Diminishing Discomfort: The Rejection of Sameness and Otherness in Mohja Kahf’s Muslim-American Novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

Caught between two worlds, the child of immigrants is met with the difficulty of moving between these spaces, lured by the promises of the new world while yearning for the comfort of the old (Ruzy Suliza et al. 103). Yet, this navigation becomes even more complex when these two worlds starkly differ in practices, values, and worldview. Such is the case for Muslim-Americans, whose politicized religion and patriotic home are highly incongruent, forcing individuals to question their allegiances, and in turn, their identity (Majid 57). This vividly manifests within *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, a coming-of-age-novel by Syrian-American writer Mohja Kahf. By placing the Muslim-American identity at the forefront of the story, Kahf’s text proves to be more than a faithful portrayal of the rich diversity that characterizes the Muslim way of life; it is also an account of the discomfort that arises when negotiating two contradictory modes of living. The theme of discomfort is characteristic of diasporic fiction, yet Kahf’s inclusion of religion against a secular backdrop amplifies the struggle between otherness and assimilation (Ruzy Suliza et al. 103). After falling victim to this struggle, Kahf’s protagonist, Muslim-American Khadra Shamy, “loses her sense of self” (Abdurraqib 60), and is thus propelled to challenge the discomfort that has long-defined her life by constructing a new
identity. Ultimately, in exploring Khadra’s journey of discomfort between two opposing worlds, it shall be made evident that for an individual who belongs to both a faith and nation, a true sense of self may only arise when they reject the confines of sameness or otherness.

The dichotomy of “us” versus “them” is heavily interwoven into The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, where Muslim-Americans are positioned, by virtue of their faith, as outsiders. This is established within the very first chapter of the novel, where a young Khadra states, “There are silver silos... and the blue day beginning to pour into the dark sky. But it is not mine, she thinks, this blue and gold Indiana morning. None of it is for me” (Kahf 2). Noting her lack of entitlement, Khadra is aware that just as the American landscape does not belong to her, she does not belong to it. In this way, she is acknowledging her status as an “other”, a foreign individual to the land, its non-Muslim ways, and its people. It is only amongst other Muslims that Khadra feels a sense of inclusion, as seen when Kahf depicts a Muslim prayer scene in which “[t]he strong vibrations of the men’s voices and the murmurs of the women made her feel safe. Sandwiched between them she was right where she belonged” (Kahf 33). In this way, Khadra relishes in the “us”, who even outside of the unified act of praying promise to shelter and cherish her, unlike the country she inhabits. Though Khadra’s Indianapolis Muslim community is composed of individuals of varying ethnicities, their identity as “Muslim” overshadows their cultural background. For this reason, Islam, like a culture, is a “totalizing identity” that dictates a specific way of life, anchoring Khadra to a stable sense of sameness (Abdurraqib 58). Yet, regardless of the comfort her strict community gives her, she remains discomfited by her “incompatibility with the larger society that surrounds her” (Majid 56). These sentiments are echoed when Kahf writes: “Maybe we don’t belong here, Khadra thought...Maybe she belonged in a place where she would not get shoved and called ‘raghead’ every other day” (Kahf 97).
Though Khadra’s headscarf is a blatant marker of her identity as a Muslim, it is also a reminder that sameness comes at the cost of discrimination and violence. The headscarf draws her closer to her community, yet it also forces her to question her sense of belonging in America and in turn, distances her further from society at large. This is reflected in current-day research, where it is reported that “[m]osque participants feel a degree of tension at the prospect of growing closer to a society and culture that are quite different and also quite reluctant to accept Islam and Muslims into the mainstream” (Bagby 474). Evidently, those that are “othered” find solace in individuals that share their plight, yet, as seen through a maturing Khadra, merging with the “us” may come at another, much less expected cost: a group identity, rather than a unique “self”.

