

Understanding Arab American Identity through
Orientalist Stereotypes and Representations in
Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006)

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Abstract

Arab-American women's literature has emerged noticeably in the early years of the 21st century. The social and political atmosphere in post-9/11 America encouraged the growth of such literature and brought it to international attention. This diasporic literature functions as a means of discussing the Orientalist discourse that circumscribes Arab American identity and its effects in determining their position in the wider American society. As such, this article investigates the extent to which Edward Said's discourse of Orientalism is employed by Mohja Kahf in her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) to project the stereotypes and misrepresentations that confine the identity of Arab and Muslim characters in the US society. This article suggests that post-9/11 Arab American fiction serves as a literary reference to such stereotype-based discourse in the contemporary era. The arguments in this article, while employing an analytical and critical approach to the novel, are outlined within postcolonial and Orientalist theoretical frameworks based on arguments of prominent critics and scholars such as Peter Morey, Edward Said, and Jack Shaheen, to name just a few.

Keywords: Arab American; Edward Said; Mohja Kahf; identity; Orientalism; stereotypes.

Introduction

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf (2006) is an example of the kind of Arab-American women's literature that has emerged remarkably at the beginning of the 21st century. It is written in the form of a bildungsroman that revolves around the life of a Muslim Arab girl named Khadra Shamy and her journey of self-discovery. She comes to the USA with her parents from Syria as immigrants. Khadra grows up in a strict Muslim community in the city of Indianapolis where the children are brought up following rigid Islamic rules and rejecting all differences. The novel portrays the hardships with which Muslim characters of different nationalities cope in the USA and their endeavors to better position themselves in the wider American society. It discusses a wide range of issues and concerns that affect their daily lives—mainly political and cultural. As the novel progresses, Khadra goes through several experiences, which give her the opportunity to explore her true identity as opposed to the identity that she inherited from her parents and to reconsider the meaning of life from a different angle. Mohja Kahf weaves her novel in a way that shows the extent to which diasporic figures find it difficult to understand their identity and develop a sufficient sense of belonging given their dual identities. She is an example of the type of Arab-American author who discusses and assesses the discourse of Orientalism and its repercussions on her literary production – it is difficult for these Arab-American authors to produce their literature without challenging and assessing Western stereotypes and Orientalist assumptions that circumscribe their identity and self-understanding. This is because they personally confront such representational paradigms in their lived experiences.

Identity is a key word and problematic concern in diaspora studies. Madan Sarup reflects on the nature of identity and argues that “it can be displaced; it can be hybrid or multiple. It can be constituted through community: family, region, and the nation-

state” (1). Sarup’s definition of identity applies, to a great extent, to the complex circumstances of Arab-Americans whose major concerns oscillate between the problems of displacement and the complexity of hybridity. The identity of Arab-Americans has been constructed through various phases since the first years of their immigration to the USA in the late 19th century, particularly during the 1870s. This is due to their varied origins from North Africa to the Levant region and to the Middle East (Haddad 3; Naber 38). Nonetheless, there are many contributing factors that define the identity of Arabs in the USA; one prevalent determining factor is the American Orientalist views and the Western representations that are perpetuated through media, literature, and popular culture.

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) provides a useful critical lens to discuss those views and their impact on the process of Arabs and Muslims’ self-realization. Said refers to Orientalism as a Western ideology that perpetuates a cluster of erroneous assumptions and judgmental attitudes towards the Orient and its populations with misleading stereotypes and cultural representations. In his own words, Orientalism is “an instrument of Western imperialism, a style of thought, based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and Occident [...] and a Western strategy that aims at dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient” (2-3). The discourse of Orientalism, to some extent, revolves around the manifestation of biased perceptions and subtle persistent prejudices against Oriental people, with particular reference to Arabs and Muslims, to construct their inferiority which consequently affects their sense of identity.

