

**MOHJA KAHF'S *THE GIRL IN THE TANGERINE SCARF* SEEN THROUGH THE  
HIJAB PERSPECTIVE**

CARINE PEREIRA MARQUES

*Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG)*

GLÁUCIA RENATE GONÇALVES

*Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG)*

**ABSTRACT:** Literature often represents fictionally how gender relations are deeply affected by diaspora. The case of contemporary Arab-American writers is no exception to this, and recent works by Arab-American women writers have indeed been giving voice to silenced women. Our hypothesis in this article is that, in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, the main character negotiates her subjectivity in the space of diaspora, which is illustrated mainly, among other things, through her choice of clothes.

**KEYWORDS:** Diaspora; Arab-American Literature; Gender; Mohja Kahf.

**RESUMO:** As relações de gênero podem ser profundamente alteradas pela experiência da diáspora, o que é muitas vezes representado pela prosa de ficção contemporânea. A literatura árabe-estadunidense é um exemplo disso, uma vez que em especial obras de autoria feminina vêm dando voz a mulheres antes silenciadas. A hipótese aqui desenvolvida é que, no romance *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, de Mohja Kahf, a protagonista negocia sua subjetividade no espaço da diáspora e o faz, entre outras coisas, através da escolha de seus trajes.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Diáspora; literatura árabe-estadunidense; gênero; Mohja Kahf.

“Any insect that undergoes a complete metamorphosis has several different life stories, one that describes how it lives in its immature, larval forms, what goes on in its pupal transformation – if it has one – and how it behaves as a mature sexual adult.”

(HUBBELL, 1993: 34)

Wars and terrorist attacks have brought more visibility to the Arab community in the United States, and the interest in Arab-American literature has also increased. This interest also coincides with an increase in the production of literary texts by Arab Americans. However, it is important to look back and track down the history of Arab-American writers as it provides the necessary information to help us understand not only their trajectory, but also to observe that their literary production is interwoven with the political events affecting the Arab community living in the United States. Joana Kadi comments on the importance of this trajectory of Arab-American literature as she considers anthologies published thus far as maps which “help record a community's history and spirit” (KADI, 1994: xvii).

The first manifestation of Arab literature in the United States was the gathering known as the Al Mahjar, meaning immigrant or diasporic writers. As Majaj explains, the writers of the Mahjar group “were nonetheless primarily expatriate writers, exiles whose vision was trained in the Middle East and its literary and political contexts” (MAJAJ, 1999: 68). They wrote mostly in Arabic, but a few wrote both in Arabic and in English, and their objective was to confer upon literature a more effective role in the forging of an Arab national consciousness (LUDESCHER, 2006: 95). However, while these first immigrants were worried about maintaining their Arab literary identity, they lived in an assimilationist context and many of the writers of this period wrote autobiographies about their successful integration

into mainstream society, trying to write about what was similar between the two cultures or use what was thought of as positive stereotypes. As Majaj explains, “these writers were conscious of serving as bridges between East and West, and actively sought to establish philosophical meeting points between Arab and American ideologies and contexts” (MAJAJ, 2008: 2). It was in this context that Gibran Kahlil Gibran published in English the renowned *The Prophet*, which had the “implicit claim that the Arab homeland is a fountainhead of wisdom and spirituality” (SHAKIR, 1996: 5). Contemporary to Gibran and also part of the *Mahjar* group, Abraham Rihbany, Ameen Rihani, and Mikhail Naimy also wrote books that aimed to “promote cultural, social, and political reform in the East, based on the Western model, and to encourage a spiritual awakening in the West, based on the Eastern model” (LUDESCHER, 2006: 98).

From 1924 to the beginning of the 1960s, few books were published as there were fewer Arabs entering the U.S. due to strict immigration laws and wars in the Middle East. In fact, as Alixa Naff pointed out, the lack of contact between the Arab community living in the U.S. and their homelands was so abysmal that “if political and economic events had not reactivated Arab immigration and an interest in Arab culture, Syrian-Americans might have assimilated out of existence” (NAFF, 1985: 330). After 1967, when new immigrants arrived in the US, this scenario began to change. As new immigrants were highly politicized, they helped “rekindle a sense of ethnicity in the established community and promote a sense of kinship with the Arab world in general” (SHAKIR, 1996: 9). The political and cultural context of that time favored this new manifestation or phase of the Arab community, as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements also voiced other minority movements.

