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Towards a Feminist Debate of Religion-Related Violence in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at exploring Kahf's feminist and critical position of masculine Islam, fundamentalist Islam, and their agencies that operate within Arab and Arab American societies to engender physical and structural violence against women, and hinder a harmonious relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim people, as reflected in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Kahf's feminist dramatization of the question of Muslim woman is so evocative as to be a part of challenge to the tenets of patriarchal Islam and the representational image of Muslim woman as a powerless victim of its ills in the Western world. Examining the novel as a feminist epistemological space to explain the religious empowering knowledge that Muslim women need to share represents a real challenge to the status quo.

Keywords: Arab (American) Feminism, Masculine Islam, Fundamentalism, Structural Violence, Segregation, Muslim Women.

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1. Introduction

Islam occupies an intellectual space for debate among Arab and Arab American intellectuals. A group of thinkers, writers, and scholars have emerged in this domain to investigate a set of important issues the boundaries of which revolve around the true Islam and women's rights, patriarchy and fundamentalism as strange ideologies to Islam, and the Western hegemonic discourse about this religion and its believers. Although the task of questioning and debating these contentious issues has been a challenge to Arab (American) writers, no writer wrestles with this problem as interestingly, vividly, and inventively as Mohja Kahf in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). The novel marks a crucial turning point in eliminating the false notion of Islam as a patriarchal or fundamentalist religion, and freeing its believers from the stereotypes enacted against them by the Western hegemonic discourse. Reading the novel to explore these subject matters will deepen our understanding of the text, and encourage us to engage in an intellectual interaction to explore new insights of the author's mindset, especially if we take into account that these motifs have gone largely unnoticed by literature done on the novel.

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Recent studies of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, however, are, to my knowledge, concerned with identity, symbolism, the politics of place and its impact on identity, and polygyny in Islam. In “Self and Identity in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*” (2010), Barakat and et.al. communicate Khadra’s quest for self-realization. To them, the novel is a dramatization of Khadra’s “journey of self discovery . . . to [find] her true self as opposed to the identity that she inherits from her parents” (Barakat, Al Assad & Jaradat, 1). Susan Alkarawi and Ida Bahar’s “Negotiating Liminal Identities in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*” (2013), written in part as a critique of the discriminatory practices against Muslim women in US, challenge the notion that “the term ‘Muslim woman’ connotes submissive or backward” (Alkarawi and Ida Bahar, 1). In “‘What About Women?:’ The Treatment of Women in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*” (2014), Husni Abumelhim explores the problematic status of woman and the modern practice of polygyny. Drawing on James Fowler’s theory of the process of faith development, Abdul Majd’s “The Process of Faith Development in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*” (2015) vividly explains Khadra’s evolutionary attitudes towards individuation and maturity. Khalifeh, in her turn, makes interesting claims in “The Symbol of the Veil in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*” (2016), an article that discusses “the symbol of the veil in the novel from postcolonial perspective” (Khalifeh, 155). The studies of the novel take on a new dimension by Ismail’s “Narrative of Identity and Place in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*” (2017), where she explores “the question of identity and its connection to narrative and spatiality” (Ismail, 1).

In light of the aforementioned studies, this article aims at exploring Kahf’s feminist and critical position of masculine Islam, fundamentalist Islam, and their agencies that operate within Arab and Arab American societies to engender physical and structural violence against women, and hinder a harmonious relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim people, as reflected in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Kahf’s feminist dramatization of the question of Muslim woman is so evocative as to be a part of challenge to the tenets of patriarchal Islam and the representational image of Muslim woman as a powerless victim of its ills in the Western world. Examining the novel as a feminist epistemological space to explain the religious empowering knowledge that Muslim women need to share represents a real challenge to the status quo.

Kahf’s interest, however, in discussing the religious gender violence is complex; she furthers her communication of such a form of violence to encompass issues of violence of representation of Islam and Muslims in Western consciousness, Islamic fundamentalist teachings that serve to “other” non-Muslim. Examining how she critiques such configurations of religious violence or ideology advocating it, I argue that Kahf proves herself to be a liberal Muslim intellectual, who is inspired by the vision for a more human global life among people. She advocates rejection of hierarchical duality of religion.

2. Masculine Islam and obscuring Muslim women’s rights

In fact, Kahf voices a strong criticism of masculine and fundamentalist Islam and its state, familial, and societal institutions that normalize the practices of sexism and violent acts against women in areas of marriage, family, sex, education, and social interactions. A major strategy Kahf adopts to counter masculine Islam is to unearth the true feminist virtues and principles of this faith, the principles that are manipulated and obscured by male Muslims’ interpretation and appropriation of Islam. As Mernissi argues, “if women’s rights are problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite. (Mernissi, 1991, ix).

Likewise, Barazangi talks about the disempowering status of Muslim women as a result of Muslim males’ interpretation of Islam: “[W]omen see Islam as a protective power by being totally submissive to the will of God as interpreted by men . . . Muslim women . . . view themselves, in general, not as a primary principal in the familial and social relations . . . but only as mothers . . . and wives” (Barazangi, 2004, 81). She sees that a necessary step to be taken by Muslim women, who chooses to pursue their emancipation within the context of Islam, is to counter the patriarchal dominance of interpreting the Islamic sacred texts. As a strategy toward this goal, Barazangi suggests “‘Self-learning of Islam (S-LI), as a means for self-realization and self-identity” (113). In her novel, Kahf performs Muslim women’s right and authority for re-reading and explicating Islam. Based on Islamic sources, scholarships, and individual reading of Islam, Kahf acts out the Muslim feminist voice to demystify the patriarchal Islamic discourse, and construction of Muslim women’s identity, the rules and oppressive dictates that are imposed upon them

in the name of Islam. The dominance of this discourse and its dictates, as they are represented in the novel, are, from an Islamic feminist perspective, challenged for having unfairly objectified women, segregated them, and obscured their existence as human beings of rights for independence and equality with men.

