



# Between the Secular and the Islamic: An Arab American Woman's Journey to Negotiate Feminist Identity in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

Ishak BERREBBAH<sup>1</sup> 



<sup>1</sup>PhD, Coventry University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Coventry, United Kingdom

ORCID: I.B. 0000-0002-4355-2214

**Corresponding author:**

Ishak BERREBBAH,  
Coventry University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Coventry, United Kingdom  
**E-mail:** berrebbi@uni.coventry.ac.uk

**Submitted:** 22.01.2020

**Revision Requested:** 25.01.2020

**Last Revision Received:** 25.01.2020

**Accepted:** 08.03.2020

**Citation:** Berrebbah, I. (2020). Between the secular and the Islamic: An Arab American woman's journey to negotiate feminist identity in Mohja Kahf's the girl in the tangerine scarf. *Litera*, 30(1), 137-154. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2020-0005>

## ABSTRACT

The hybrid belonging of Arab American women, particularly Muslims, makes their feminism a complex notion. Being in the USA gives Arab American female authors the opportunity, through various literary genres such as poetry, fiction, and memoirs, to express themselves and voice their concerns for Arab women in their homeland and/or country of residence – this is due to the necessity of collaboration to resist the gender stereotypes inflicted on Arab and Muslim women in the USA and religious and social structures in the Arab world that directly or indirectly oppress and confine them. Islamic and secular feminisms, excluding other forms of feminism such as transnational and postcolonial, are the most prominent feminist paradigms embraced by Arab women in their motherlands and host-lands to negotiate their rights and express their concerns. Taking *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) as a sample of Arab American fiction produced by Mohja Kahf, an Arab American female author whose identity entails Islamic background, this paper examines the process of negotiation that Khadra Shamy, an Arab American female protagonist, goes through to negotiate her feminist identity in both realms i.e. Mecca and Indianapolis. Stemming from Islamic and secular feminist paradigms based on perspectives of prominent feminist critics such as Margot Badran and Fatima Mernissi, I argue that Khadra, as a female diasporic figure, embraces a hybrid feminism to better understand her gender identity and effectively negotiate and claim her rights.

**Keywords:** Arab American, Mohja Kahf, Islamic feminism, secular feminism, hybrid feminism



## Introduction

*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is written in a form of Bildungsroman. The protagonist of the novel is a Muslim Syrian immigrant named Khadra Shamy. She comes from a strict conservative religious family consisting of her father Wajdy, mother Ebtihaj, and two brothers Eyad and Jihad. They are committed to the Dawah Centre, a strict Muslim community centre that has a mission to broaden the horizons of Islam in the USA. Several events in the novel take place in the city of Indianapolis, in which Khadra "spent most of her growing-up years" (Kahf, 2006, p. 1). *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is an example of the kind of Arab American literature that has emerged noticeably in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are two factors that spurred the growth of Arab American literature:

The first was the search for voices outside the traditional canon of Anglo-American male literature, a search which led to the burgeoning interest in ethnic American writers. The second factor, like so many things in the Arab American community, was political. Recent events in the Arab World combined to raise the political consciousness and solidarity of the Arab American community. In order to combat the proliferation of anti-Arab stereotypes, writers dedicated themselves to putting a human face on the Arab American immigrant population. (Ludescher, 2006, p. 106)

In addition to these, I argue that there is a third factor: a desire on the part of Arab American women authors to discuss the situation of Arab women,<sup>1</sup> particularly Muslim women, both inside and outside the domestic spheres of the Arab and Western worlds. This also includes the feminist strategies and discourses that lead to their emancipation and empowerment. Arab women in the USA are described as "women who are culturally, racially, or ethnically Arab; currently live in, but may not have been born in the United States, and may be of any religious background" (Kakoti, 2012, p. 61). The convoluted belonging of Arab American women, makes their feminism a complex notion. Being in the USA gives this ethnic population an opportunity to express themselves and voice their concerns for women in their homeland, country of residence and Arab or Islamic countries. This is due to the necessity of collaboration to resist gender stereotypes against Arab women in the USA and the religious and social structures in the Arab

---

1 I am aware that there are many categories of Arabs: Jewish, Christians, Muslims, etc. In this study, to remove any confusion that might occur in the arguments, I focus solely on Muslim Arabs.

world that directly or indirectly oppress and confine them. Arab feminists engage in a “two-front battle – against Islamic traditionalism [patriarchy and gender inequality] and Western imperialism” (Bahi, 2011, p. 5). Griffiths and Tiffin further discuss this feminist struggle and suggest that the discourse of feminism intersects interestingly with a post-colonial discourse for two major reasons:

First, both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate. Hence, the experiences of women in patriarchy and those of colonized subjects can be paralleled in a number of respects, and both feminist and post-colonial politics oppose such dominance. Second, there have been vigorous debates in a number of colonized societies over whether gender or colonial oppression is the more important political factors in women’s lives [...] This has led to calls for a greater consideration of the construction and employment of gender in the practices of imperialism and colonialism. (2007, p. 93)