The publication of the anthologies *Wrapping the Grape Leaves: A Sheaf of Contemporary Arab-American Poets* (1982) and *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poets* (1988) was a turning point as they gave visibility to Arab-American literature. The first

work, as Shakir explains, “was a landmark publication, testifying to a sea change in Arab Americans' sense of themselves” (SHAKIR, 1996: 9). The second anthology, which includes works from Gibran to Elmaz Abinader and Naomi Nye, who are still writing today, was even more seminal as it “announced a body of literature the existence of which came as news to most American scholars” (SHAKIR, 1996: 10). Among the first works of fiction published by an Arab-American is Joseph Geha’s *Through and Through: Toledo Stories*, followed by several other names, including those of women writers. The gradual and steady increase in the literary production by Arab-Americans is explained by Ludescher as follows:

Two factors 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: 106)

It is in this context that we can situate Mohja Kahf, the writer whose work is under analysis in this article. Kahf was born in Syria in 1967 and moved to the United States when she was four. Her personal story and her condition as a writer is aptly explained by Majaj as she claims that “for many of us this negotiation of cultures results in a form of split vision: even as we turn one eye to our American context, the other eye is always turned toward the Middle East” (MAJAJ, 1999: 67). However, as Majaj also explains, this 'schism' in vision is often a source of imbalance, and it will inevitably affect diasporic subjects like Kahf.

The tension between assimilation forces and the need to hold on to one's cultural legacy confers a certain fluidity on subjects of diaspora. As Almeida states,

Identities or the formation of subjectivities become, in our contemporary world, a process in flux, a temporary belonging rather than a unifying concept. It is possible, therefore, to speak not of a national or personal identity/subjective per se but of identities that will be defined by a process of being in the world... (ALMEIDA, 1999: 318)

Dislocation movements, moreover, greatly affect gender relations in diasporic communities. Besides taking into account the issues of personal and national identities to understand the contemporary writings of diaspora, we also have to bear in mind that this movement of dislocation also interferes with gender relations. "Diasporic experiences are always gendered" (CLIFFORD, 1994: 313-314) and the migration movement has made possible for women to question their status in the new social environment.

When investigating contemporary Arab-American writers, one eventually thinks of the story of Scheherazade, from *One Thousand and One Nights*, who manages not to be killed by her husband by telling him a different story every night. However, the idea for storytelling that saved her life was not hers, but was rather suggested to her by her sister Dinarzad, who "central as she was to the structure of the tales, she disappears into silence" (KALDAS AND MATTAWA, 2004: ix). Thus, it is also silence, and not only Schererazade's legacy of voicing stories, which characterizes the plight of Arab women. Recent works by Arab-American women writers have indeed been giving voice to these silenced women:

During the past twenty-five years, women from the Arab world have been writing themselves into visibility at both national and international levels. Historically invisible, they are becoming agents of possible transformations in

the societies in which their voices had traditionally not been heard. (COOKE, 2000: 150)

The fact that women are now considered agents in this process of transformation is largely due to their inhabiting the space of diaspora. As Brah argues, diasporas are “potentially the sites of hopes and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure” (BRAH, 1996: 193). Our hypothesis in this article is that in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* the main character negotiates her subjectivity in the space of diaspora and she does so through her choice of clothes, as we will show below.

*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* was published in 2006, and it tells the story of Khadra Shamy, a Muslim Syrian immigrant in the United States. The story is told by an omniscient narrator who uses flashbacks and flashforwards. Several of the events in the story take place in Indianapolis, where Khadra “spent most of her growing-up years” (KAHF, 2006: 1). Her father had decided to move there in order to work at the Dawah Center, a Muslim community center, where he believed he would answer God's call and help other Muslims. Before that, the first place Khadra lived in the United States was Square One, in the Rocky Mountains. Despite living among American kids, she did not face any kind of discrimination: “The American kids in Square One didn't seem to know yet that they were supposed to be better than the rest because it was their country. Their parents were all students at the same university” (KAHF, 2006: 10). Nevertheless, the sense of not belonging was soon to come to her as they moved to Indiana. In their first day, when they were still unpacking their belongings, some boys threw glass bottles at their doorstep, and the Shamy family realized they were not welcome. At school, things were not different. She felt that she not only had to face the prejudice on the part of other students, but she also had to live with the indifference