The static identity of Arabs, particularly Muslims, is determined by the Western ideology that accepts Orientalism as a form of reality that seeks to pinpoint them as unchangeable and fixed. A few years after Said’s critique of Orientalism, Bernard Lewis in his “The Question of Orientalism” (1982) claims that “Orientalism has been emptied of its previous content and given an entirely new one – that of unsympathetic or hostile treatment of Oriental peoples” (2). Said’s discourse of Orientalism,

notwithstanding, is not based on objective knowledge, but rather, it relies on only processing a set of beliefs and fantasies, or as Ziauddin Sardar puts it, “an artificial construction” (75) that is “devoid of any empirical research” (qtd. in Warraq 245). Said’s arguments, however, are vital and also useful in examining the extent to which Arab-American identity is infused with stereotypes and misconceptions. Said’s discourse of Orientalism not only develops our understandings of Arab and Muslim identities as lived in the USA in the contemporary era, but it also, importantly, unveils how misrepresentations of such category are practiced in the media, popular culture, and literature. With this consideration in mind, the analysis of Kahf’s novel will offer possible answers to many questions, including the following: to what extent does the discourse of Orientalism affect the lives of Arab-Americans in the USA? How does Kahf project the Orientalist stereotypes and misrepresentations as echoed by white American characters in her novel? How does Orientalism intersect Arab-American identity politics in Kahf’s novel? Although there are many categories of Arabs – Jewish, Christians, Muslims, etc. – in this study, to remove any confusion that might occur in the argumentation, I will focus solely on Muslims and Arab Muslims. The term “Arab-American” in this article is used as an inclusive umbrella for both Muslims and Arabs of Oriental background living in the USA, as both categories share similar experiences of Orientalist discourse.

Stereotypes and Misconceptions: Representational Strategies to Define Identities

Arab-American women, particularly Muslims, are perceived by the wider American society to be marginalized and alienated in their community due to Islam-related patriarchy. One key factor that helps to spread such a perception is the “media and popular culture in the USA” (Alsultany, “Prime-Time Plight” 204). In the same way, Coeli Fitzpatrick suggests that “positive and negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in the media, taken together, have

added up to a large increase in the number of representations presented to American viewers” (244). As such, Kahf, like other critics and writers, attributes the negative perception around ‘Arabs and Muslims’ to the biased representations that pervade the US media. For instance, Luqman, a Muslim male character in Kahf’s narrative, is arrested for being a suspect in the killing of his Afro-American Muslim fiancée Zuhura. Without any further investigation, “*The Indianapolis Star* reports him being a suspect in a possible honour killing - Middle Eastern connection, they said, with a sidebar on ‘the oppression of women in Islam’” (Kahf 97). The newspaper thus not only credits the death of Zuhura to fundamentally regressive Islam because of its Orientalist vision that Muslim women would be killed if they go behind their husbands’ back, but it also orientalises the Islamic patriarchy as being fanatic and barbaric through Luqman, who is later deported.

According to Kahf (*Western Representations*), the representations and stereotypes of Muslim women have been grounded in Western imagery since the eighteenth century, a period during which Islam first had contact with regions under Western authority and was regarded as an alien and threatening religion. In this respect, Leila Ahmed explains that “Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies” (52). As such, Kahf introduces in her narratives incidents of prejudice and discrimination against Muslims in the USA to suggest that Islam is still going through a process of misconception and also to provide new interpretations of today’s narratives of Muslim women which, according to Michel Foucault, allow us to see them not only as “culminations of a natural truth, but merely the current episodes in a series of subjugations” (qtd. in Kahf, *Western Representations* 2). Furthermore, the most ubiquitous perception and common axis undergirding a wide variety of Western representations is that the “Muslim woman is being oppressed and victimized” (Kahf, *Western Representations* 1; Zulfikar and Mukherjee 1).

Interestingly, “tales and stories about honour killings continue to perpetuate in the Orientalist fantasy – the sexual bondage of the Eastern woman and the severe punishment that comes to her if she goes against the rules” (Croutier 5). In this context, Arabs and Muslims, especially women, are depicted in both Kahf’s novel and in scholarly works as victims of a long-lasting struggle that afflicts their lives. As an example, Ebtihaj, Khadra’s mother, says: “just like the early Muslims, when one fell, another one picked up the banner and struggled on” (Kahf 98).