It is possible to place Arab women on the basis of these arguments as the subordinate group of a colonized society which has to deal with the issue of gender inequality, female oppression, and patriarchy in the colonial and imperial realms. This also includes those living in a diaspora such as the USA. The Arab American feminist activist Susan Muaddi Darraj further argues in her book, *Personal and Political: The Dynamics of Arab American Feminism* (2011), that gender inequality, sexism and domestic abuse are a product of the monolithic Arab culture that haunts women in both distinct realms: the Arab American community and the larger American society. In this regard, Islamic and secular feminisms, excluding other forms of feminism such as transnational and postcolonial, are the most prominent feminist paradigms embraced by Arab women in their motherlands and host-lands to negotiate their rights, serve their needs, and express their concerns. While the former is based on a direct reference to the rubrics of Islam such as Sharia and the holy Quran, the second, apparently in opposition, asserts a strong separation between feminism and religion. Embracing both these different feminist paradigms is a result of the state of in-betweenness that Arab American women experience. Mohja Kahf’s novel, hence, accentuates this feminist dilemma and projects the conditions and circumstances that circumscribe the lives of diasporic Arab women, particularly Muslim women, and prompt them to practice two conflating types of feminism. In addition to employing critical and analytical approaches to the novel, this

study will adopt Islamic and secular feminist criticism and perspectives of prominent feminist scholars and theorists such as Margot Badran, Valentine Moghadam, and Fatima Mernissi, to name a few. The crux of this study aims to answering the following questions: How does Mohja Kahf project both feminist paradigms in the novel? How does Khadra negotiate her feminist identity? To what extent do Islamic and secular feminisms serve Khadra's pursuit to claim her rights, emancipate herself, and achieve gender equality?

## **Forging the Feminist Identity: An Employment of the Islamic and the Secular**

Khadra Shamy, the Arab female protagonist in the novel, is positioned by Kahf as a prototype of Arab women living in the diaspora that has often been regarded as a place in which negotiation of rights, woman's liberty, and gender equality seem more achievable than in the Arab world. In other words, despite the issues of a cultural encounter, women of the Arab world perceive the West as a place of emancipation and freedom. The West to Arabs, with an emphasis on women, is "no longer an oppressor but a saviour, a place of refuge from repression at home, a space of freedom with the promise of prosperity" (El-Enany, 2006, p. 186). El-Enany's point of view can be illustrated in the novel in the scene of the Arab women who travelled from the USA to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, for a pilgrimage:

They boarded in Western clothing, black hair slayed down their shoulders, and suddenly covered up in black *abayas* [Islamic dress] and turned into picture-postcard Saudi dotting the airplane rows. Ebtelah who was sitting at a distance from Khadra, shook her head and said loudly: "as if God sees them only in one country and not in the other. (Kahf, 2006, p. 158)

This scene denotes the extent to which Arab women look at Arab countries ruled by Islam as a realm that restricts their liberty of dressing and prevents them from celebrating their bodies – a liberty that is found in the Western spheres.

Being a Muslim and a member of a strict conservative religious family is a key factor in Khadra Shamy's frequent decisions to refer to the Islamic texts and Sharia to claim her rights and discuss the social injustice she goes through in her living experiences i.e. patriarchy and gender inequality. The manifestation of feminist thinking and actions

with Islamic arguments and teachings is called Islamic feminism. It is to a great extent an expansion of Khadra's faith and a symbol of her commitment to religiosity. The anthropologist and Islamic feminist scholar, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, defines the paradigm of Islamic feminism as an amalgamation of "a new consciousness, a new way of thinking, a gender discourse that was feminist in its aspiration and demands, yet Islamic in its language and source of legitimacy" (2006, p. 640). Its central axis is the re-interpretation of theology in terms of gender relations and women's rights from a feminist perspective in a way that gives the pre-established patriarchal foundation other dimensions that serve women's needs. In the words of Margot Badran, Islamic feminism is introduced to the world as a "new discourse or interpretation of Islam and gender grounded in *ijtihad* or independent intellectual investigation of the Quran and other religious texts" (2013, p. 9). As a reflection of Badran's definition of Islamic feminism, Khadra intellectually investigates the Sharia law and practices *ijtihad* in Mecca where she is prevented by policemen from praying at the mosque only because she is a woman (2006, p. 167); this incident invokes both gender inequality and social injustice – an infringement of women's rights. In this respect, and in a discussion with her father Wajdy, she says:

Women have always gone to the mosque. It is part of Islam [...] what about Aisha? What about how Omar wished his wife would not go to the mosque for *fajr* but he couldn't stop her because he knew it was her right? What about the Prophet saying 'You must never prevent the female servants of God from attending the houses of God?' I told the matawwa that hadith and he laughed – he *laughed* at me, and said 'listen to this *woman* quoting scriptures at us!' (2006, p. 168)

Khadra's arguments, supported by Islamic teachings and a personal interpretation of the Islamic rules, demonstrate a feminist struggle to claim her right to pray at mosque equally as other male counterparts in her Muslim society; this ascribes to Khadra a character of gender jihadist<sup>2</sup> which is, according to Margot Badran, a label that refers to "a struggler in the cause of gender justice that includes promoting the practice of full equality" (2005, p. 16). In addition to this, Khadra in her claim of the right to pray at the mosque establishes a "legitimate example or aspiration that comes from a representation of archetypal models derived from early Islamic history and built around