Kahf powerfully resists the notion that true Islam is a religion of oppression against women, and that it is a religion of fundamentalism that promotes violence and terrorism against non-Muslims. She draws, through the characterization of many Muslim figures and intellectual feminist heroines, the counter arguments, and negotiations they have conducted against masculinity and fundamentalism in Islam, a clear distinction between what is true about Islam with respect to women's rights, tolerance with non-Muslims, acceptance and respect for people of other religions, and what is ascribed to this religion by masculine and radical Muslims. Kahf's alternative vision, the vision she mainly materializes across the novel on Islamic views, true Islam— i.e. Islam that is devoid of any political or patriarchal agenda—endorses equity between men and women, tolerance towards other religions, and respect for humanity and human beings of any religious background.

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Kahf questions the problematic of Muslim women's gendered position in the light of masculine Islam and its agencies in Arab American societies, hostility-evoking attitude towards non-Muslims by the proponents of fundamentalist/ conservative Muslims, and the racially religious violent acts practiced upon Arab American Muslims out of the Americans' insufficient perception of Islam through the limits of the hegemonic discourse on this faith and its believers. Kahf's performance of such "dual critique" forges an important constituent of her resistant strategy, and it is, for Kahf, done as a religious duty towards her people and their religion. Of dual critique and its significance for Arab American writers' resistance, Kahf states:

Critiquing oppression in the global Muslim community while simultaneously critiquing oppression committed by and in Western societies, waging a double-fronted battle, pries gender work out of both camps. Here we might recall 4:135 from the Quran's chapter on, appropriately, 'women.' it is a passage that construes the criticism of one's own society as a strength: 'Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even against your selves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be against rich or poor: for God can best protect either, and follow not your desires that conflict with justice, and if ye distort or decline to do justice, then truly God knows what it is that ye do.' (Kahf, 2011, 121)

It is thus Kahf's quest for justice that determines her dual critical position of masculinity, fundamentalism in Islam, the U.S. hegemonic discourse, and its consequential racial practices upon Muslims

Kahf underlines the problem facing Muslim women from masculine Islam and its practices. This issue is first brought to the forefront in Kahf's novel through Khadra Shamy, Kahf's heroine. Khadra's personal experience, being a Muslim daughter to the conservative devout parents, Wajdy and Ebtehaj, and a girl growing up in an immigrant conservative religious community in Indianapolis, is telling of the various forms of gender injustice Muslim American women might be subjected to by this modality of Islam and its practitioners. A crucial part of Khadra's gender status in this family seems to come from the parents' fall under spell of the masculine (Muslim) tradition of defining woman, in Ghasoub's terms, as "fitnat," the tradition that has been inherited and infused into Islam and Muslim males' consciousness from "the nomadic tribal societies of the Arabian peninsula before Mohammed" (Ghasoub, 2005, 30-1). According to this tradition, as Ghasoub maintains, Muslim woman is perceived as a sign of beauty, temptation, a being of "uncontrollable" sexual potency, that evokes the anxiety of Muslim male advocates of this concept to keep her under control and "fearful seclusion—at once physical (the imposition of veil) and social (the creation of segregated spaces)" (30-1). Wajdy's adherence to this conviction is reflected in his anxiety and obsessive precautions of closing the house "curtains" so that Ebtehaj and Khadra are not "exposed to the eyes of Americans" (96), and in his belief in the mandate segregation for Muslim women. Wajdy believes that a Muslim woman is to be segregated and controlled, and that she who does not conform to this supposed Islamic gender segregating code "[becomes] a byword for 'lost Muslims'" (103). It is to be pointed out here that Wajdy's regulations/ views on segregation are represented in the novel as if they were part of his adoption of Arab tradition, in the sense of customs. Wajdy does not base his stance of segregation on an Islamic ground.

Ebtehaj, for her part, is also a believer in the concept of woman as *fitnat* to be segregated, but her stance of this issue relies on her internalization of masculine Islam as it is established by male Muslim

scholars and theologians. This conviction in Ebtehaj has been suggested in Kahf's novel by the type of the religious selected readings she has conducted, namely, Al-Ghazali's *Revival of Religious Knowledge*, and the gender restrictions that this mother has imposed on Khadra, most probably out of what she has read in this book about the female sexuality by this Muslim theologian and philosopher.

For some Arab feminists such as Mernissi, this book has played an enormous impact on constructing the Islamic theory of Muslim women's sexuality in relation to the concept of *fitnah*. Mernissi upholds the notion that Al-Ghazali, a prominent fifteenth century theologian and jurist, in his interpretation of Koran in this book has objectified Muslim woman, making of her "the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential" (Mernissi, 1987, 44). Mernissi believes that the theory of "female sexuality, as seen in Imam Ghazali's interpretation of the Koran, cast the woman as the hunter and the man as the passive victim" (33). She continues to argue that Imam Al-Ghazali considers the Muslim woman's sexual power "as the most destructive element in the Muslim social order . . . [And] as synonymous with the satanic" to be controlled and regulated (33). It is not accidental, then, that Kahf makes an overt reference to this book as one of Ebtehaj's favorite religious properties and selected readings. In one of the family sitting, where Livy Morton constitutes the center of the family talk, Kahf portrays Ebtehaj engrossed in reading this book: "'Does she [Livy Morton] have religion . . . what is her name?' Ebtehaj said, looking up from her leather bound Volume Four of al-Ghazali's *Revival of Religious Knowledge*" (86). This episode can be thought of as an indication of the religious background upon which Ebtehaj builds her attitude towards gender segregation in the novel, especially towards her daughter, Khadra.