Despite its allure of belonging, a closed-off community upholds the binary of “us” versus “them”, which in turn breeds a sense of righteousness, a narrow worldview, and partakes in its own acts of exclusion, creating a discomfort of its own. Raised in a small Islamic missionary (Dawah) community in Indiana, Khadra learns that a strict form of Islam is the only acceptable mode of living, stating, “It wasn’t that simple. Her parents said so. You have to practice Islam to be a real Muslim” (Kahf 24). The young Khadra draws on the teachings of her “parents” and her community to define a “true” Muslim, an identity that cannot be simply actualized through belief, but must be enacted through “practice”. This definition gives rise to the binary of “practicing” versus “non-practicing”, which ironically mirrors the othering that Khadra’s community is subjected to. In addition, by excluding variations of religious followers and delegitimizing their identity as Muslims, the Dawah community upholds a monolithic image of Islam, perpetuating the dangerous misconception that all Muslims are the same (Romylos 1). Hence, by presenting the sheltered Khadra with a multitude of Muslim identities such the Shia Muslim Haqiqat Family (Kahf 34) and Joy, the Mishawka Muslim (Kahf 184), Mohja Kahf
“deconstructs the homogenized image of Muslims” for both the protagonist and the Western audience (Alkarawi 105). Interestingly, Khadra’s early encounters with Islamic heterogeneity fail to alter her blinding convictions, which also prevent her from creating meaningful relationships. This is seen when Khadra states, “I’ve never been a real friend, or had one. I’ve demanded that my friends conform to what I approve and disapprove” (Kahf 249). As both a victim and perpetrator of exclusion, Khadra approaches the world in a hostile way, weary of people and places that do not “conform” to the ways of her safe upbringing. Yet, in gravitating towards the comfort of “sameness”, Khadra leads an isolated existence that limits her ability to question and engage with the world, hindering her personal growth. Unlike Khadra, Mohja Kahf relays that her early years were “imbued with the ambition and curiosity for a life of the mind, and with the passion for the principled life” (Davis et al. 384). Though Khadra has a “passion for the principled life”, her “ambition and curiosity” are thwarted by the suffocating hold of her community. This dawns upon Khadra with the discomforting feeling that the “sameness” she greatly values is perhaps a misconstrued façade.

Khadra’s sense of self begins to shatter when her parents, who had long instilled in her an aversion to Americaness, begin to reconcile with the land they deemed different. This initial aversion is noted when Kahf writes: “Who were the Americans? The Americans were the white people that surrounded them, a crashing sea of unbelief in which the Dawah Center bobbed, a brave boat” (Kahf 67). Likened to a “crashing sea”, America is a “place of sin and moral corruption” that strays from the Dawah community’s vision of piety (Mehta 126). This is echoed by Khadra’s father, who insists, “Americans lead shallow, wasteful, materialistic lives. Islam could solve many of their social ills, if they but knew” (Kahf 68). Here, it is revealed that even the victimized “other” may harbor prejudices, reinforcing their isolation in the diaspora (Majid
57; Manaf et al. 552). A product of her parents, Khadra also voices these prejudices and clings onto the comfort of her Muslim identity, refusing to practice the tolerance she so often sought from others. However, these sentiments begin to topple when Khadra and her family are forced to become American citizens and assume the identity of “them”. Kahf writes: “To her, taking citizenship felt like giving up, giving in. After all she’d been through at school, defending her identity against the jeering kids …wasn’t she supposed to be an Islamic warrior woman…? What was all that, a big fat lie? She seethed” (141). In attaining her citizenship, Khadra is met with a sense of crushing defeat, for she is no longer a Muslim living in America, she is now a Muslim-American (Alkarawi 104). This hyphenated identity is one she rejected, as it implied the impossible task of bringing two dissimilar cultures into dialogue with one another. Moreover, what makes Khadra “seethe” is her parent’s hypocrisy, for they had insisted that her identity was characterized by her place in the Dawah community, not within American society. Khadra’s discomfort now stems from a dark reality: she had spent years reinforcing the notions of “us” versus “them”, only to realize that it had been a false construction by her parents and society, rendering her identity as unstable as the binary itself.

The instability of Khadra’s identity culminates in a failed marriage, which reveals to her that the comfort of sameness is conditional: so long as others control you personhood, you can remain one of them. This is evidenced when Khadra states, “She has given away too much. She will not give the last inches of her body, will not let them fill her up with a life she does not want” (Kahf 248). Though Khadra’s Muslim community acted as a space of acceptance in a world that rejected her, the community slowly consumed her, dictating the way she thought, dressed, and acted. Swathed in their safety and comfort, Khadra failed to notice their debilitating effect on her: they had impeded her personal and spiritual growth by imposing their strict
doctrines and narrow world-view on her. For this reason, she feels a “sudden revulsion for everything” and wants to “abort the Dawah Center and its entire community…twenty one years of useless head-clutter. It had to all go…it needed to be cleared out so she could find out for herself this time. Not as a given” (Kahf 262). Just as Khadra resisted American assimilation and its threat of erasure, she now sees this threat reflected in the Dawah Center and its staunch, fear-based version of religion, deeming it worthy of rejection as well. In separating her self from these two opposing worlds, that of sameness and that of otherness, Khadra is empowered to “find out for herself” (Kahf 262) what her religion truly is and who she is in relation to it (Majid 60).