---

2 A common label in the contemporary era that refers to the advocate of women's rights in religious context. For more details see Wadud, A. (2006). *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld Publication.

the figures of the *ummahat al- mu'minin*: literally mothers of all believers" (Yamani, 1996, p. 264). Khadra's approach, as Yamani contends, is a part of Islamic feminist thought. Accordingly, the legitimate example to Khadra is Aisha, the Prophet's wife. Moreover, the response that Khadra gets from Wajdy and the matawwa men denotes the extent to which the Islamic rules towards women in the Muslim world are manipulated through a patriarchal system outside and inside the domestic sphere – a system that does not allow women "to go out from house without permission" (Kahf, 2006, p. 167) or "travel abroad alone" (Kahf, 2006, p. 153). In fact, Khadra realizes that it is controversial for her to be granted the right to pray at mosque in the non-Muslim USA – a fact that is validated by her father Wajdy who, addressing Khadra, says "You're used to America, binti [...] In most of the Muslim world, it hasn't been the custom for hundreds of years" (Kahf, 2006, p. 168). The gender inequality and the patriarchal domination over a women's rights as seen in Khadra's experience are key aspects of Muslim society and Arab culture in the name of Islam, particularly in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where women "are subjected to the authority of men on the basis of conservative Islamic traditions" (Fernea, 1998, p. 332). In this regard, Kahf seems to be suggesting that Islamic feminism, figuratively speaking, is a shield that protects a Muslim woman's rights in her Muslim community.

Islamic feminism challenges the patriarchal and masculine interpretation of the Quran and revises this interpretation from a feminist perspective based on women's status parameters. Riffat Hassan, a Pakistani female scholar, points out that the Quran, through the centuries, "has been interpreted only by Muslim men who have arrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological and eschatological status of Muslim women" (as cited in Mojab, 2005). Hassan's argument is further evidenced through Khadra's husband Juma who uses the Quran to deprive his wife of the right to ride a bike and to control her bodily exposure in front of Arab men, the ones who support the same patriarchal ideology. In a moment of anger, quoting from the Quran, he says: "Say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty, that they should not display their beauty and ornaments" (Kahf, 2006, p. 228). This shows the extent to which the Muslim husband uses the Quran to support his authority over his wife, especially if she is a believing Muslim woman. Khadra does not accept Juma's argument easily; she revolts against him: "show me where in the Quran it says women can't ride bikes in public" (Kahf, 2006, p. 229). She refuses what Juma calls "God's rulings" and denies that her act is "UnIslamic" (Kahf, 2006, pp. 228-229).

Khadra, however, submits herself to Juma's patriarchal authority when he says: "As your husband, I forbid you" (Kahf, 2006, p. 230). She eventually "put the bike in the resident storage area of their building's basement [...] The gears rusted and the tires lost air. Something inside her rusted a little, too" (Kahf, 2006, p. 230). Juma's attitude towards Khadra mirrors Fatima Mernissi's argument that Muslim ideology consists of the idea that Muslim domestic life is based on male dominance that "women should be under the authority of fathers, brothers and husbands [...] and that they are to be spatially confined and excluded from matters other than those of family. Female access to non-domestic space is put under the control of males" (2011, p. 27). This is further evidenced through Wajdy's opinion that the most important thing Muslim women can do is to make more Muslims (Kahf, 2006, p. 21). This may be what prompted his wife, Ebtihaj, to abandon her dream to go the medical school and stay at home and be submissive to such patriarchal ideology. Ebtihaj's choice to be a housewife reflects Ahmed-Ghosh's opinion that some Muslim women, willingly, adhere to patriarchal Islamic norms and traditions that support the contested global masculinities that have control over women's bodies. She labels this process a "patriarchal trading" (2008, p. 100).

Mir-Hosseini opines on the heaviness of the Quranic arguments that Muslim men use to confine the liberty of their female counterparts and impose their patriarchy. She purports that the husband's authority over their wives is elicited through this verse from the Quran: "Men are *qawwāmūn* (protectors/maintainers) in relation to women, according to what God has favored some over others and according to what they spend from their wealth. Righteous women are *qānitāt* (obedient) guarding the unseen according to what God has guarded" (as cited in Mir-Hosseini et al, 2013, p. 9). She further contends that this verse is frequently invoked as the main textual evidence in support of men's authority over their wives. It is often the only verse that ordinary Muslims know in relation to family law (Mir-Hosseini et al, 2013, p. 9). Patriarchy practiced by Muslim men can be justified with the idea that "God is said to have given men a degree above women and to have appointed them guardians (in some accounts, rulers) over women" (Barlas, 2002, p. 7).