of the teachers. In one incident at her school when two boys harassed her and ended up tearing her scarf and leaving her bareheaded, a teacher does not sympathize with her: “Mr. Eggleston came out of his room down the hall. Silhouetted by the daylight streaming from the double doors at the end of the hallway, he shook his head, gave her a look of mild disapproval, and went back inside” (KAHF, 2006: 125).

Khadra's school days are synthesized in a passage when she compares herself with some American embassy workers who are taken hostage by Iranian revolutionaries. The story of the American hostages is on television every day and she has to face the consequences of the media coverage at school:

Khadra 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 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, 2006: 123)

While the consciousness that she is not fully accepted in the American society grows, so does the sense of belonging to the Muslim community. The feeling that they are different and should remain as such is noticed when their green card expired, and they could not get a new passport for political reasons. Khadra's father decides to apply for American citizenship, and the day they walked into the courthouse for the ceremony, the narrator says they are “like a family in mourning” (KAHF, 2006: 141). Her mother seems to have cried all night long, and Khadra's feelings are described as follows: “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 who vaunted America's superiority as the clincher put-down to everything she said,

everything she was” (KAHF, 2006: 141). Not being fully accepted is in part due to the fact that she is a Muslim, and dressing differently makes the difference even more conspicuous.

Although Khadra feels that she does not belong in the United States and that her homeland is somewhere else, the notion of home is still not that clear to her. In the plane to Mecca with her family, the narrator tells us that “Khadra felt funny. The phrase 'leaving home' came into her head. But Indianapolis is not my home, she thought indignantly” (KAHF, 2006: 157). Then, when they land, Khadra thinks “*someplace where we really belong*. It's the land of the Prophet. The land of all Muslims” (KAHF, 2006: 159). At the moment of landing, it is clear that she considers Mecca, a place she has never been before, closer to a kind of home than the place where she grew up and lives. Yet, upon returning to Indiana after some disappointments in Mecca, we are told that

Khadra was glad to be going home. 'Home' – she said, without thinking. She pressed her nose against the airplane window. The lights of Indianapolis spread out on the dark earth beneath the jet. The sweet relief of her own clean bed awaited her there – and only there, of all the earth. (KAHF, 2006: 179)

Clearly Khadra is torn, divided. She is between two worlds and she does not seem to belong to any of them. The words of Vijay Agnew translate her condition only too well: “The individual living in the diaspora experiences a dynamic tension every day between living 'here' and remembering 'there', between memories of places of origins and entanglements with places of residence, and between the metaphorical and the physical home” (AGNEW, 2005: 4). Ironically, Khadra herself was never very tolerant when it came to difference. She was rather judgmental of those those who did not follow the Muslim customs, and because of that she lost many friendships along her life. Once, when she is already at university she has an argument with her friend, Joy, about entering or not a sushi bar. Khadra is so intolerant she



accuses her friend of being a 'McMuslim'. On the other hand, Joy seems not to believe the rigid points of view held by Khadra:

As part of the first generation in her family to go to college, she had enough to deal with, without some little Arab girl from a privileged college-educated family trying to tell her what was acceptable and what was not in the 'Islamic lifestyle.' As if Islam was a lifestyle. Instead of a faith. (KAHF, 2006: 185)

Khadra will only reconsider her attitude when Joy helps her in a moment when she did not have anyone else to count on. When she asks Joy why she was so helpful, the latter explains: "I'm your friend. Friends don't drop you when you do something they disapprove" (KAHF, 2006: 249). It is just after hearing this that Khadra considers: "I've never been a real friend, or had one. I've demanded that my friends conform to what I approve and disapprove" (KAHF, 2006: 249).