Being, however, a female living in this family, Khadra has to set herself for a restrictive gendered life. Khadra is forbidden from socially interacting with boys. Eyad's notice that Khadra, in spite of being a child, shares "a handlebar ride" with Hakim warns her: "'Get off Hakim's bike and get on mine. 'Cause he's a boy and Mama might see you . . . mother said she shouldn't ride with boys'" (5). As a young daughter, Khadra is not allowed to partake in social occasions unless the parents make sure that they are quite gendered occurrences. Khadra's invitation for attending Ginny Debs' party displays to what extent Wajdy and Ebtehaj maintain restraining attitudes towards mixed gender meetings. The narrator describes the parents' long list of questions so that they consent Khadra's attendance at this party: "'Does she have a brother? How old? What is her father like? No? How do we know he won't? We don't know, do we? We don't know anything about these people.'" (85). Wajdy and Ebtehaj strongly stand against social occurrences that might render Khadra exposed to a mixed gender interaction. It is just after making sure that Ginny Debs' does not have a brother and that her father will not show up during Khadra's stay at the party, the parents finally agree on their daughters' participation in this social occasion. The imposition of gender restrictions on Khadra by Wajdy and Ebtehaj does not only touch her social activities, it also bans her aspirations for religious education. The narrator emphasizes Khadra's deprivation of getting the same chance of religious education at Al-Azhar as her brother Eyad on gender grounds (154). The parents seem to be standing against such an educational chance for Khadra since it would weaken their observant surveillance of keeping her under segregation.

Even Khadra's opportunity of learning at Indiana university, Bloomington, will be prohibited by Wajdy and Ebtehaj "had she not had a mahram [i.e. male companion], Eyad" (180). According to Kahf, however, such practices of Khadra's parents contrast with true principles of Islam. Kahf believes that part of the problematic position of Muslim women in Islam is that this religion is not practiced on its true principles, and that Muslim women's recovery of these principles to assert their dignity and rights in Islam demands of them a re-reading/re-construction of this faith. Kahf asserts: "You [have] to study your faith, dig out the core principles from underneath customs that may have accrued around them . . . and find away to act on those principles in the present conditions" (96). It is this pedagogical message that Kahf attempts to accentuate in her communication of the issue of segregation, the enhanced by masculine Islam and its practitioners.

Wajdy's and Ebtehaj's prejudices against Khadra are highlighted in this text to be juxtaposed with what true Islam says about gender segregation. Islamic law, in Kahf's view, as it actually is, accredits mixed gender interaction as long as this contact sounds, in Kahf's terms, "circumspect and respectful" (197). The position of Islam on this issue has been represented in the novel as a subject of religious negotiation between the Mauritanian sheik and his male students as Khadra decides to join his *halaqa* (i.e. session) for Quran recital lessons at the Terre Haute mosque. Once "the Terre Haute men"

disapproves of Khadra's presence among them as an anti-Islamic, the Mauritanian sheik refutes their masculine opposition on Islamic grounds.

The Mauritanian sheik makes it clear for the male students that mixed gender meeting was a normal practice in Islam, and it was even conducted by the Prophet himself (197). Indeed, Kahf engages in an ongoing excavation of Islamic heritage to show that Muslim women are religiously sanctioned to mingle with men and perform mixed gender activities in the various aspects of life, be them religious or political. To demonstrate that, Kahf briefly cites some aspects of Aisha's biography, Prophet Mohammad's wife. Aisha, the so called in "Islamic Jurisprudence . . . as a great authority" ("women in Islamic Law" 92), holds no reservations about getting engaged in "contention with the scholars" (110), and in political activism with men. Of Aisha's political activism, Kahf calls upon the historical event of Aisha's leadership of the Battle of Camel against Ali as a witness of Islam's renunciation of the imposition of gendered roles on women. In response to Rose's bogus contention that God created men and women different, and that it "goes against religion [Islam]" that women attempt to reverse the roles imposed upon them, Khadra protests against such stance: "I think religion allows a little more flexibility than that, Auntie. I mean, the Prophet used to help his wife with the housework, and Sitna Aisha led a battle once" (192). If, nonetheless, the Mauritanian sheik's and Khadra's counter arguments against gender segregation prove something to a modern Muslim or non-Muslim reader's sensibility about Islam, they may underscore that this religion in its true form did not promote seclusion or segregation.

Although gender segregation is not part of Islam in its original form, the practices of this form of oppression remain a remarkable feature of Muslim women's ills in modern Muslim patriarchal institutions, a point that Kahf emphasizes and critically examines in the novel. In fact, one of the major motifs Kahf communicates in this text is the interpenetration between Arab patriarchal tradition and/or the patriarchal interpretation of Islam concerning woman's identity, and the impact of this hegemonic understanding/appropriation of this faith on American Muslim woman's status. Kahf features this dilemma through Khadra's experience with the male-dominated CMC. In this institution, Khadra is excluded from attending the meetings of CMC and forbidden from "reciting the Quran in front of men" (203) in the light of Arab patriarchal tradition, the obscurely enhanced by the patriarchal institutionalized interpretation of this faith, of defining woman as *fitnah*. Eyad explains to Khadra the reason behind her exclusion: "Eyad said. . . [Y]our voice when you're reading Quran . . . is pretty awesome. . . I don't want to be put in that position, with guys listening to my sister and getting, well almost turned on. (204 emphasis in the original). The identity of Khadra, as a product of the patriarchal Islamic institution and its performative interpretation, does not go beyond the scope of being a sexual threat, a fatal attraction, and a source of social anarchy against which the male Muslim finds himself powerless to exercise segregation as a protective device.

Mernissi believes that it is the dominance of this male-oriented Islamic definition/conceptualization of Muslim women that has formed an effective enabling factor of enforcing segregation against them. For her, one of the reasons behind the enforcement of gender segregation in Muslim communities is that "[t]he Muslim woman is endowed with a fatal attraction which erodes the male's will to resist her and reduces him to passive acquiescent role. He has no choice; he can only give in to her attraction" (Mernissi, 1987, 41).