Mervat Hatem, notwithstanding, deconstructs the myth that portrays men as the first promoters and supporters of women's rights; she condemns this patriarchal endeavor which quarantines women's liberation and self-certainty. She further contends that the act of liberation is empowered by re-examining the Islamic traditions from, as

Omaima Abou-Bakr calls it, a “woman-friendly standpoint” (as cited in Hatem, 2014, p. 16). Equally important, Asma Barlas, one of the opponents of the patriarchal readings of the Islamic texts and the Quran particularly, argues that a women’s liberation in the Muslim world relies on a re-reading of the Quran from a feminist point of view; she says: “if we wish to ensure Muslim women their rights, we not only need to contest readings of the Qur’an that justify the abuse and degradation of women: we also need to establish the legitimacy of liberatory readings” (2002, p. 3). Indeed, Khadra announces her liberation from Juma’s Quran-related patriarchal attitude and domestic confinements, such as cooking, by stating that “the Prophet never asked his wives to do anything in the house for him [...] seeking knowledge was more important than traditional feminine tasks” (Kahf, 2006, p. 241). Khadra, taking a feminist stance, not only confronts her husband’s authority, but she also, stands up for her rights, of which she prioritizes her studies over domestic commitments – a priority that comes through a re-examination of the “Islamic traditions concerning stereotypical gender roles and the unequal power relations between men and women” (Ali, 2006, as cited in Abou-bakr, 2014, p. 336). Relevantly, Amal Grami accentuates one of the key objectives of Islamic feminism that matches Khadra’s approach towards her husband Juma. Grami suggests that to employ Islamic feminist thought is to:

underline the importance of the re-examination of Islam in the interests of developing an Islamic women’s liberation theory. This is a project that can only be achieved through independent interpretation, a redefinition of textual bases and traditional values, and through a diligent re-examination of Islamic History. (2014, p. 323)

Khadra, moreover, concludes her liberation from Juma’s patriarchy and the constraining marital life by asking for a divorce, or what it is termed in the Islamic laws as *Khulu’* [wife initiated divorce]. Marriage makes Khadra feel incomplete. In a discussion with her brother Eyad, Khadra claims: “I don’t know if I can stay married to him [Juma], Eyad. I feel like I can’t go on in this marriage without killing off the ‘me’ that I am” (Kahf, 2006, p. 242). Unlike many other Muslim women, she knows it is her right to offer her husband *Khulu’* because it is originally Islamic. Her knowledge of Sharia Laws and Islam reinforces her decision to put an end to the domestic and patriarchal constraints she experiences in her daily life. Khadra, though Juma refuses her decision at first because he does not know it is a women’s right in Islam, follows the Islamic procedures of *Khulu’* and gives back the front-mahr to Juma to settle everything at its end. Alongside her



liberal Islamic feminist abilities,<sup>3</sup> exploring the issue of Khulu' would encourage Khadra to re-explore herself and seek an understanding of her own identity.

This religion-based feminist identity is further demonstrated through Khadra's intention to abort and end her pregnancy. Khadra's belief in a Muslim woman's right to abort puzzles her friend Joy. The latter says, addressing Khadra: "you are supposed to be the religious nut in this picture" (Kahf, 2006, p. 224). Though there is no passage in the Quran or hadith that gives permissibility to put an end to pregnancy or to have an intentional abortion (Katz, 2003, p. 25) Khadra, while supporting her arguments with one of the famous Islamic jurists, Imama al-Ghazali, maintains the validity of this women's right in Sharia with the Islamic teachings she received in the Dawah Centre<sup>4</sup> and her research into Islamic *fiqh* [Jurisprudence]; she calls out that "Islamic law allows abortion up to four months [...] All the schools of thought allow it. The only thing they differ on is how long it's allowed. Four weeks to four months [...] when ensoulment happens" (Kahf, 2006, pp. 225-245). Marion Holmes Katz also opines on this debate-triggering issue of abortion in Islam when she says that "the most obvious cut off point is, quite obviously, ensoulment. Most jurists agree that after this point abortion is quite simply unconscionable" (2003, pp. 31-32). Khadra, therefore, legitimizes her stance towards abortion within the guidance and rubrics of the Sharia. Khadra's right to abort, however, can be critiqued from an Islamic standpoint. This is because it seems quite unreasonable and questionable in its justification: the only excuse Khadra has is that having a child will add another commitment and responsibility that she is not ready for. After the medical examination at the hospital she whispers to the nurse and says: "I can't have a baby now" (Kahf, 2006, p. 244). In spite of her life not being in danger, as her father argues, Khadra strongly insists upon an abortion to avoid a life that was mapped out for her by her parents. She asserts that 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, 2006, p. 248). Through her determination to terminate the pregnancy, she adopts a liberal position against the traditions of her family and also patriarchy.

Khadra's astute ability to negotiate her rights within the rubrics of her religion, Islam, comes through a continuous study and contemplation of her faith in a way that serves

3 For more discussions about liberal tendencies within Islamic feminist thought see Salah, H. (2010). "From Ijtihad to Gender Jihad: Islamic Feminists between Regional Activism and Transnationalism". In *Diversity and Female Political Participation: Views on and from the Arab World*. Heinrich Boll Foundation: Publication Series on Democracy.