The role of memory is another important aspect that should be taken into account and, unlike her brother Eyad, Khadra did not have clear memories of Syria during her childhood years in Indiana: Eyad "remembered Syria in complete sentences, not flashes of words and tastes [like herself]" (KAHF, 2006: 15). Instead, the memories of Syria were passed on to her by her parents as well as by relatives, and the 'aunts' and 'uncles' from the Dawah Center. Among other Muslims Khadra used to feel safe: "the 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. Everyone knew her, and who her mother and father were" (KAHF, 2006: 32-33). It seems that it is the Muslim community that gives Khadra the feeling of belonging, of safety.

The same Muslim community soon made her realize that there are certain boundaries between men and women. Khadra is first taught how a woman should behave when she hops

on her friend Hakim's bike, and hears her brother's reprimand: "Get off Hakim's bike and get on mine. 'Cause he's a boy and Mama might see you" (KAHF, 2006: 5). Some passages of the novel make clear that women should be submitted to men. When Khadra's friend Zuhura, a law student, was to get married, her fiancé made her see that certain things were unacceptable. Zuhura "was beginning to see that her argumentation talents, while they suited her career ambitions, were not the skills needed for becoming Luqman's wife" (KAHF, 2006: 74).

The role of a married woman is also expounded when her brother Eyad was choosing a bride for himself:

The girl has impeccable character, was active at the mosque, and wore flawless hijab with not a hair showing. And, definitely, she was a native speaker of Arabic, with a pure accent, and a fluency aided by the private Arabic tutors her father had hired. She was splendidly qualified to teach their future children the language of the Quran. Piety, character, beauty, brains, the right language, the right home culture – what more to ask in a bride? (KAHF, 2006: 138)

When Khadra wants to devote herself to Islamic studies, her father suggests that she take a course given by a Mauritanian sheikh. During the course, the men seem not to approve of the presence of a woman. There she learns to recite the Quran, and she decides to enter an international competition on Quran recital announced by the sheikh. However, when she gives him her tape for the contest, and he tells her that she cannot take part in it, she is taken aback: "Well – you see – I never meant to imply – the contest, I'm afraid – it is not open to women" (KAHF, 2006: 199). Furthermore, she only truly realizes that the equality between men and women, which was taught to her when she was a child, was not part of the Muslim reality when, during a visit to Syria with her parents, she hears a call to prayer coming from a mosque near her relatives' house, goes to the mosque to pray, and is brought home by the

police, thus bringing shame to her parents and to her host. Confused by what had happened, her father explains: “Well, women are not allowed to pray in the mosque here” (KAHF, 2006: 167). Khadra seems overwhelmed by her father's explanation that women attend mosques in America, but not in most Muslim countries. She then asks:

“But you said – *you* said –” she whirled here to include her mother, “you *always* said it was part of Islam. (...) 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!*’” (KAHF, 2006: 168)

Another issue used to illustrate the difference between men and women is the Muslim dress code, discussed several times in the novel. A woman should cover up and wear a hijab after she menstruates, and Khadra in effect was enraptured by this imposition: “Hijab was a crown on her head. She went forth lightly and went forth heavily into the world, carrying the weight of a new grace (...), hijab soon grew to feel as natural to her as a second skin, without which if she ventured into the outside world she felt naked” (KAHF, 2006: 112-113). However, we can notice in the novel that this issue is rather controversial. When the adult Khadra returns to Indianapolis in order to photograph her Muslim community for a magazine assignment, the narrator tells us “she doesn't think she herself can take one more of those shots of masses of Muslim butts up in the air during prayer or the clichéd Muslim woman looking inscrutable and oppressed in a voluminous veil” (KAHF, 2006: 48). This passage may hint at the fact that Khadra believes that the community as well as the veil are not represented accordingly by the outside community, as if saying that being a Muslim is much more than praying, and that the veil does not necessarily mean oppression.

The choice of the verb 'looking' in the passage above suggests that, being a Muslim, she does not see the veil as an outsider would, since she believes the hijab is worn naturally. Another passage in the novel, though, suggests that clothes do imply some kind of restriction. Khadra describes Zuhura's engagement party and explains why it was for women only: "So they could remove their headscarves and coverups 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: 78). The choice of the verb 'enjoy' suggests that they liked dressing that way. Besides, the expression "as attractively clothed as they wished" also suggests that they are not always dressed as they want, that the kinds of clothes are more an imposition than a wish.