3. The complexity of Muslim women's status in Islam

However, masculine Islam— in spite of its relatively hegemonic and oppressive institutionalized practices at the familial, formal, or informal levels against Muslim women in immigrant Muslim communities— is merely one aspect of Muslim women's lives in Kahf's novel. Part of her endeavors of communicating the status of Muslim women in Islam is to refute the monolithic image in Western consciousness that Islam exists only in its masculine form and that all Muslim women live within the limits of this oppressive modality of Islam. According to Leila Ahmed, "[T]he discourses on Islam . . . [are] that Islam [is] innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation [epitomize] that oppression, and that these customs [are] the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies" (Ahmed, 1992, 151-52). A core issue of Kahf's narrative is to prove that the true picture of Muslim women in Islam is more complex than it can be judgmentally reduced to these homogeneous views.

Kahf's novel is emblematic of the heterogeneous picture of Islam and Muslims women's status in this religion. Neither does Islam in Kahf's novel exist in its masculine version nor all her Muslim figures buy or implement its gender practices. If Khadra's family are for masculine Islam and its rigid segregation politics against Khadra, Kahf's representation of the Muslim Mishawaka family functions as an antithesis of these practices. Mishawaka men and women can mingle with their acquaintances, friends, and people around without gender restrictions. For example, Amalie Mishawaka, the youngest daughter, can freely enjoy playing soccer with friends around and happily comes back home without being annoyed by gender-related questions or pressures from Mother (189) as Ebtehaj usually does with Khadra when performing a social activity. On the other hand, Joy Mishawaka appears to be free to host her friends and enjoy sitting with them at home without any troubles with parents even if such friends come with their brothers (190). Parallel to Mishawaka women's freedom of living a life devoid of gender restrictions, Kahf's narrative, significantly, represents Zuhura's and her family's lifestyle as another evidence of the actuality of this freedom within Muslim family/community. In the Muslim community of Indianapolis, Zuhura and her family to great extent stand for defiance of gender restrictions and norms prevailing against women in this society. The narrator contrasts Zuhura and her family's lifestyle with that of Khadra's and with the patriarchally Islamic norms in the Muslim community of Indianapolis:

There had always been . . . disapproval about the amount of latitude Zuhura's parents gave her in allowing her to commute to the Bloomington campus. Khadra's parents, for their part, believed a Muslim girl should go to college close to home . . . Zuhura was going farther afield than a Muslim girl ought to be, especially when it entailed driving home late at night by herself. (61)

Zuhura's parents strongly believe in their daughter's right for autonomy and mobility. Aunt Ayesha, Zuhura's mother, for example, supports her daughter's independence: "She's a smart girl . . . She can take care of herself" (61). As well, Zuhura's religious, social, and political activist actions at IU and the family's support of her to achieve these ends are overt challenging evidences to the dominant notion that Muslim women live only as suppressed entities. "True to her mother's expectations," Zuhura becomes an "activist" at IU to help "lobby the university administration to recognize Muslim holidays," and she organizes "speaking events" in order to demystify misunderstandings about Islam and support "social justice issues" (61). Zuhura's activism at IU and her success in heading ASO (i.e. the African Students Organization) becomes a catalyst for her family's sense of pride and support (74). Besides, within the Muslim community of Indianapolis, Zuhura maintains a remarkable defiance of gender roles.

This defiance is strongly suggested in her interference to defend the existence of Dawah Center against Orvil Hubbard, whose racial plots to close the center are permanent, ranging between summoning upon immigration authorities under the pretense that this center hides illegal immigrants and invoking "Zoning ordinance" (43). Contrary to what seems to be a presupposed notion that it is the duty of Muslim men to defend their religious center against Hubbard's schemes, Zuhura gives herself the right to share men with this responsibility. Once the zoning inspector arrives at Dawah center and starts "measuring the shutters" (43), Zuhura goes out to press, dog, and discredit such official's job: "Did you know that zoning law has often been used to keep people of other races out?" (43). Although Zuhura's action does not appeal to Wajdy, who very likely sees it as a sort of transgression against Muslim male's domain to "firmly signaled for her to go back into the house" (43), Zuhura overlooks such remark and insists on her right for defending Dawah Center.

However, one of Kahf's feminist preoccupations in this novel is to communicate Muslim women's rights in issues of marriage, divorce, and abortion. Kahf's argumentation of these issues, as I may see, promotes the notion that Islam consists of elements that— if they are truly implemented, and, or, perused by Muslim women — can secure Muslim women's privileges of conducting these matters, and protect them from being treated as unequal partners in marriage. Kahf displays these rights as integral parts of Islam through her representation of Khadra's marriage to Juma and Teta's marriage to the Circassian guy. While Kahf's dramatization of the story of Khadra's marriage to Juma aims at accentuating Muslim women's for granted rights for divorce, abortion, and gender-free relation with husband, her representation of the story of Teta's marriage assures Muslim women's right of having a choice in marriage.

In fact, through her dramatization of Khadra's marriage to Juma, Kahf offers to us a concrete example of the capability of Muslim women's resistance to the patriarchal husband based on Islamic grounds. The unstable relationship between Khadra and Juma might be construed as an embodiment of

Islamic options open for a Muslim wife who finds herself entrapped in a patriarchal marriage to a male husband like Juma. The first sign of Juma's attempt to dominate Khadra starts with his order that Khadra must not ride the bike (227). After his failure to persuade her that "it's unislamic" that she rides a bike since "it displays [her] body" (228), Juma resorts to the execution of authority granted for him by his patriarchal tradition as a husband: "Finally, Juma pulled rank. 'I forbid you,' . . . 'As your husband, I forbid you'" (230). Khadra's story with the bike is only "a little thing . . . in the overall picture of" Juma's ongoing attempts to control her (230). He interferes in her choices of courses at University, attempting to forbid her from taking an elective with the German Islamic studies professor Eschenbach as he imagines that this course might "distort Islam in her teaching"(231).