4 A form of organization that explains Islam in accordance to Sharia and Quran.

her needs and life requirements: a good example of this is her reading of *The Muslim feminist guide to Shariah Reform* by Dr. Asifa Quraishi (Kahf, 2006, p. 348). She contends that "Shariah law is elastic. It changes, it evolves slowly, like Talmudic law" (Kahf, 2006, p. 344). Kahf, in this regard, weaves her narratives to maintain Khadra's vision of the necessity to re-establish a new approach towards classical Islam to better refine the status of the Muslim woman in the modern era: "you had to study your faith, dig out the core principles from underneath all the customs that may have accrued around them in the old Muslim world, and find a way to act on those principles in the present conditions" (Kahf, 2006, p. 96). This process, as Omaima Abou-bakr suggests, forms a feminism that "both emanates from Islam's ideals and flows back into its interest as a religion" (2014, p. 333). Moreover, it is possible to illustrate the narrator's description of Sharia law as elastic, dynamic, and flexible as a direct reflection of the "progressiveness" of Islam", especially within a feminist paradigm (Husain & Crabtree, 2012, p. 139; Moghissi, 2011, p. 81; Bardan, 2001, p. 48; Bardan, 2013, p. 170; Wadud, 2000, p. 11; Gonzalez, 2013, pp. 2-3). Stemming from feminist and gender discourses, the importance of such a modern approach lies in discussing (neo)traditional and puritan Islamic hegemonic discourses on many issues including debates on modernity, human rights, gender equality, and justice. It also contributes to providing a reform of the traditional jurisprudence pertaining the Muslim realms (Duderija, 2017, p. 2).

The ultimate objective behind revising the Sharia in the name of modernity is to deliver women's emancipation and liberation from the confining and outdated classical 'culture-related' Islamic rules. Some scholars such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali go even further in critiquing Islam and position it as a system that controls the lives of its followers cruelly and backwardly – a system that needs reformation. She points out that the Islamic Sharia laws force Muslims living in the West, such as Khadra in her surrogate country, the USA, "to engage in a daily struggle to adhere to Islam in the context of a secular and pluralistic society that challenges their values and beliefs at every turn" (2015, p. 17). In other words, there is a clash between modernization and the existing old Islamic ideology. Qasim Amin, however, produced other arguments that challenge Ali's points of view towards Islam and women's status in Sharia. He elucidated the stance of Islam towards women as respectable by stating that,

within the Shari'a, the tendency to equate men's and women's rights is obvious [...] Islam has created for women mechanisms worthy of consideration and contrary to what Westerners and some Muslims imagine

or believe [...] nothing in the laws of Islam or in its intentions can account for the low status of Muslim women [...] women were granted an equal place in human society [...] unacceptable customs, traditions, and superstitions inherited from the countries in which Islam spread have been allowed to permeate this beautiful religion. Knowledge in these countries had not developed to the point of giving women the status already given them by the Shari'a. (1992, p. 8)

Though Qasim's arguments date back a century ago, specifically to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they are still a reference for developing Islamic feminist thinking in the contemporary era. Islamic feminism, therefore, and on the basis of Qasim Amin's opinion, works to establish the knowledge that serves Muslim women through the investigation and re-examining of the Sharia laws and texts with an exclusion of the customs, traditions, and superstitions that hinder the understanding of the proper and appropriate status of women in Muslim settings.

In spite of the advantage that Islamic feminism provides to Khadra's negotiation of her rights and gender-related problematic discussions with masculine authorities, a remarkable number of feminist scholars such as Fatima Mernissi and Haideh Moghissi critique Islamic feminism as counterproductive for women and suggest it *doesn't fully* achieve women's rights because its methodology is weak. Ahmed-Ghosh, for instance, suggests that the Islamic feminist paradigm "does not effectively challenge the patriarchal and masculinist interpretation of Islamic texts, nor accommodate for women's status as it is played out in reality" (2008, p. 104). Omaima Abou-bakr further contends that,

both the secular and religious currents were suspicious of it and rejected it (Islamic Feminism) – because in the opinion of the former – it is inevitably self-contradictory, and therefore vague and ambiguous, because Islamic Sharia is based on clear legal differences and discrimination between men and women, while total equality and absolute freedom are neither conditional nor incomplete. (2014, p. 334)

Omaima's points of view, with regards to the perspective of the secular stream, can be applicable to Khadra's approach towards polygamy. Khadra, when she raises the possibility of becoming the second wife of an Arab man she likes, purports that accepting polygamy is "a feminist sin" (Kahf, 2006, p. 372). Within feminist thinking,

woman would not want to be part of a set-up in which men are able to dominate multiple women when women are not permitted the same 'privilege'. It is also common that a woman has the right not to share her man with another woman and the rejection of polygamy is a resistance of Muslim patriarchy. In this case, Khadra may be guilty of self-contradiction. She, as explained before, establishes her arguments of women's rights and gender equality on Islamic evidences on one hand but, on the other hand, she refuses polygamy although it is Islamic and the Quran clearly gives authority to men to have more than one wife. Actually, according to Qasim Amin, "Islamic law favours men in one area only – polygamy. The reason is obvious and is related to the issue of lineage, without which marriage is meaningless" (1992, p. 8). Plus, Khadra herself says that "Islam is to follow the Quran and the Prophet" (Kahf, 2006, p. 24). She, however, refuses this Islamic commandment from the Quran and teachings of the prophet who himself had more than one wife at once. The feminist ideology as expressed by Khadra may cause her feminism to be considered as controversial. In other words, regardless of her negligence of the message of the Quran, she re-examines well-grounded Islamic texts and Islamic traditions prejudicially. Feminism in this case seems to be in opposition with religion. Such opposition is further illustrated through Amal Grami's opinion that "Islam is a religious doctrine, while feminism is an international, legal civil movement that rejects the incorporation of religion into movements of struggle" (2014, p. 320). In other words, Islamic feminism in this case can be seen as oxymoronic and paradoxical. Consequently, Khadra's approach supports "the hegemonic U.S feminisms that often construct Islam as antithetical to feminism, assuming that one cannot be both a Muslim and a feminist" (Alsultany, 2005, pp. 310-311). She, in this instance, opens up the door to an alternative paradigm by which to deeply explore her feminist identity – secularism.

