



## MOHJA KAHF AND HER WRITING: A CRITIQUE OF MARGINALITY

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### Abstract

*The research paper centers on the voices of women, their sufferings, subjugation and diaspora experience. The paper highlights on the writing of Mohja Kahf's general and the novel entitled *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* in particular. The paper also sheds light on the discrimination of veiled Muslim Arab-American women. The veil has been one of the controversial and serious issue and many Arab-American writers have paid much attention on it. As a writer and women, MohjaKahf challenges the oppressive religion that imposes a certain code of dress on women. Muslim Arab-American women find it difficult to practice their cultures and traditions in the host country. They are incapable of freely wearing their Islamic hijab that is one of the essential principles of the Islamic religion. Mohja Kahf's famous novel entitled *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* criticizes the Western discrimination against Muslim and Arab-American women. Mohja Kahf gives a very detailed description of September 11 attacks and the prejudiced treatment the veiled Arab-American Muslim women have received in America. MohjaKahf has successfully employed Khadra Shamy, a Muslim woman protagonist to describe all such complicated and controversial issues that Arab-American women faced and experienced.*

### Keywords

*Diaspora, Veil, Women, Subjugation, Discrimination, Prejudice, Status, Identity, Culture, Difference, Experience, Religion, Voices, Liberty, Justice, etc.*

### Full Article

Mohja Kahf is considered as one of the most powerful and dominant Arab American writer. She is a contemporary well-known Arab-American feminist novelist, poet and author. Born in Damascus, Syria in 1967, she is recognized as a Syrian-American writer who moved with her family to the US as a child at the age of three in 1971. Mohja Kahf and her family members moved to Indiana after the accomplishment of their parent's respective degrees. Kahf stayed there up to the tenth grade and later the family moved to the USA. Together with her family Kahf settled in Utah. She was grown up in a very well-educated family. She is a famous member of Arab-American writers who has come from mixed Arab and American backgrounds. Kahf is a famous academician who got her bachelor and Ph. D. degree in comparative literature from Rutgers University, New Jersey. Mohja Kahf's literary writings discuss the issues of Arab and Muslim women who are oppressed, suppressed, marginalized and silenced. Mohja Kahf gives the detailed picture about Arab-American Muslim women in diaspora.

Mohja Kahfis a prominent Arab-American Muslim woman and an author of the well-known novel entitled *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. The novel was published in 2006 and was selected as Book Sense Reading Group Favorite for June 2007. The novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a coming-of-age story which is set in Indiana and America. The novel



highlights Arab- American women's struggle for protecting their identity in a hostile country. Through her writing, Mohja Kahf sheds light on the issue of Muslim women's veil/hijab and the status of the veiled Muslim Arab women in the American society.

Mohja Kahf's novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is the most important novel which defends Muslim and Arab-American women's civil liberties. Kahf has further displayed the predicaments of the veiled Muslim Arab-American women face in diaspora. As a Muslim feminist writer, Mohja Kahf tries to break up the obstacles and the stereotypes that Muslim women face at each and every step. As a feminist, social reformer and novelist Mohja Kahf actively fights for Arab-American women's liberty, justice and equality. As a prominent writer, Kahf explores Muslim Arab women's identity issues in America by giving voice to the silenced and the oppressed Arab-American women. The most important issue the immigrant's face is the assimilation process. And it is very difficult to the Arab-American to adjust with the new environment. As a writer, Mohja Kahf pays much attention to Arab-American women's issues such as migration, subjection, hijab/veil, identity crisis and so on. Like all the immigrant Muslim women, Kahf finds herself trapped between two hostile worlds- the Eastern and the Western.

The novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a story of a young Syrian-born American woman called Khadra Shamy. The novelist narrates her journey of self-discovery through the female character of Khadra Shamy. The novel centers on the character of Khadra Shamy who moved from Syria to Indianapolis in the American Midwest early in her childhood in the 1970s. Khadra Shamy was from a good and virtuous Muslim family who rose up in a close interwoven and well-organized Muslim community in a small town in the Midwestern State of Indiana. As she grew older, she began to withdraw from her own community due of the hypocrisy of its members. The community members propagated Islam and viewed themselves as good Muslims. On the other hand they did not follow its teachings. As a result, series of life-changing events had arisen in Khadra's life and that led her many personal crises and hardships. Having love and faith for Islam, Khadra Shamy re-discovered herself and finally learnt to develop herself as a self-dependent Muslim woman in America.

The novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* also describes the cultural clashes and the conflicts of Muslim community's life in the USA. The novel also gives much emphasis on the wearing of Islamic hijab which has been growing concern among the Arab-American Muslim women. Some of the differences and clashes aroused among communities in the Islamic countries in terms of Muslim women's life style. However, the majority of the American people think that Muslim women who wear the Islamic hijab/veil are enforced to do so. They have argued that the Islamic hijab represents ignorance, oppression and subjugation. People in the West also consider that veiling as a symbol of persecution, insult and domination on Muslim women. Thus, hijab/veil has become the target of colonial attacks on Muslim societies. They falsely depict the veil that is a symbol of oppression of the Muslim women. They try to justify the colonization of Muslim nations and the women's urge for liberation by their European superiors.

The hijab/veil is an Islamic symbol of great religious importance. The hijab/veil is used in Muslim communities for many different purposes for instance, it can be used as face masks by Muslim women to hide their beauty and to protect themselves from people who are non-relatives to them. By covering their head hair and concealing their beauty, Muslim women become more protected from harassers and seducers. The Muslim women wear the Islamic hijab/veil to hide their beauty from sexual harassers so that they can protect their virginity and dignity. By wearing the Islamic hijab, the Muslim women are following the Islamic doctrine. They become highly pure and respected in the eyes of their families as well as in the



eyes of their communities. Therefore, hijab/veil has a social and religious importance. The veil also considered as a symbol of modesty, purity and obedience in almost all Muslim societies. In many societies, cultures and religions, veils can be considered as symbol of chastity, respect and dignity for women.

Mohja Kahf, through Khadra Shamy, the protagonist shows the cultural conflicts between Arabs and Americans, between Muslims and non-Muslims and between good and evil in the contemporary American society. Khadra Shamy was astonished when she reached America with her family when she found herself torn out between two different cultures. For example, Khadra and her family objects to make birthday parties as the Americans do. They also do not like going outside regularly to eat food and they do not like the American style of clothing and so on. It is very difficult For Arab-American immigrants like Khadra Shamy to live in the American environment without being assimilated into the American lifestyles, values, traditions, cultures, etc. As a result, Muslim Arab-American women assimilate into the American culture and adopted American lifestyles. For example, some Arab-American Muslim women have stopped wearing their Islamic hijab for being influenced by the American culture. Most Muslim Arab-American women choose not to wear the Islamic hijab/veil so that they can protect themselves from the extremist American harassers who hate Islam and assault the veiled Muslim women.

Mohja Kahf thus, highlights the status of Muslim Arab-American women through the protagonist, Khadra Shamy. Throughout the story, the novelist represents Khadra in a continuous effort to adapt her relationship to many places in an attempt to make a space where she feels at home. However, Khadra does not enjoy equal freedom as American enjoy instead she encountered by the American hostility and discrimination. Being a displaced citizen who is away from her homeland, Khadra Shamy becomes a victim of identity crisis. She dreams of returning to the homeland, the place which she belongs. The extremist Americans exercise all sorts of racism against Arab-American women in general and the veiled Muslim women in particular. They practice all forms of hatred and discrimination against the veiled Muslim women because of their Islamic identity as Arabs and Muslims.

In short, Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* confirms that the Islamic hijab/veil is not only a piece of fabric rather it has many symbolic connotations. Wearing hijab is a sign of a devout Muslim woman who attempts to achieve spirituality, security and solidity. The novelist further states that Hijab/veil should not be stereotyped as a sign of Muslim women's extremism or oppression. Hijab is used interchangeably with words, such as headscarf, head-cover, veil and so on. In fact, literature often signifies how gender relations are deeply affected by diaspora. The Islamic veil/hijab is not only a piece of cloth to cover the head hair of a Muslim Arab woman, but also it has many symbolic meanings, religious and cultural values.

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