More to the point of Juma's oppressing attitude towards Khadra is the gendered division of housework he attempts to impose on her. According to the masculine rules of Juma, Khadra is to be solely entrusted with housekeeping such as cooking. Coming back home to figure out that Khadra does not prepare him the dinner because of her engagement in "work-study" (241), Juma, instead of displaying an understanding to Khadra's academic busyness or condescending to prepare the dinner for both of them, flares up, arrogantly reminding Khadra of her domestic duty: "Well, uh . . . [L]et's see; who's the wife in this picture . . . I'm not a woman" (241). Juma's sexist attitude towards establishing such a gendered division of housekeeping takes on a particular religious resonance in Kahf's novel. Kahf's Khadra makes of it an overt deviation from true Islam and the way it was originally implemented by Prophet Mohammad.

Much to her shock of Juma's masculinity that she is basically assigned to do him cook, Khadra snaps: "The Prophet never asked his wives to do anything in the house for him" (241). For sure, Prophet Mohammad had never asked his wives to do him housekeeping because he was fully aware of the notion that "the Muslim wife", in Al-Hibri's terms, "is a companion to her husband and not a maid" (Al-Hibri, 2000, 57). Al Hibri asserts: "it is for this reason that some prominent traditional Muslim scholars have argued that a woman is not required to serve her husband, prepare his food, or clean his house" (57). It is true; nonetheless, that Khadra's religious counterargument does not and will not affect a male like Juma, yet, it is made obvious by Khadra that Islam does not promote hierarchy between a husband and wife in marriage.

In fact, Khadra cannot quit her real self, her political activism, educational aspirations, and she, as well, cannot assume a life in conformity with the traditional roles of wife for the masculine Juma. She then divorces him as the narrator describes: "She [Khadra] offered Juma a *khulu'*, or wife initiated divorce, . . . [which] Popular Islam most buried. . . and Muslim women . . . did not know they had this right" (251). With Muslim women's right for initiating divorce and Khadra's practice of it, Kahf disturbs the Western reader's expectations that a Muslim woman is denied such a right in Islam. Esposito talks about how the West misconstrues the lack of Muslim women's right for divorce as something intrinsic in Islam: "The status of women in Muslim countries has long been looked to as evidence of Islam's oppression in matters ranging from the freedom to dress as they please to legal rights in divorce. The true picture of women in Islam is far more complex" (Esposito, 2002, 89). Kahf is vocal in reversing this misunderstanding, and in insisting that it is "Popular Islam" rather than real Islam that "most buried *Khulu'* as a privileged right for Muslim women. With having the right to practice *Khulu'* on Juma, Khadra, nonetheless, effectively defeats her masculine husband: "Juma's pride was deeply offended by *Khulu'*. She, repudiates him . . . He'd never even heard of it . . . she was just a girl in Juma's eyes . . . to boot" (251 emphasis in the original).

Besides, khadra is simply different from patriarchal Muslim women; she struggles to exist outside the dictates of masculine Islam. This difference is substantiated by defending her right to control her body. Kahf highlights this point through Khadra's religious right of performing abortion. Figuring out that she is pregnant and that she does not want "to have a baby" (244) since it would "lock her into a life, a very specific kind of life with Juma" (247), Khadra finds a solution for her predicament in Islam. In her self-learning and exploration of Muslim women's rights in Islam, Khadra recognizes that Islam secures her the right to abort, asserting this point to her friend, Joy, who believes that abortion is just possible in Islam for emergency reasons: "Islamic law allows abortion up to four months . . . All the schools of thought allow it. The only thing they differ on it is how long it's allowed. Four weeks to four months. That's the range" (225). Enabled by this religious right, Khadra directs another blow against Juma on the way towards her emancipation from this masculine husband. The narrator describes Juma's reception of

Khadra's determination, as she actually does, to carry out abortion: "Juma's face looked like it was going to break, just get cracks all over it and crumble . . . He went away . . . Went deep into the cave where wounded men go" (248). For sure, what is happening inside Juma is the overwhelming sense of defeat owing to Islam-based retaliation Khadra assumes against him. Juma turns out to be such a powerless man who is only capable of enduring with much pain and sense of defeat Khadra's Islam-oriented challenge to his masculine arrogance.

Another interesting point Kahf discusses in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* about Women's rights in Islam is their prerogative to have a choice in marriage. Teta's narration to Khadra of her love marriage to the Circassian guy and the religious vindication she reclines on to justify her performance of this marriage against her family's authority serve to accentuate that a Muslim woman has a right and is capable of deciding for herself whom to marry (272). Although this love is the reason of Teta's conflict with her parents, who reject the guy's proposal on racial grounds, Teta does not lose the will to marry her lover. Caught between the racially cultural demands of her family, her feelings, and her belief in having the religious right to marry the Circassian guy as long as he is "a good god-loving man", Teta decides to elope with him in order to get "married properly, with witnesses" in Haifa (273). For Teta's contention, a Muslim woman decision of marriage should be measured by Islamic fundamentals rather than by racial or traditional norms. Therefore, she carries out the elopement with her love for marriage with much comfort and sense of rightfulness, defending her action from an Islamic perspective against her family's claim that she has committed a moral crime and that she should then be regarded dead:

[M]y parents said I was dead to them. And what had I done? . . . Had I gone against God and Prophet? Not I. They were the ones in violation . . . Doesn't the Prophet say if you find a good god-loving man accept him? . . . Does the Prophet say he must be from your people? Hardhearted people, using religion—the butt end of it. (273)

In addition to her emphasis on Islam's renunciation of racism against other ethnicities, Kahf here displays that Teta's decision to elope for the purpose of asserting her *Self* in marriage is coterminous with Islamic law. In fact, Teta practically corresponds to the conditions of marriage in Islam that permit Muslim woman to arrange for her own marriage provided that she chooses a man of ethics and love for God.