Now, Khadra’s search for a space of belonging is no longer external, “rather it is internal, and most importantly, individual”, reflecting a common diasporic trope (Mehta 126).

Khadra’s internal search for self-understanding is shaped by an emotional openness that neither the “us”, the Dawah Center Community, and the “them”, American society, could nurture within her, due to their judgment of the “other”. Once Khadra steps away from America by travelling to Syria, and distances herself from her childhood community by moving to Philadelphia, which “had a diverse array of mosques to choose from” (Kahf 327), she embraces the spiritual diversity that surrounds her. While in Syria, Khadra reflects that, “Damascus demanded that you see all the religions as architectural layers of each other…that it all came together somehow in a way that made sense” (Kahf 297). Deprived of “layers” of religion, Khadra sees a newfound beauty in difference, which was often clouded by the righteousness of her community. The beauty she encounters in Syria inspires her to live with “gratitude, modesty and love” (Kahf 315) and seek fulfillment through prayers, “poetry, and wisdom from all over the world” (Kahf 328). With this individualized approach to religion (Majid 60), Khadra also begins to reformulate her relationship with the headscarf, choosing to wear it as she pleases:
“Gone was the flutter about her, the flutter and sweep of fabric that was so comforting and familiar” (Kahf 310). A marker of her religious upbringing and its comfort, the headscarf is now a marker of her agency. Her choice to wear it does not stem from her need to please those who grant comfort, and her choice to remove it is not spurred by fear. Khadra’s religious rejuvenation is also complimented by an appreciation of her hyphenated identity as a Muslim-American.

Upon reaching America, Khadra states, “Homeland America, Bismallah” (Kahf 313) and later recalls that, “going overseas was what enabled her to see that she was irrevocably American, in some ways she couldn’t pin down” (Kahf 391). By bridging “America”, with the first word of the Quran, “Bismallah”, Khadra is interweaving the two disparate poles of her existence into a single sentence, which in turn, reflects her singular identity as a Muslim-American. In admitting that she is “irrevocably American”, she is eliminating the “us” versus “them”, while placing new emphasis on the “me”. Hence, Khadra and her identity no longer exist inside or outside, marginally or in the center, but within an empowering, self-sufficient space that lies in-between (Mehta 127). This is echoed by Khadra herself, who states, “I guess what I’ve been doing is trying to get to a place where I could reconnect the two, and be a whole person” (Kahf 395). As Khadra suggests, a coherent identity is only formed through constant questioning, searching, and most importantly, adjusting, of the inner self (Majid 61).

In an interview prior to publishing The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, author Mohja Kahf asserts that good literature not only deconstructs misconceptions, it is also “dynamic, provocative, and shows the courage to speak truth to power” (Manaf et al. 548). By thoroughly detailing the Muslim-American experience, Kahf’s novel successfully accomplishes these literary tasks; with a plot that is both moving and intriguing, themes of othering that are often over-looked, and a protagonist who challenges perceptions of the clichéd Muslim woman. It is
these components that make the novel a distinct “other”, occupying the shelf-space closest to Religious texts rather than American fiction, just as a young Khadra Shamy is compelled to do. Yet, by rejecting the discomfort of confinement in either one sphere or another, Khadra comes to terms with a new, vibrant identity that harmoniously blends the binaries of “us” versus “them”. Unlike the newly transformed Khadra, the novel, which is conscious of itself as “book on Muslims”, retains its original label to “speak truth to power” (Manaf et al. 553). For the Muslim reader, the narrative is an empowering account of religious diversity and the search for one’s self, whereas for the American, non-Muslim reader, the novel counteracts a one-dimensional image of Muslims, equipping them with a truth they may otherwise never encounter (Alkarawi 106). Undoubtedly, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* enables its readers to engage with new concepts and reshape false conceptions, inspiring them, like Khadra, to learn more about others and most importantly, themselves.
Works Cited