Secular feminism is a methodology that avoids any integration with religion in its demands for women's rights and liberation; it positions religion as "an obstacle to women's empowerment" (Bahi, 2011, p. 11). Azza Karam further elaborates on this point when she claims that

Secular feminists firmly believe in grounding their discourse outside the realm of any religion, whether Muslim or Christian, and placing it, instead, within the international human rights discourse. They do not waste their time attempting to harmonize religious discourses with the concept and declarations pertinent to human rights. To them, religion is respected as

a private matter for each individual, but is totally rejected as a basis from which to formulate any agenda on women's emancipation. (1998, p. 13)

The secular journey of Khadra to explore the other side of her feminist identity starts in Syria, her country of origin. Her meeting with an unnamed modernist poet gives her the opportunity to discover life from a different angle – an angle that doesn't take Islam and Sharia as a framework. Khadra lets her desire for self-actualization abate her commitment to religion; she attempts to experience what it means to practice feminism not bound with Islamic *rules*. However, it should be acknowledged, as Margot Badran argues (2008), that when persons identify themselves as secular or secularist this does not per se mean that they are not religious or anti-religious. According to Badran (2002), the difference between secular feminism and Islamic feminism is that the latter is a feminism that is practiced within a more exclusively Islamic paradigm" (as cited in Bahi, 2011, p. 3). Khadra, although she knows that the "body of a woman or girl is enough to bring the whole thing in a crashing halt" (Kahf, 2006, p. 413), breaches the teaching of Islam and message of the Quran and exposes her sexuality in public by uncovering her head and dressing in a way that defines and exposes her body. She goes against the crux of piety, chastity, and modesty in Islam by adopting a secular style of appearance (Kahf, 2006, pp. 310-312). The message of the Quran addresses both the prophet and believing women of the importance of the veil and body covering in Islam: "say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and remain chaste and not to reveal their adornment [...] and they should fold their shawls<sup>5</sup> over their bosoms" (Quran 24: 31 as cited in Khanam, 2009, p. 263). The message of the Quran to Muslim women to veil and preserve chastity through body covering is further evidenced in this passage: "O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the wives of the believers that they should draw over themselves some of their outer garments<sup>6</sup> [when in public], so as to be recognized and not harmed" (Quran 33: 59 as cited in Khanam, 2009, pp. 321-322).

Aisha Wood Boulanouar emphasizes the requirement for Muslim women to cover their heads and body in accordance with the teachings of Sharia and the Quran. She supports her arguments, on the basis of the above mentioned Quranic passages, with two famous Islamic jurists in the Muslim world: Yusuf Al-Qaradawi and Mohammed Ash-Sharawy. The former denotes that "it is haram (forbidden) for a Muslim woman to wear clothes that delineate the parts of the body, especially those parts which are

5 A piece of cloth that is used especially by women as a covering for the head and shoulders.

6 Usually known as Jilbab or Niqab in the Islamic context.

sexually attractive" and the latter explains that "covering the head is obligatory in Islam and the veil is an essential requirement to show woman's modesty" (Boulanouar, 2006, p. 139-142). It should be acknowledged, however, that the issue of covering the hair and the head is immensely debatable; while many would argue that the Quran does not specify the covering of hair, others claim that it is the hair that should be covered because it is part of women's beauty that attracts the gaze of males.

It is possible to situate Khadra's decision to unveil and expose the aesthetics of her body within a secular paradigm in which a woman's right to take off the veil and celebrate her sexuality contradicts the teaching of the Quran and Sharia. This falls within Valentine Moghadam's argument that "women's social status and rights are best negotiated and promoted by secular thought and non-religious parameters" (2002, p. 1162). In fact, Khadra in the scene of unveiling falls into self-contradiction because she herself says that "a real Muslim woman is the one who wear *Hijab* (veil), follow the Quran and the Prophet and follow the Islamic way of life" (Kahf, 2006, p. 24). It is true that Khadra was a child when she made this statement but it significantly shows her personal maturity from Islamic conservatism to secular-modern liberalism based on a humanitarian agenda; such a transition may be interpreted as a message by Kahf to show the struggles that women in the Western diaspora go through to maintain their religiosity in a feminist context. The various circumstances that Muslim women face in the diaspora affect the way they approach feminist paradigms. Furthermore, Khadra's emancipatory stance against the confining instructions of Islam to Muslim women in terms of chastity and modesty can best be justified through the tendency of modernization which is inaugurated through a "process of thinking that offered Muslim women only one choice: if you are a feminist or a supporter of women's rights, you must operate outside the Islamic religious and moral framework" (Hatem, 2014, p. 15).