Similarly, the common label that exists widely in American media and is used against Muslims is *terrorist* (Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims*). Jean-Paul Marthoz, a journalist and an advisor to the Ethical Journalism Network, suggests that the media perpetuates the idea that terrorism is a product of Islamism and Islamic ideology and that “these kinds of representation can fan stereotypes and division, and fuel backlash and counter-violence” (4). Kahf’s novel reflects on Marthoz’s provocative statement when it illustrates the use of the ‘terrorist’ label by MacNeil-Leher, an American news broadcaster, who announces a suicide bombing at the Israeli Military checkpoint in the West Bank, Palestine. This terrorist attack is attributed to a radical Muslim character named Ramsey Nabolsy, an old friend of Khadra Shamy (Kahf 354-356). As a result, the phrase ‘Muslims are terrorists’ starts to haunt Khadra’s mind every time she hears the news on different radio channels. Because she is a member of the Muslim community in Indianapolis, Khadra finds herself confronting “the infuriating, confining assumptions the Americans put on her” (Kahf 358).

Interestingly, Marthoz’s point of view on the ramifications of stereotypes of Muslims in causing counter-violence matches Said’s opinion. In his interview with Sut Jhally, an executive producer and director of Media Education Foundation, Said claims that his interest in Orientalism was triggered by the plethora of “Orientalist images and discussions in the media and popular press following the Israeli-Arab war of 1973 about how Arabs are cowardly and don’t know how to fight and they are always going to be beaten because they are not modern. And then everybody was

very surprised when the Egyptian army fought to cross and own the canal in 1973” (2). Furthermore, besides the heavy impact that the media has in galvanizing the discourse of Orientalism and “making it accepted as a conventional wisdom” (Park and Wilkins 5), the connection that Said draws between Orientalism and the reaction of the Egyptian army may sound similar to the actions that the character Ramsey Nabolsy commits against the Israeli military checkpoint in Kahf’s novel. In other words, the connection between the Egyptian army in Said’s statement and Ramsey’s suicidal bombing is that stereotypes can cause a counter-violence to debunk and/or resist racism and discrimination.

It becomes clear that racial stereotypes and profiling are the main reason that allows the suicide bombing to happen; Ramsey Nabolsy had been able to get close to the checkpoint because “racial profiling made it easy. The Israeli were disarmed by his fair-skinned, redheaded Midwestern look, his buzz cut and style of dress. He could have been a regular American, or an Ashkenazi Pole. Their *Us-versus-Them* thinking made them slacken on detecting actual behaviour tip-offs” (Kahf 355). The narrator in this passage clearly points out that Ramsey Nabolsy’s look does not meet the expectations of Israeli soldiers and the racial-based-images and stereotypes of a regular Arab person. In this case, Ramsey Nabolsy, labelled as a Palestinian Muslim terrorist, starts to be seen as something ideologically constructed and not as a human or citizen of worthy attention and value. In this context, Said reflects on the way people of the Orient are perceived by Westerners, or in some cases by non-Arabs as shown in the bombing scene, when he says that “Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined [...] with already pronounced evaluative judgement” (207).

Racial profiling is an important factor to assess the identity of the individual, especially when it comes to stereotypes based on assumptions, and this issue of race raised by Kahf in the bombing scene can be elaborated on through the use of critical race theory. Ian Haney-Lopez defines *race* within its theoretical framework as a

“fluctuating, decentred complex of social meanings that are formed and transformed under the constant pressures of political struggle” (9). The change in the physical appearance of Ramsey Nabolsy alters the racial stereotypes credited to him. The change in his racial stereotype is due to the political struggle he goes through against the Israeli enemy. Transforming his appearance is possibly an attempt to prevent the Israeli soldiers from recognizing his racial identity and intercepting the suicide bombing. On the basis of the relationship between Haney-Lopez’s definition of race and Ramsey’s technique in deceiving the Israeli counterparts, it is possible to argue that race forms a significant milestone in identity definition – it serves as “an organizing principle to categorize individuals into different groups” (Aoudé 142). Based on this reasoning, Ramsey removes himself from the negative category of Arab in order to be simply seen as non-Arab.