After Khadra starts wearing the hijab, she goes through different phases. The first phase is the radical one, which she enters while she was still a teenager. She decides to dress in black headscarves and navy-blue *jilbab*, which is a long garment. The clothes she wears in this phase indicate her attachment to what she considers genuine Muslim behavior, and that contrasts with any kind of assimilation or deviation of tradition. However, even her family does not quite approve of that:

[Her parents] exchanged looks but didn't say anything. What could they say? They were the ones who had introduced Khadra to the works of Islamist revolutionary Sayid Qutub, after all, and his multivolume *tafsir* of the Quran sat on their rickety bookshelf in the living room. She seemed only to be taking his rhetoric a step or two further along the path of its own logic. (KAHF, 2006: 150)

The extremist phase, part of Khadra's immaturity, does not last long. Khadra stops wearing the sober clothes when she develops a crush on a boy. In this second 'dressing' phase

she begins to wear more colors and replaces the *jilbad* with blouses and skirts. It is the beginning of what she calls 'her neoclassical phase', when "she thirsted now to study traditional Islamic heritage. It seemed to her the answer lay in there somewhere" (KAHF, 2006: 194). During this phase Khadra meets Juma, a friend of her brother Eyad's, who considers taking her in marriage because she has the qualities he admires in a woman: a "pure Arabic accent", an exemplary dress code, intelligence, and, most importantly, she "had not lost her Arab identity despite being raised entirely in America" (KAHF, 2006: 201). Khadra's mother asks her to consider the possibility of marrying him as she would have to think about getting married in the next few years anyway: "A girl's window of opportunity narrows after that" (KAHF, 2006: 207).

Khadra explains her reasons for marrying Juma to Téta, her grandmother, when the latter arrives from Syria for the ceremony. She tells her grandmother that she decided to marry him because her parents might be moving away and she wanted to stay in order to finish her degree. When her grandmother asks her again why she wants to marry him and not another man, she says "well, I guess he's as good as any other guy I'd end up marrying, so why not?" (KAHF, 2006: 208). Téta seems to notice the fragility of her reasons to marry Juma, but she is the only person to question Khadra, as the others seem only worried about practical matters involving a Muslim marriage ceremony.

As a married woman Khadra goes through the most dramatic period of her life. Although she seems happy in the beginning, the couple soon starts to have problems as Juma imposes more and more limits on her. He first tells her to stop riding her bicycle, which he considers inappropriate for a Muslim woman. At this point the reader knows that Khadra will not play the obedient wife, and she indeed refuses to stop riding it. After many quarrels, Juma finally says: "As your husband, I forbid you" (KAHF, 2006: 230). Khadra eventually consents, but she is conscious that something has changed: "She put the bike in the resident

storage area of their building's basement. Such a little thing, a bike. In the overall picture of a marriage, what was a bike? The gears rusted and the tires lost air. Something inside herself rusted a little, too” (KAHF, 2006: 230).

The bike episode was followed by others, and everything collapses for Khadra the day she discovers she is pregnant: “‘I can't have a baby now,’ she whispered to the nurse at the student clinic, sitting on the examination table in shock after the doctor had just told her. Her face was sallow, her eyes puffy. She had never known anything more clearly or more urgently. ‘I can't’” (KAHF, 2006: 244). Khadra claims she can have the abortion as any woman can before she is a hundred and twenty days into the pregnancy. However, no one seems to support her, and she is certain that her “life *is* in danger” (KAHF, 2006: 244) – meaning not physical danger, but psychological breakdown. The abortion is also the occasion for breaking up with the institutions which have been the basis of her entire life up until then: family, religion, and marriage:

No, enough, no. Her back was up against the wall, the bathroom small, mewing her in. She beat the floor with the Ajax canister over and over with the force of her will, no no no, no no no no, scattering the powder seven times. Where was it, this will of hers, this misshapen self? She needed to know it. (...) Her self was a meager thing, scuttling behind a toilet, what she hadn't given over of it to Mama, to Juma. Too much, 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. Feral, it was not a word but a spasm, the snarl of a fanged thing gnawing at a trap: no. No, no, no, no, no, *no*. (KAHF, 2006: 248)