Khadra's secular liberalism, therefore, comes to resist the Islam-related conventions that Muslim women should unveil and celebrate their bodies in the domestic spheres and in front of close male relatives only. An example of that is manifested at Zuhura's henna, a part of the traditional wedding celebration, where "an engagement party was women only, of course. So they could remove their headscarves and cover-ups at the door and enjoy an evening dressed as they were within the home, with their hair out and their bodies as attractively clothed as they wished" (Kahf, 2006, p. 78). It is clear how Khadra differentiates herself from other Muslim women with regard to the question of unveiling and body politics: whereas the identity of the former relates to secular

liberalism, the identity of the latter is merged into Islamic conservatism. Khadra, therefore, articulates her feminism to unveil and celebrate her body in a non-religious paradigm.

In addition, Khadra's emancipatory stance leads her to a forbidden relationship [unIslamically valid] with a secular man named Chrif. This relationship involves all that Islam considers illegal between a man and a woman: this includes dating, kissing, and experiencing physical contact which Khadra knows is banned in her Muslim community. Khadra ironically says: "it's *Islamic dating*. Hah! Try and imagine saying that to dear old dad, she thought wistfully. Never happen" (Kahf, 2006, p. 353). She throws behind all those Islamic teachings that control Muslim women's chastity and religiosity through her liberal stance, a stance that prompts her to discover herself and her identity as a woman with no constraints. Her liberalism excludes the premises of the Quran and ensures a direct dismissal of Islamic feminism while it holds that of "universal standards which fall exactly within the rubrics of secular feminism" (Bahi, 2011, p. 8). The unIslamic relationship, as so called, provides extra evidence of the personal maturity that Khadra goes through from Islamic conservatism to secular liberalism – liberal from a non-religious point of view. Khadra in her early conservative Islamic days refused to shake hands and hug Hakim, a Muslim Afro-American friend, because it goes against Islamic teachings. She, however, in this instance, allows the secular man Chrif to grab her by her waist and kiss her (Kahf, 2006, pp. 353-360). She, in this respect, manifests a transition from an Islamic commitment to a forbidden relationship consigned to secularism. This can be illustrated as a revolt against the restriction of gender dialogues as outlined in Islam and Sharia. The liberal agenda that Khadra develops has an aura of Western feminism which, according to Asifa Qureishi, "destroys Muslim women's identity through empowering the alternative secular identity" (Fernea, 1998, p. 378 as cited in Bahi, 2011, p. 11). Khadra's acts against Islam by her sexual encounter with Chrif and unveiling empower her liberation from Islamic constraints.

Khadra's negotiation of the feminist identity between what is secular and what is Islamic positions her in a dilemma that is demonstrated through Chrif who, in a conversation with her, says: "you want to pretend you're some kind of liberated woman on one level, but on another level you're just your typical backward Muslim girl [...] hiding in yourself-righteous *haik*" (Kahf, 2006, p. 359). In addition to Chrif's point of view, it is possible to identify a clear endeavor of Khadra going through both feminist paradigms in accordance with her daily needs and experiences. This is to better negotiate her rights and to pursue her self-actualization as a woman free of Islamic instructions

and laws. Margot Badran in her "Islamic feminism: what is a name?" (2002) and "Between secular and Islamic feminism/s: Reflection of the Middle East and Beyond" (2005) suggests that both paradigms of feminism are intersected, flow into and complete each other to serve Muslim women's needs of equality and liberation. As such, Khadra's negotiation between the two strands of feminism represents a double commitment that leads to the emergence of a complex, strategic self-positioning that confirms her belonging in a hybrid feminist entity. She provides for herself a space in which two opposing feminist paradigms intersect to serve her needs and meliorate her conditions. The collaboration between Islamic and secular feminism to actualize the feminist identity, as echoed through Khadra, is termed as "hybrid feminism" (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2008, p. 102) which is more accommodative to Muslim women's demands for their rights, equality, and emancipation.

## Conclusion

Through her novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Kahf suggests that Arab female diasporic figures are always in the process of being perplexed by their search for a proper sense of feminist belonging. She manifests the way in which the cultural, religious, and social constructions defy Muslim women's emancipation, freedom of choice, equality, and justice. She uses her female protagonist Khadra Shamy to voice multiple feminist concerns and preoccupations from Islamic and secular points of view that ascribe to the latter a jumbled reality. It is possible, in this regard, to borrow Mariam Cooke's expression of 'speaking positions' to identify Khadra's heterogeneous feminist identity. This term reflects the multiplicity of positions that Khadra occupies to claim her rights and fulfil her emancipation through Islamic conservatism, Islamic progressiveness, and secular liberalism. Cooke argues that these speaking positions are based on a multiple critique "which provides women with the basis for power in Muslim communities. It enables them to emerge into representation from the margins" (2001, p. xxvii). In this respect, I stress that such heterogeneous speaking positions, as seen in Khadra's journey to liberate herself and claim her rights, lead to a hybrid form of feminist critique through which she aims to represent herself from the margin as a Muslim-secular woman. This hybrid feminism, as an amalgamation of both feminist paradigms – Islamic and secular – provides Khadra with the possibility to survive as an Arab American woman of Islamic affiliation in two conflating worlds as depicted in Mecca and Indianapolis.