Returning to the subject of Orientalist discourse in the mass media, in his *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the World* (1997), Said explains the extent to which Arabs and Muslims are under the lens of the American and Western media with highly exaggerated stereotyping, belligerent hostility and Orientalist ideas advertised on news programmes and talk shows that have a strategic influence on how ethnicity and religion are viewed. To illustrate this point, Jack Shaheen, in his *Guilty? Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, examines 100 movies and shows produced after 9/11 by the Hollywood industry – this includes popular shows such as *24* and *Sleeper Cell*. He notes that “more than 50 post-9/11 TV shows [...] vilify Arab Americans and Muslim Americans” (18). The image of Arab-Americans and Muslim Americans post-9/11 has been particularly politicised in an effort to eliminate feelings of sympathy, and they are racially implicated in order to reinforce the “us” and “them” binary. Relevantly, Shaheen’s arguments are reflected in Kahf’s novel. The narrator states that “the only Muslims on television were Arab oil sheikhs who were supposedly *bad* because they made America have an energy crisis” (*The Girl* 83).

The image drawn by Kahf in the abovementioned passage deploys a group of Orientalist ideas that define the identity of Muslims and Arabs through TV dramas and the gaze of the viewer. This can be supported by Peter Morey's examination of images of Muslims in the British TV series *Spooks* in the aftermath of 9/11 events. He argues that this post-9/11 drama features Muslims through a specific group of images positioned to sketch them as strangers and hostile interlopers (529). Morey, therefore, in line with the portrayal of Arab sheikhs in Kahf's novel, points out that in many dramas and in the media Muslims are portrayed through stereotypes featuring "anti-rationalism and anti-democracy" (Ridouani 2; El-Aswad 41). American media, therefore, invariably works to "steer the public opinion and consequently impacts the identity negotiation and self-definition of Arabs and Muslims" (Schmidt 29; Ahmed and Matthes 220).

Equally important, the American mass media strongly maintains the discourse of Orientalism as a key component in the formation of Muslim and Arab identity (Morey 143-150; Haddad et al. 28). Shaheen further asserts that "a child is accompanied in his life from early years with negatives stereotypes that define Arabs introduced on American television, shows and editorial cartoons" (*Guilty?* 328). Such a strategy perpetuates the Orientalism-based identity ascribed to Arabs and Muslims in the minds of the young viewers, both from within the Arab-American culture and outside it. The character of Khadra, a young Arab American of Islamic background in Kahf's narrative, acts as a prototype of the child in Shaheen's argument on the negative effects of stereotypes presented in the media in that she develops an overall picture of how Arabs look through what is presented in media and TV shows. This can be evidenced by her perception of the "nasty Arab sheiks who appeared on her favourite American series *Charlie's Angels* forcing the shy angel, Kelly, to belly-dance" (Kahf 83). Arabs in this sense are stereotyped and represented through the lens of Hollywood industry that serves to propagate a cultural awareness that fuels the discourse of Orientalism from a Western perspective with fixed ideas on what Arab and Muslim identity entails. The act

of ordering a woman to belly-dance, as Shay Anthony contends, establishes an image that Arabs are sexually driven and submissive to the desire of eroticism and misogyny (2005). Such Orientalist cliché constructs a component of Arab identity for an American audience that “ultimately might be spread internationally” (Shaheen *Guilty?* 174).

Additionally, Shaheen reveals in his “Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People”, regarding the representations and portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in more than 900 Hollywood movies, that “almost all Hollywood depictions of Arabs and Muslims are bad ones [...] which sustain adverse portraits across generations” (176). This provides an argument that the “American style of Orientalism had sunk deep roots into U.S popular culture” (Little 11). Arguing along the same lines as Shaheen, Sardar reflects on the postcolonial perspectives that Orientalism generates through Hollywood products. He explains that stereotyping and representations in drama sustain the idea that “the Orient is there always as a measure of otherness, as a permanent witness to the superiority of the Western civilization and an eternal justification for the domination of the West over the non-West” (105). In this respect, the stereotypes and representations in Orientalist dramas tend to create a process of differentiation in terms of an identity which is heavily marked by racial and cultural value judgments, a process which is called “*ethno-normativity*” (Morey 531). According to Morey, the concept of ethno-normativity is “a critical strategy that allows us to highlight and explore how certain values are constructed and projected” (531). In other words, it is “the way a viewer’s sympathies are drawn towards some characters rather than others, and the way some voices and messages are imbued with a greater degree of authority” (Morey 531). Khadra’s ethno-normative reaction to the scene in *Charlie’s Angels* can be detected through her view of her friend Sabrina as “almost the Muslim Charlie’s Angel” (Kahf 84) only because the latter, Sabrina, is modest, smart and respects herself. This provides an interpretation that the Arab characters’ values and images in this Hollywood