4. Challenging fundamentalism and the hegemonic discourse on Islam

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Kahf defies fundamentalism in Islam, the Western monolithic discourse on this faith, its believers, and racism resulting from the construction of such a discourse. To start with exploring her defiance of Islamic fundamentalism, the concept needs be briefly identified. Esposito identifies Islamic fundamentalism: "Islamic *fundamentalism* evokes many images: the Iranian revolution, the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks of 9/11 . . . Osama bin Laden . . . suicide bombers. For many, this term is equated with radicalism, religious extremism and terrorism" (Esposito, 2002, 59 emphasis in original). As such, the concept together with the politico-religious figures and actors it evokes entail rigidity in thought, anti-democracy, anti-secularism, and the legitimacy of using Islam as a motive and a mean of political violent activism. If Esposito mainly alludes to these implications through his references to political tragic events (i.e. attacks of 9/11), models for Islamic states (i.e. Iranian revolution), or extreme religious movements (i.e. al-Qaeda), in her book, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*, Moghissi details these implications through her critical illustration of the major premises and trends of Muslim fundamentalists.

Of rigidity in thought and anti-democratic tendency among Muslim fundamentalists, Moghissi displays how their thought is emblematic of bias, religion-oriented exclusionary stance, and strictness. To Muslim fundamentalists, people are to be assessed and tackled with in terms of the strict Muslim/non-Muslim duality. For fundamentalists, Islam solely enjoys the truth of God's message, and the other religions are just distorted versions of this truth. Therefore, they believe that Muslim people should be more privileged to enjoy civil rights in Muslim communities. Moghissi states: "Their [fundamentalists'] attention is focused on the Muslim *Umma* . . . Non-Muslims may live in [their] Islamic society, but are at best, second-class citizens" (Moghissi, 1999, 71). She continues to argue that since fundamentalists consider themselves "to be the true bearers of 'authentic Islam' . . . other interpretations of Islam are not tolerated . . . Lack of tolerance is among the outstanding features of the fundamentalists" (71-2). Another feature Moghissi highlights and simultaneously critiques of Muslim fundamentalists' mindset is their

attempt to politicize religion, impose it as a means of life style, and demean the individual rights. “Fundamentalists”, she argues:

[S]ee Islam as a totalizing force that inspires and regulates all aspects of life . . . they are determined to subjugate all aspects of life . . . to the will of God . . . Fundamentalists oppose the separation of religion and politics. They deny the importance of individual rights and are not taken with the notion of human progress. (70-1)

It is from this perspective that Muslim fundamentalists legitimize the use of violence to impose the teachings of Islam on people in their communities, and to achieve political ends against whom they consider their opponents. To attain political goals, the fundamentalists, to Moghissi, consider that “the most violent and brutal tactics are justified. Once in power, the fundamentalists self-righteously justify the use of absolute and brutal force to suppress their opposition” (69). Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* voices a sensible critique against some aspects of such Muslim fundamentalist mindset. Kahf has written her novel to be in many of its characteristics an Islamic reformist and moderate text, whereby she calls for renunciation of Muslim/non Muslim dichotomy, the notion of spiritual superiority of Islam over other versions of faith, and accentuate her refutation of radical Muslims’ abuse of appropriating Islam to be a justification for their use of indiscriminate violence against their oppositions.

The first element of fundamentalism Kahf counters in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is Muslim people’s exclusionary stance of other faiths and their adherents. Kahf represents Ebtehaj as an example of the fundamentalist Muslim, whose belief that Islam is the only true version of God’s message is to be reconsidered. This belief becomes a reason for adopting a hostile attitude towards non-Muslims, namely Christian Americans. Ebtehaj imagines that Khadra’s stay in Ginny Deb’s house is an evil-evoking occurrence that demands of her saying prayers for her daughter’s safety: “Ebtehaj whispered three Kurses for her daughter’s safety as she slipped behind the wheel of the station wagon. The thought of staying outside the kuffar house until pick-up time crossed Ebtehaj’s mind, but she cast a final doubtful glance at the door and pulled away”(85 emphasis in original).

Kahf adopts a clear opposition to any fundamentalist religious thought promoting superiority of a religion over another, be it conducted by a Muslim or non-Muslim. Kahf’s novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, depicts adherence to this religious conviction as frustrating any chance of friendship or establishing a human relationship based on mutual respect for religious diversity among people of different religions. If Ebtehaj’s belief in the spiritual superiority of Islam and Muslims has invested such hostility inside her that she becomes almost unable to develop intimate attitude towards non-Muslims, Khadra’s and Livvy’s acquisition of this belief damage their friendship forever. Khadra’s and Livvy’s debate over whose religion is true or whose religion is to be deemed superior to another displays the serious consequences of such thought upon the human relationship between people of different faiths. The result of Khadra’s and Livvy’s strict attachment to their exclusionary religious stances is the everlasting collapse of their friendship: “After that, Livvy and Khadra could only look at each other across the lunchroom with big sad eyes and weren’t friends anymore” (128). These two characters are very likely to maintain their intimate human relation were it not for to view each other through rigid and fundamentalist religious lenses; their attachment to the religious fundamentalist thought prevents the possibility of continuing their friendship.

In fact, Kahf’s alternative vision to diversity of religions in the world function to unsettle the religious rigidity of fundamentalists like Livvy, Ebtehaj, and even Khadra, as a representative of fundamentalist thought before she initiates what she herself calls “revolutionary path”/ stage of devotion to Islam (150). This message is clearly stated through the voice of the narrator, who comments on the inspiring scene of the multi-ethnic and the harmonious blending of the diverse religious structure of Damascus while sitting on Mount Qasyoon:

Sitting on Mount Qasyoon looking down on the city of Damascus, you could not possibly hold that one religion had to an exclusive truth. Damascus demanded that you see all religions as architectural layers of each other . . . All the religions spoke on the same wheel. All connected to the hub. All taking their turn in the wheeling of the great Azure heavens. (297)

Clearly, Kahf here disclaims the notion of religious superiority of one religion over another. For Kahf, every single religion in this world has its own turn to contribute to God’s fullness of message and truth. Wajdy is emblematic of accentuating this point as an Islamic conviction. For example, in response

to Ebtehaj's question if Christians' "prayers are counted by God" (101), Wajdy asserts: "They're people of the Book; of course their prayers count" (101).