**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

**Grant Support:** The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

**Hakem Değerlendirmesi:** Dış bağımsız.

**Çıkar Çatışması:** Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

**Finansal Destek:** Yazar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

## References

- Abou-bakr. O. (2014). Trends and direction in contemporary islamic feminist research. In J. Makdisi., N. Bayoumi & R. Sidawi (Eds.), *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East* (pp. 333-344). London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd.
- Ahmed-Ghosh, H. (2008). Dilemmas of Islamic and secular feminists and feminisms. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(3), 99-116.
- Ali, H, A. (2015). *Why Islam needs a reformation now*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Alsultany, E. (2011). Stealth Muslim. In R. Abdulhadi, A. Evelyn, & N. Naber (Eds.), *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence and Belonging* (pp. 307-315). New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Amin, Q. (1992). *The liberation of women and the new woman: Two documents in the history of Egyptian feminism*. Cairo: The American University Press in Cairo.
- Badran, M. (2002). Islamic feminism: What's in a name? *Al-Ahram Weekly*. Retrieved from: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2002/569/cu1.htm>
- Badran, M. (2005). Between secular and Islamic feminism/s: Reflections on the middle east and beyond. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*. Duke University Press, 1(1), 6-28.
- Badran, M. (2008). Islam's Other Half. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2008/nov/09/islam-women>.
- Bahi, R. (2011). Islamic and secular feminisms: two discourses mobilized for gender justice. 25. *RSCAS*. Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.
- Badran, M. (2001). Understanding Islam, Islamism, and Islamic feminism. *Journal of Women's History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 13(1), 47-52.
- Badran, M. (2013). *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergence*. London: Oneworld Publications. E-book edition.
- Barlas, A. (2002). *Believing women in Islam: Unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Quran*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Boulnoar, AW. (2006). The notion of modesty in Muslim women's clothing: An Islamic point view. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 8(2), 134-156.

- Cooke, M. (2001). *Women claim Islam: Creating Islamic feminism through literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Duderija, A. (2017). *The imperatives of progressive Islam*. New York: Routledge.
- Ferne, E. W. (1998). *In Search of Islamic feminism: One woman's global journey*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Gonzalez, A, L. (2013). *Islamic feminism in Kuwait: The Politics and Paradoxes*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Grami, A. (2014). Islamic Feminism: A New feminist movement or a strategy by women for acquiring rights? In J. Makdisi., N. Bayoumi & R. Sidawi (Eds.), *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East* (317-333). London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd.
- Hatem, M. (2014). What do women want? A critical mapping of future directions for Arab feminisms. In J. Makdisi., N. Bayoumi & R. Sidawi (Eds.), *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East* (3-19). London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd.
- Husain, F., & Crabtree, S, A. (2012). Within, Without: Dialogical Perspectives on Feminism and Islam. *Religion and Gender, 2*(1), 128- 149.
- Kahf, M. (2006). *The girl in the tangerine scarf*. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers.
- Karam, A, M. (1998). *Women, Islamism and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Katz, M, H. (2003). The problem of abortion in classical sunni fiqh. In E. B. Jonathan (Ed.), *Islamic Ethics of Life: Abortion, War, and Euthanasia* (25-50). Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Khanam, F. (Ed.). (2009). *The Quran* (W. Khan, Trans). Birmingham, UK: Goodword Books.
- Ludescher, T. (2006). From nostalgia to critique: An overview of Arab-American literature. *MELUS, 31*(4), 93-114.
- Mernissi, F. (2011). *Beyond the veil: Male-female dynamics in muslim society*. London: Saqi Books. E-book edition.
- Mir-Hosseini, M. (2013). Justice, equality and Muslim family laws: New ideas, new prospects. In Z. Mir-Hosseini, V. Kari, L. Larsen, & M. Christian (Eds.), *Gender and Equality in Muslim Family Law: Justice and Ethics in the Islamic Legal Tradition* (pp. 7-37). London: I.B Tauris.
- Mir-Housseini, Z. (2006). Muslim women's quest for equality: Between Islamic law and feminism. *Critical Inquiry, 32*(4), 629-645.
- Moghadam, V, M. (2002). Islamic feminism and its discontents: Toward a resolution of debate. *Signs, 27*(4), 1135-1171.
- Moghissi, H. (2011). Islamic feminism revisited. *Comparatives Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. Duke University Press, *31*(1), 76-84.
- Salah, H. (2010). From Ijtihad to gender jihad: Islamic feminists between regional activism and transnationalism. In *Diversity and Female Political Participation: Views on and from the Arab World* (pp. 27-47). (Ed), *21*, Heinrich Boll Foundation: Publication Series on Democracy.
- Wadud, A. (2000). Alternative Quranic interpretation and the status of Muslim women. In G. Webb (Ed), *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists of North America* (pp. 3-22). Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Wadud, A. (2006). *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld Publication.
- Yamani, M. (Ed.). (1996). *Feminism and Islam: Legal and literary perspective*. Reading: Garnet Publishing Limited.