender equality in the domestic space. In this regard, they follow Islamic feminists. Whereas secular feminists have given much importance to the gender equality in the public space, character like Khadra and other followers of Islamic feminism have a holistic approach claiming gender equality both in the domestic as well as public space.

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