Still, however, much more than this disclaimer, Kahf's voice of the harmonious multi-ethnic-religious blending in Damascus accentuates the actual existence of non-fundamentalist Muslims' tolerance towards people of other religions in their communities. Islam in Muslim world is not necessarily what the fundamentalist Muslims attempts to make of it. In Damascus, religious barriers between Muslims and non-Muslims are blurred. Damascenes are depicted as people of much respect and understanding to other religions. The existence of the historical Jewish temple, Jobar kanees, attests to Damascenes' exemplary religious tolerance to Judaism and their religious sites: "The Jobar kanees . . . had seen three thousand years of continuous use by the Syrian Jewish community, and locals claimed it was the oldest synagogue in the world used as a house of worship" (304). Besides, religion and its performative dichotomies do not exist as a measure for establishing a real friendship between people of different religious backgrounds in Damascus. The strong friendship between Teta, Hayat, and the Jewish, Iman, gives another evidence to the Damascenes' authentic open-mindedness for substantiating a religiously pluralistic community.

Another important fundamentalist issue Kahf communicates in this novel is the question of Muslim fundamentalists' use of Islam to justify the use of unconditional power and violence to achieve political goals against their opponents. Kahf brings this issue forward in her novel through the dramatization of Ramsey Nabolsy's performance of suicide bombing against "Israeli military checkpoint in the West Bank" (355). Kahf appropriates Nabolsy's violent act to feature her outright critique of the Muslim fundamentalist discourse on bombing suicide, denounce this violent phenomenon as a tool of indiscriminate violence assumed by radical Muslims' movements in their resistance to Israeli occupation and, simultaneously, to counter the hegemonic discourse on the Palestinian people's practice of this violent phenomenon by situating it within the oppressive political context they live in.

In Fact, after the tragic 9/11 attacks, the discourse on bombing suicide has been enormously activated by Israeli and U.S. media industry to the extent that it, somewhat, elusively reduces Islam and Muslim people to terms of terrorism, violence, and lasciviousness. Amireh interestingly argues:

Since September 11th, a whole industry has evolved to explain suicide bomber. Much ink has been spilled . . . studies tend to emphasize a complexity of motives . . . Sex . . . the *hour el ain* theory of suicide bombing . . . One thing that can be discerned from most of these studies is that the image of the male suicide bomber could fit easily into the preexisting dominant discourse about Muslim and Arab men as violent and licentious others. (Amireh, 2011, 32)

Mindful of these reductive illustrations about bombing suicide, Kahf undertakes to explain for the reader that this violent phenomenon with the religious motive behind it is a mere production of Muslim fundamentalists' thought and their interpretations of Islam and not necessarily reflect moderate Islam and Muslim people's views. Kahf's feminist figures, Insaf Haqiqat and Khadra Shamy, well act out the role of this explication. After their reception of Ramsey Nabolsy's murder, their teenage friend, in a suicidal operation via U.S. media, both characters condemn the fundamentalist Muslims' manipulative religious discourse on bombing suicide that associate it with martyrdom and justifies its indiscriminate use against Israeli civilians. To Khadra, Insaf utters her anger at the fundamentalist Muslim discourse on bombing suicide: "I refuse to believe any of that so-called Islamic crapola . . . I refuse to cheer him[Ramsey Nabolsy] for taking an Israeli soldier down with him . . . I refuse to cheer. Because that's what the radical Muslims were doing these days, issuing rulings that attempted to define suicide bombers as martyrs," (356). Khadra concurs on Insaf's rejection of Muslim fundamentalist discourse on supporting bombing suicide. Khadra also regards the association between bombing suicide and martyrdom as "stupid" and "senseless" (356).

Nonetheless, Khadra's renunciation of the fundamentalist Muslim discourse on bombing suicide does not also prevent her from repudiating the U.S mass media's discourse on Nabolsy's action. This incident, as the narrator points out, is reductively reported in the U.S. media by the following terms: "That was what news calling him: 'Palestinian terrorist bombs West bank military checkpoint, killing one soldier, wounded another.' That was all Ramsey merited, his whole life, the history that brought him to that point, twelve words?"(256-57). In spite of her personal reluctance to what Nabolsy has done, Khadra refuses such U.S. media's reductionist and obscuring identification of Nabolsy with terrorism, saying: "No. Ramsey is not a terrorist . . . If he'd done it at a market, he would be. But he didn't. He didn't go for

civilians. He attacked soldiers. Of an army of brutal occupation. Ramsey joined the war. It's sad and I wish he hadn't. But that's what he was, a soldier attacking soldiers. Not a terrorist" (357). To Khadra, to reduce Nabolsy's violent action to one term, "terrorism," especially since this act has not been performed against Israeli civilians as the case is in suicidal operations performed by radical Muslims, is to obscure Palestinian people's victimization by the heavy handed occupation practiced upon them and to abstract such people practice of bombing suicide from any historical and political context. Khadra makes it clear that Nabolsy's act is a result of Israeli "brutal occupation," and it, then, cannot be reductively viewed as a mere terrorist act.

Kahf's countering views of U.S. hegemonic discourse and its violent practices against Arabs and Muslims permeate *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Kahf's performance of sensible cultural self-critique does not mean that she ignores countering violence, discrimination, and injustice practiced upon Muslims and Arabs living in or outside United States. Kahf devotes a reasonable space in her novel to unfold and question the multiple enabling discriminatory forces and forms of violence done against such group of people, giving with creating such a space an opportunity for those people to articulate their sentiments of injustice and make their endeavors of deconstructing the pillars of religions-oriented oppressions inflicted on them voiced.