series are less desirable to Khadra than the ones attributed to the mainstream American heroines.

The various stereotypes and misrepresentations generate an image that substantiates the idea that Arabs and Muslims are the “enemy or the *alien* that does not fit in the American milieu” (El-Aswad 41) and contributes to “cementing the threatening strangeness of the Muslim other who appears always as a problematic presence, troubling those values and individualism and freedom said to define Western nations” (Morey and Yaqin 1-3). In the narratives, the character Hubbard, an ex-military American soldier, consistently protests against the presence of Muslims in *his* city of Simmonsville. During one of his protests, he shouts: “I am not speaking of ignorance, I have lived in their countries, and I know, they will destroy the character of our town” (Kahf 42). Hubbard reinforces the prevailing stereotype of Arabs and Muslims as enemies, anti-modern and a threat to American society. He identifies them as intruders and foreigners. The Orientalist vision as echoed by Hubbard to the American public is not new. Douglas Little, for instance, suggests that “the citizens of one of the new world’s newest nations [America] have long embraced a romanticized and stereotypic vision of some of the old world’s oldest civilizations [Orient]” (9).

Hubbard’s stance is an example of, borrowing Little’s words, the “soldiers who promoted and protested U.S. interests in the Middle East during the twentieth century and converted these earlier cultural assumptions and racial stereotypes into an irresistible intellectual shorthand for handling the backward Muslims whose objectives frequently clashed with America’s” (10). The fear that this American character manifests is both an example of, and a repercussion of, *Islamophobia*: a label that signifies the supposed clash between Islam and the West. This well-known term in the post-9/11 period refers to “the dread, hatred and hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetuated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims” (Kalin and Esposito xxii-xxiii). The religion of Islam represents a crucial component in the

construction of the discourse of Orientalism. Although the events of 9/11 provoked an upsurge in images of Islam in the Western and the US social mainstream, the conflict between Islamic civilization and the Western world dates back far longer, as is noted by Sardar, who argues that “it was in its encounter with Islam in the seventieth and eighteenth centuries that the West first developed its vision of the Orient as an unfathomable, exotic and erotic place where mysteries dwell and cruel and barbaric scenes are staged” (2). It should also be acknowledged that “Islam for the West has multifaceted definitions based on representations; for the right, Islam represent barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the centre, a kind of distasteful exoticism” (Said 55). The religion of Islam is seen to be not only an alien religion to the West but also an oppositional system that dislocates the Orient from the Western hemisphere. In another sense, “Islam is the counterpart of both Christianity and Christendom – not only a religion in the narrow Western sense, but a whole civilization (Orient) which grew up under the aegis of that religion” (Lewis, “The Roots”).

In Kahf’s novel, the relationship between Islam and the West in post-9/11 is constructed by the discourse of Orientalism to a degree not only strengthened by stereotypes and perceptions, but also by a hostility which is exemplified through the acts of the Vaughn boys, who attack Khadra’s family house with beer bottles as a sign of unwelcoming gesture (Kahf 6). As a Dawah centre agent with a commitment to spreading the word of Islam, Wajdy steps in to inform the neighbours of their children’s behavior, but one of the parents shouts: “accusing my children off my porch – back where you people came from” (Kahf 7). Such narrative action reinforces Mohamed Eid’s point of view that “Americans have increasingly been told to believe that Islam is a fatal threat to the West and is antithetical to the Westphalian international system and its underlying Western liberal norms and values” (6).