Sitting on the bathroom floor and realizing they even want to have rights over her body, Khadra begins to question the roles assigned to her, the identity that she did not know

was being gradually forced upon her. Metaphorically she also decides to abort several other things from her life:

She wanted to abort the Dawah Center and its entire community. (...) Twenty-one years of useless head-clutter. It all had to go. (...) All that smug knowledge. Islam is this, Islam is that. Maybe she believed some of it, maybe she didn't – but it needed to be cleared out so she could find for herself this time. Not as a given. Not ladled on her plate and she had to eat it just because it was there. (KAHF, 2006: 261-62)

It is important to observe at this point that the space of diaspora is pivotal to all her questionings. This new environment promotes the contrast between the Muslim and the American culture, as well as between the theoretical teachings she had received and everyday practices that make her question views previously taken for granted. After recovering from the abortion, she sells coins that were given to her by Téta as a wedding gift, and travels to Syria because she thought it was a “time for retreat” (KAHF, 2006: 266). While there, her grandmother makes significant revelations to Khadra: she had been one of the first women to have a job in Syria, had run away with the man she loved, and married away from her family. These revelations help Khadra not only to see her grandmother differently, but also to question what is acceptable from a Muslim woman. Later on, Khadra also finds out that her mother, a 'model' Muslim woman, also has a shocking past. According to Khadra's aunt, her mother had been a rebel herself who refused “to wear hijab and pray regularly” (KAHF, 2006: 286). At hearing this, Khadra feels she had been deceived.

Khadra's views on religion begin to change. Once, while she is contemplating the city, she thinks:

Sitting on Mount Qasyoon looking down on the city of Damascus, you could not possibly hold that one religion had claim to an exclusive truth. Damascus demanded that you see all religions as architectural layers of each other, gave you the tangible sense, real as the crumbling citadel steps beneath you feet, that it all came together somehow in a way that made sense. (KAHF, 2006: 297)

Thus, it is in Syria, a place Khadra always believed safeguarded her beliefs, that religion is redefined for her. It is also in Syria that Khadra feels her voice will be heard: “she is not in an isolated locale where no one would hear her if she screamed” (KAHF, 2006: 298). This passage, interestingly enough, contrasts with another discussed earlier in this article, when Khadra felt she would not be heard in Indianapolis if she screamed; she feels the opposite while sitting totally alone in an isolated place in Syria. This contrast may suggest how displacement is in fact relative.

It is in Syria that Khadra stops wearing the hijab. Her headscarf falls accidentally, but she doesn't mind and realizes that unveiling was a necessary part of the transformation she was going through: “How veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary; how both light and dark are connected moments in the development of the soul in its darkroom” (KAHF, 2006: 309). The absence of the hijabs and scarves marks the beginning of a new phase in Khadra's life. She is aware that she is stepping into the unknown:

The first few days without her lifelong armor she felt wobbly, like a child on new legs. Her body felt off-balance, carried differently. Gone was the flutter about her, the flutter and sweep of fabric that was so comforting and familiar. Having waist and legs encircled now, being compactly outlined by clothing



that fit the line of her body – that *defined* her body, instead of giving it freedom and space like hijab did – was all so new. (KAHF, 2006: 310)

Khadra's decision signals chance and rupture with certain traditions, but it does not mean she starts behaving in an entirely different way. It is, indeed, a moment of uncertainty and even loneliness for her, as the metaphor of the hijab as a friend illustrates: “some days she just wanted her old friend hijab standing sentry by her side” (KAHF, 2006: 312). When she decides to return to the United States, she feels she is going home again, only this time she is conscious of the implications of this choice: “She knew by the time she crossed the Atlantic that she was headed home, if there was any home in the world of worlds. (...) She knew at last that it was in the American crucible where her character had been forged, for good or ill” (KAHF, 2006: 313). Her choice of clothing for the return journey is also symbolic. She puts on a headscarf because “she wanted them to know at O'Hare that she was coming in under one of the many signs of her heritage” (KAHF, 2006: 313).