One of the enabling forces that Kahf sees effective in perpetuating violence against Arabs and Muslims is to preserve their image alive in American consciousness within the circle of structural violence. That is, to maintain them within the circle of the hierarchical dichotomy according to which they are constructed as inferior, uncivilized, repugnant, and foul others. This violent structural construction against Arabs and Muslims emerges in Kahf's novel as an outcome of a methodical and, if I dare say, a systematically institutionalized prejudice that begins with curriculum at schools and reinforced by media. Ladicola and Shube refer to the dynamics of disseminating and substantiating structural violence among people of a state as a manifestation of complex systematic ideology, the enabled by societal institutions:

Our understanding of violence (that is, what it is and what we believe causes it) are products of the ideology we are taught . . . A society's dominant ideology is the cultural mechanism that defends, preserves and legitimates the structural arrangements or, more specifically, the systems of stratification that form the foundations of the normative systems that support it and preserve them. (Ladicola and Shube, 2003,71)

The dominant ideology and its agencies in the United States society to great extent perpetuate structural violence against Arabs and Muslims. Educational curriculum at school appears to be an area where the image of Arab Muslim is propagandized to become tantamount to backwardness. The novel describes: "There was a picture in the nine-grade social studies book of an Arab with unkempt beard standing in a dirty caftan next to a camel" (121). Such reductionist treatment of Arab Muslim image in school curriculum does not only help promote negative and hierarchy-evoking stereotypes alive in the minds of non-Muslim American students, it also prevents them from appreciating the real vast scientific contributions Arab Muslim intellectuals made to human civilization, an issue that Kahf's characters strongly confronts.

The picture in Khadra's nine-grade social studies book is brought into discussion by Wajdy and Khadra to dismantle the stereotypical implications of backwardness associated with it. Wajdy asserts: "Even if schoolbooks didn't say so, Islamic civilization was responsible for most of the good scientific inventions of the world up until the last hundred years or so. The clock. Eyeglasses." (120). When Khadra responds to her father that the invention of eyeglasses is accredited to Benjamin Franklin, Wajdy accredit the success of Franklin's invention to the scientific effort of the Muslim scientist, Ibn Sina: "But if he did invent them, it's because Ibn Sina advanced the science of optics in the eleventh century" (120). Wajdy continues to make significant remarks about the scientific contribution of Arab Muslims scholars to human civilization: "It was an Arab [i.e. Al-Idrisi] who discovered the world was around . . . This why Christopher Columbus came to America" (120). Unfortunately, in conformity with implementing the exigencies of performing structural violence against Arabs and Muslims, who are to be viewed as primitive and uncivilized in American consciousness, such like achievements and positive images are excluded from schoolbooks in USA. Amber Haque critiques how Arab Muslim scientists and their universal scientific scholarly contributions to humanity are excluded from school texts in the United States:

[P]rominent Muslim scientists . . . al-Kindi, an authority in geometrical and physiological optics, mathematics, and astronomy, al-Biruni . . . al-Baitar, a celebrated botanist and pharmacist, al-Tusi, who wrote about the size and distances of the planets and planetary tables and how celestial bodies influence things on earth . . . Sadly, few if any modern- day school textbooks feature these pioneering scientist-scholars. This is due to the biased curriculum. (“Islamophobia in North America: Confronting the Menace” (17)

However, in addition to bias in curriculum, it seems that what makes Arab Muslim scientific contributions to humanity also invisible in the United States educational school system is the lack or exclusion of books that talk about this issue at school libraries. The narrator informs us: “None of this information was in any book Khadra could find at the school library” (120).

Along with bias in school curriculum, the U.S. media is another realm, where structural violence against Arabs and Muslims is reinforced. U.S. media has a profound impact on the Americans’ way of thinking and directing their disposition and behavior towards Arabs and Muslims. The image of such group of people and their faith has been appropriated in media to evoke hostility and stereotyping. As Said puts it, “there has been an intense focus on Muslims and Islam in the American and Western media, most of it characterized by . . . highly exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility” (Said, 1997, xi). Kahf’s text is focused on the theme of the role U.S. media plays in objectifying Arab Muslims and evoking Islamophobia-oriented hostility against them. Kahf displays how the image of Arab Muslims in *Charlie’s Angels* is seen to be a contribution to the materialization of the stereotypical moral deterioration and the long standing repugnant image of those people’s lasciviousness: “Nasty Arab sheiks appeared on *Charlie’s angels*, forcing the shy angel, Kelley, to bellydance” (83).

U.S. dailies seem to be no less enthusiastic than film industry in performing bias against Arabs and Muslims, stereotyping them, and perpetuating the ills of their culture among the American general public. Indianapolis news papers’ reactions/ reports to the murder of Zuhura, who is found “in a ravine near Beanblossom Bridge. Murdered. Raped” (93) reveal to what extent these dailies hold bias against Arabs and Muslims. Although the murder was “clearly” committed due to “religious bigotry . . . related to her [Zuhura’s] vocal espousal of Muslim causes on campus” (95), none of the local dailies in Indianapolis refer to such a crime as a result of religious or racial intolerance against Zuhura. The report on Zuhura from “*Indianapolis Freeman*” never mentioned any association between Zuhura’s Islamic activism and her murder.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Arab American writers have invested various intellectual resistant responses to the question of violence dominating in their immigrant societies. Mohja Kahf ventures into debating the role masculine Islam, its institutions, and agencies have played in establishing physical, structural, and institutional violence against Muslim women. In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, she substantiates a strong criticism against this version of Islam, challenging its dictates that normalize practices of sexism and oppression upon Muslim women in arenas of marriage, education, and social interactions. She as well constructs a Muslim feminist counter-hegemonic discourse, whereby she refutes fundamentalism in Islam and the Western monolithic discourse on this faith and its believers, the dominant notion in Western consciousness that true Islam is a religion of oppression against women and that all Muslim women live within the limits of masculine Islam.

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