In the same discussion within the story, Khadra goes through several traumatizing social experiences in Simmonsville because of the hostage crisis of fifty-two Americans who have been captured in the American Embassy in Iran by revolutionaries. As a

result of Iran being part of Islamic civilization, the American social mainstream has led divisive political and Orientalist campaigns against all Muslims, the ramifications of which deeply affect Khadra's daily life: she "counted out her days in George Rogers Clark High School where, for four hundred and forty-four days, she was a 'hostage' to the rage that the hostage crisis produced in Americans. It was a battle zone. Her job was to get through the day 'dodging verbal blows and sometimes physical ones'" (Kahf 123). Khadra unwillingly finds herself as the collateral damage of a dichotomous clash reinforcing the schism between Islam and the West, in this instance most particularly the USA. Such incidents as the hostage crisis in Iran, justify the Western-American discourse of Orientalism about Islam as a warlike religion and sustain the practice of generalisation.

The unfair treatment that the Shamy family receives from white Americans offers an elaborate picture of how Orientalism is practiced in an intensive form that incorporates, as Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad affirms, tendencies of prejudice, otherness, discrimination and misunderstanding (3) that consequently create a space in which to "categorise the identity of a Muslim on the basis of such agenda and representations" (Morey and Yaqin 20). The American Orientalist vision of Islam is further demonstrated through a discussion carried out by Khadra and her father Wajdy over Khadra's wish to change her major to Islamic Studies. Wajdy explicitly dislikes his daughter's idea: "Islam should not be taught by Orientalists who don't believe in Revelation, claim that hadiths are fabrications, malign the Prophet, and say Islam was spread by sword" (Kahf 195). Wajdy's answer comes in line with Said's opinion that Islam is "defined negatively as that with which the West is radically at odds, and this tension establishes a framework radically limiting knowledge of Islam" and one which is orientalist as an "antipathetically troubled and problematic [...] threat to the Western civilization, and more particularly, [is perceived as] anti-American" (50;52;163). The limiting knowledge of Islam as expressed in Said's words is extensively addressed in a conversation held by Khadra and uncle Kuldip over the fact that

Westerners like to focus on the heretics and deviants within Islam, yet their Orientalist studies ignore the achievements of this religion (Kahf 233-234). The ignorance of the achievements of Islam can be explained by what Said calls ‘a fear of novelty’ – a novelty and suggestiveness which “are brought under control so that relatively nuanced discriminations are now made that would have been impossible had the raw novelty of Islam been left unattended” (59).

The clash between Islam and the West also revolves around the status of women who are supposedly, within an Orientalist framework, “marginalized by the Islamic traditions” (Ahmed 152). This alludes to many assumptions and conceptualizations that have “the effects of fostering common suppositions about Islam that denote it as a faith and cultural system that is basically inferior to that of the West” (Haddad et al. 22). A key aspect of this dichotomy is the question of polygamy, which “supports the Orientalist characterisation of Islam as a religion of sexuality, misogyny and patriarchy” (Johnson 571) and an invalid faith, thus functioning “as a cause to exclude Muslims from the Christian body politics” (Denike 864). Returning to Kahf’s text, in a conversation on the phone between Khadra and her photo editor about the necessity to cover the phenomenon of polygamy in the USA, the former expresses her disapproval of such Islamic practices in spite of her Islamic-based identity. Taking a rigid stance, Khadra says:

No, of course I don’t agree with polygamy. I think it sucks [...] I am not going to do an exposé on how many Muslims in America can be found who do it. It is what the mainstream media always does: pick the most essential thing and highlight the negative. (Kahf 434-435)

Though Khadra’s words suggest a degree of Orientalist bias in the assignment given to her, she explicitly says that she is not accusing her colleague and employer of “anything so B-movie as Orientalism” (Kahf 435). Khadra’s response shows her dislike of the practice of polygamy, probably due to its interpretation as a “patriarchal activity to fulfil males’ sexual needs and subjugation of

women” (Lewis 121;124;130). The view expressed on polygamy by Khadra evidences a clear struggle between her affiliation to Islam and the credit she gives to Orientalism in which, in line with Western views, polygamy is seen as unjust, harmful and an “inegalitarian practice in both theory and fact” (Brooks 111). This highlights the complexities of Khadra’s identity, in that it encompasses both the American vision and the Muslim self. Shahnaz Khan explains the complex relationship between Islam and Orientalism and its role in placing Muslim women living in the diaspora in a troubled position in which to negotiate their identity. She argues that:

Islam and Orientalism are often posited as polarities reinforcing a particular logic of Muslim Women’s identity, which places it into structural ambivalence. Within the category of Muslim women, individual women are caught in the contradictory and complementary nature of these polarities, negotiating the structural ambivalence by going into and coming out of consciousness of it and by manipulating their resistance to it. (xx)

In addition to the debates about polygamy, Muslim women’s image in the USA, throughout the discourse of Orientalism, has been scrutinized in relation to other aspects. The veil is one such significant aspect that not only establishes and sets apart Muslim women’s identity and self-realization in the USA but also reflects the types of stereotypical judgement that is perpetuated by the clash between Islam and the West.

The veil acts as a key concept in reinforcing the fundamentalist Orientalist suppositions of Arab and Muslim women in American society in that it propagates and maintains the stereotype-based concept of “otherization” that lies between American society as *us* and Arabs and Muslims as *them*. The veil is an object that triggers the process of constructing otherness, which is a key aspect of identity formation for this diasporic ethnic minority. Irene Zempi and Neil Chakraborti make it clear that, regardless of its definition as a sign of exoticism in the colonial period, the cultural conception of the veil in post 9/11 America

suggests that it is a symbol of Islamic fanaticism and segregation as well as a sign of gender inequality. As such, the veil has been—and continues to be—portrayed as “a symbol of Muslim otherness, and its visibility is a key to constructing stereotypes which identify it as a marker of Muslim difference and community” (6).

By the same token, Allison Mader draws attention to the importance of the veil in forming the Orientalist discourse of the Western public towards Muslim women. She argues that the veil has come to be considered a symbol of threat both epistemologically and physically: “women are left with the choice to unveil and be part of the Western hegemonic public or to be perceived as the *other* and a foreigner” (59). The veil in itself is strongly regarded as a symbol of the clash between Islam and the West and has often been read as a sign of Muslim women’s affiliation to Islam (Memissi 94-96; Zempi and Chakraborti, 7). Similarly, referring to Muslim women in the USA, Mervat Hatem argues that “the veil is an expression of their pride in a religion that was increasingly maligned in the country” (23). Moreover, Amira Jarmakani expresses her concern over the interpretation of Muslim womanhood as “monolithically oppressed” because of its devotion and commitment to the veil (228). Jarmakani’s concern meets Khadra’s vehement feelings towards the Orientalist vision that the American public holds of Muslim women. Khadra cringes, as a reaction to the Orientalism-based work given to her by the American employers, at “the thought of putting her own community in the spotlight. She does not think that she herself can take one more of those shots masses of Muslim butts in the air during prayer or the clichéd Muslim woman looking inscrutable and oppressed in a voluminous veil” (Kahf 48). Khadra’s reflection suggests that “the veil has become one of the most contested and symbolic motifs in Western imagery of the East and Islam” (Wagner et al. 525; Watson 153), a type of imagery which negatively identifies Muslim women as being “oppressively submissive to their patriarchal and fundamentalist societies” (Guyen 90).

The Western imagery of the veil causes other complications in Khadra's life as well. Due to her wearing of the veil, Khadra is harassed by her American school colleagues Brent Lott and Curtis Stephenson, who corner her, label her as raghead, and ask her to take off her towel [veil]. In a moment of violence, they rip her veil off her head and yank at her. Curtis crows: "look, raghead has got hair under that piece a shit" (Kahf 124). Such incidents prompt Khadra to position herself in the category of *the other* and question her true belonging. She thinks that her belonging should be "in a place where she would not get shoved and called raghead every other day in the school hallway. Teachers, classmates – no one ever caught her assailant. They always melted into the crowd behind her" (Kahf 97). It is clearly evident that she experiences such discriminating attitudes due to her stereotype-based identity; this can be aligned with Charles Stangor's opinion that "when stereotypes or prejudice produce negative behaviours toward others, the behaviour is called discrimination" (11).