Khadra decided not to go back to Indiana, but to go instead to Philadelphia, where she could start over without being near her family and the Arab Muslim community. In this new place she reexamines her condition as a Muslim, and mainly, as a woman. After some time she begins to date, something she would have never considered in the past, but her relationship comes to an end “at the sex crossroads” (KAHF, 2006: 352), because despite the fact she changed her mind about dating, Khadra still believes that sex is only appropriate after marriage. Her boyfriend, quite upset, offers his appraisal: “‘All I know,’ he lashed out, before she had even finished explaining, ‘is that 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 with the old country still in your head’” (KAHF, 2006: 359). What he failed to see, though, is that

Khadra was the one in control: “She knew, all right, what it was she was holding back from. Still she made the choice” (KAHF, 2006: 353).

Khadra's friend Seemi also tries, unsuccessfully, to show her that she was being too conservative, but Khadra counterargues:

“Every religion in the world has rules about sex. (...) Don't you wonder why that's such a constant in all religions?”

“To control women's bodies,” Seemi answered promptly. To Khadra, she sounded like a broken feminist record.

“But religion tells men to control their bodies too,” she reminded her. “Why do you always have to see it as a conspiracy against women?”

“Because it is. Not to see that is naïve. Because it's never equal. Men always get breaks. Polygyny in Islam ring a bell there, huh? *Please*. Women *always* have to be more pure.” Seemi wasn't giving any ground. (KAHF, 2006: 361)

It is possible to compare Khadra's development in the space of diaspora with Sue Hubbell's quotation used as an epigraph for this article. Khadra in her immature form passively accepts all the teachings her family and community passed onto her as the only existing truth. Her pupal transformations are the several phases she goes through in her life when her beliefs clash with every day life and the cultural environment of the place she lives. Finally, the older Khadra behaves as a mature sexual adult who respects herself and her condition as a diasporic woman. In conclusion, Mohja Kahf's representation of an Arab immigrant woman in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* demonstrates how the space of diaspora is central to the reconstruction of a woman's subjectivity, informed no longer exclusively by rigid social codes from the Middle East. Despite being criticized, the mature Khadra, now

conscious of her hybridity, wears a tangerine scarf and blue jeans, combining signs of the American and the Arab cultures according to her personal assessment and choices.

## REFERENCES

AGNEW, Vijay. "Introduction". In: AGNEW, Vijay. **Diaspora, Memory and Identity: a Search for an Identity**. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2005. 3-17.

ALMEIDA, Sandra R. G. "In and Out the Global Village: Gender Relations in a Cosmopolitan World". In: GONÇALVES, Gláucia R. (Org.) **New Challenges in Language and Literature**. Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2009. 317-327.

BRAH, Avtar. **Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities**. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

BRAZIEL, Jana E.; MANNUR, Anita. "Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of Contestation in Diaspora Studies". In: BRAZIEL, Jana E.; MANNUR, Anita. **Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader**. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.

CLIFFORD, James. "Diasporas". **Cultural Anthropology**, vol.9, n.3, p. 302-38, 1994.

COOKE, Miriam. "Women, Religion, and the Postcolonial Arab World". **Cultural Critique**, vol.45, p.150-184, 2000.

HUBBELL, Sue. **Broadsides from the Other Orders: A Book of Bugs**. New York: Random House, 1993.

KALDAS, Pauline; MATTAWA, Khaled. (Eds.) **Dinarzard's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction**. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2004.

KADI, Joanna. "Introduction". In: KADI, Joanna (Ed.). **Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-Canadian Feminists**. Boston: South End Press, 1994. p. xviii- xx.

KAHF, Mohja. **The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf**. New York: Carroll and Graf, 2006.

LUDESCHER, Tanyss. "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab-American Literature". **MELUS**, vol 31, n.4, p. 93-114, 2006.

MAJAJ, Lisa S. "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments". **American Studies Journal**, vol.52, 2008. Disponível em: [asjournal.zusas.uni-halle.de/150.html](http://asjournal.zusas.uni-halle.de/150.html). Acessado em 26 de Julho de 2010.

---. "New Directions: Arab-American Writing at Century's End". In: AKASH, Munir; MATTAWA Khaled. **Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab-American Writing**. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999.

NAFF, Alixa. **Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience**. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.

SHAKIR, Evelyn. "Arab-American Literature". In: KNIPPLING, Alpana. **New Immigrant Literatures in the United States: A Sourcebook to Our Multicultural Literary Heritage**. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996. 3-18.