In addition, what happens to Khadra in her school reflects what Myra Macdonald calls the "colonial obsession of unveiling" (9). In the same context, Meyda Yegenoglu links the force of attention upon uncovering the veiled woman to the Western conceptualization of the Orient as a place of feminine mystery and exotic females, and also to the Orientalist knowledge which is "characterised by a desire to master, control, and reshape the body of the subjects by making them visible" (12). The postcolonial interpretation of the incident of removing Khadra's veil is relevant to Julie Billaud and Julie Castro's argument on the French colonizer's attempts to force the Algerian [colonized] women to unveil. By referring to Vivian Bradford and Frantz Fanon's postcolonial works, Billaud and Castro argue that "the public unveiling of Algerian women functioned as a symbolic reminder of the colonizer's absolute superiority and sovereignty over the Algerian territory" (87). In other words, it is the submerging of all different and distinctive signs, specifically the veil, in the social mainstream that leads to the possession and assimilation of the colonised. Effectively, removing women's veils represents a vital

impulse for the so-called civilizing mission on the basis that “the veil was considered a visible obstacle to the construction of Western superiority” (Billaud and Castro 87-88). Consequently, it should be acknowledged that “the visible transformation from veiled bodies to Westernised bodies was a significant factor in subduing resistance towards colonial powers through imposing Western values upon them” (Zempi and Chakraborti 8).

The violent acts perpetuated against Khadra reflect the Western colonial mission to Westernize a Muslim woman by removing and ripping off her veil, which is a symbol of distinctiveness, but also, as perceived by much of the Western public, “a sign of backwardness, Islamic fundamentalism, misogyny and oppression” (Zempi and Chakraborti 9-10). Such Western stereotypical treatments of the veil and of Muslim women can be defined as a “semiotics of mythology” (Jarmakani 19-21), employing signifiers and markers of a civilization that is regarded within the U.S. cultural context as an ideology where sexual fantasy and the concept of the *Harem* are dominant, or, from Homi Bhabha’s perspective, “a fixed and static construction of the other as a subject of the colonial discourse which features the identity of the colonized as a knowable and visible social reality” (70-71). The veil, on this basis, acts in several localities as a vital factor to not only define Muslim women’s identity through stereotypes and misrepresentations, but also, in a very effective way, to categorize them under the characteristics of otherness and foreignness.

Conclusion

Given that the novel is told from Khadra’s perspective of how white Americans view her community, it may be possible to conclude that Kahf uses her novel to better understand Arab-American identity as seen through the gaze of Orientalists. Her narratives suggest that stereotypes and representations play a significant role in determining cross-civilizational and cross-cultural dialogues between white Americans and Muslim or Arab characters. The novel delivers a clear exposition of Orientalist

discourse and its paramount politics that feature much of Arab-Americans' quest to understand their self-identity and position themselves in the wider American society. In an interview, Kahf states that "there is no forgetting that the stereotypes—and the bigotry behind them – dog us. They are real, and malign. They have real-life repercussions, often enough, on Muslim lives" (qtd. in Taylor et al. 388). In tackling the subjugating and essentializing the discourse of Orientalism, Kahf affirms that the post-9/11 period has witnessed an intense manifestation of the clash of civilizations through polarising stereotypes and conceptions that aim to divide the world, create social and cultural rifts, and define identities. In discussing this, she reflects on Samuel Huntington's hypothesis, *The Clash of Civilizations*, first introduced in 1993, in which he points out that the world's civilizations in modern times are in constant conflict and that "the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural." As such, Kahf argues that the clash of civilizations (mainly between the Arab and the Western worlds) is fuelled by the politics of Orientalist representations in the contemporary era. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, nonetheless, opens a door to examine and question a new form of Orientalism that has started to become more prevalent in postcolonial and Middle Eastern studies—that of Neo-Orientalism. It should be understood as "a supplement to enduring modes of Orientalist representations" (Behdad and Williams "On Neo-Orientalism, Today" 2012).

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