Deconstructing Borders: Arab American Immigrants and Body Politics in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

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> Is there a way to construct new worlds with our words that will help us create paths out of the violence that entangles us? Can we, as artists and activists, repurpose the colonizer's words to express old stories about how we have found ways to survive?
>
> – Kahf and Ghadbian 2017, 478

Introduction

On May 5, 2024, a viral video depicted a pro-Israel scholar at Arizona State University verbally harassing a veiled Muslim woman during a rally, resisting public demands for ceasefire and stopping the genocide in Gaza. "Go back to Jihad," he and others shouted at her (trtworld). On May 8, 2024, Arizona State University issued a statement on its website, announcing his being "placed on leave...he is not permitted to come to campus, teach classes, or interact with students or employees…ASU has also referred this matter, which took place on a city sidewalk, to the Tempe Police Department for a criminal investigation."

Though the above quotes depict separate historical moments, the unprecedented current moment in the West in general, and the United States in particular, is witnessing a polarizing debate characterized by a remarkable anti-Zionist public sentiment that condemns the colonial/imperial matrix of power exercised on Palestinians in Gaza, following October 7, 2023, in contrast to its post 9/11 Islamophobic counterpart. However, both moments converge on the persistence of a colonial/imperial racist discourse of othering that takes Muslim women as battlefields. "Go back to Jihad," the above sentence uttered by the scholar and his group, is similarly shouted at the protagonist of Mohja Kahf's 2006 novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, in which the stories of Muslim women's bodies are imbricated with colonial/postcolonial history which encompasses the 1948 Palestinian Nakba. The present article thus aims at examining the body politics represented in Mohja Kahf's 2006 novel and a few of her selected writings, contextualizing them within historical perspectives.

Drawing on cultural, postcolonial, gender and border studies, I argue that the Syrian American novelist and poet Mohja Kahf (1967-) locates woman's body, labeled as 'Muslim' by the West, at the crux of her works to interrogate body politics and negotiate gender and rights. Depicting the life of Arab American immigrants

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from the 1970s to the 1990s, Kahf delineates the macro/micro politics hegemonizing that body (see Sinno 2017), subverted by its agency and counter-hegemonic voice. Taking Indianapolis, the city at the crossroads, as her space of departure that witnesses her coming of age, in her narrative, Kahf interrogates power structures through deconstructing temporal, spatial and gender borders, and negotiating with Western and Muslim intellectual heritage. As she puts it, "Sometimes your skin falls off. Sometimes the identities you came with crumble due to life experiences" (Savage 2017).

Body Politics

Woman's body has been perceived across times and cultures as an ambivalent geographical space to be possessed, occupied/penetrated/fertilized. Crystalizing the complex networks of power relations, discourses on woman's body as nation idealize women as Madonnas/mothers, or lovers/prostitutes (Baron 2005; Elrefaei 2014; Mayer 2000; Najmabadi 2005). Sexual harassment and rape as "gender-based violence" (Harcourt 2009, 97) have been rampant in reality and in knowledge production, signifying a reductionist discourse of othering and essentializing women/nations as bodies/objects. Woman's body as such has become a site of memory and a space of oppression and resistance.

Accordingly, one of the main objectives of feminists has been the deconstruction of such patriarchal/imperial discourses (Bordo 1997). As Nelly Richard (2000) puts it,

> The body is the physical agent of the structures of everyday experience. It is the producer of dreams, the transmitter and receiver of cultural messages, a creature of habits, a desiring machine, a repository of memories, an actor in the theater of power, a tissue of affects and feelings. Because the body is at the boundary between biology and society, between drives and discourse, between the sexual and its categorization in terms of power, biography and history, it is the site par excellence for transgressing the constraints of meaning, or what social discourse prescribes as normal. (208)

Wendy Harcourt (2009) similarly postulates that through understanding the interconnectedness of knowledge production regarding women and the "social, colonial, ethical and economic" discourses, "we can strategically re-conceptualize bodies as cultural products on which the play of powers, knowledges and resistances are worked out" (22).

Consequently, the discourse of saving oppressed Muslim women from patriarchal culture has been utilized by Western powers as a means of imperial intervention (Ahmed 1992*,* 6; 2011; Abu-Lughod 2002, 6; 2013; Savage 2017; Jarmakani 2011; Kahf and Ghadbian 2017). Anchored in the double standards of the civilizing mission, the ambivalent discourse is based on the politics of "invisibility/hypervisibility" (Jarmakani 2011, 227; Kahf and Ghadbian 2017) as it

both "annihilates, erases" (hooks 2015, 233) the Muslim woman's body, yet, paradoxically, acknowledges its existence and rights. Depicted as oppressed, negated rights, and in need of Western intervention, the body is also perceived as threatening to Western "borders and national identity" (Kahf and Ghadbian 2017, 477) and a cultural marker of terrorism and extremism. The politics of silencing can be comprehended in light of bell hooks' following words,

> Silenced. We fear those who speak about us, who do not speak to us and with us…We know that the forces that silence us, because they never want us to speak, differ from the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain. (2015, 234)

Seen in the above light, a whole cultural discourse has been generated by Islamists/Muslim secularists, on the one hand, and imperialists/neocolonialists, on the other, compelling Muslim women either to veil or unveil[1].

Manifesting her "politics of location" (hooks 2015, 149), Amina Wadud, a Malaysian American Muslim feminist who has greatly impacted Kahf (Savage 2017; Kahf and Ghadbian 2017), attributes patriarchy in the Muslim world to the masculinist misinterpretation of the Quranic verses and Hadiths. Transgressing boundaries, Wadud calls for the necessity of having women not only as interpreters of theology but also as Imams who can lead both men and women in prayers. In a 2005 Friday congregation attended by both sexes, Wadud, in an act of "radical openness" (hooks 2015, 149), assumed the role of Imam, following the call to prayer sounded by an unveiled woman (Kahf 2013, 303; Elliott 2005). For Kahf, that act was liberating as it reclaimed and rediscovered "the just ground of prayer" (2013, 304). Such perspectives on body politics are common themes in Kahf's works.

A Contrapuntal Critique of Self and Other

In their 2017 article "Hypervisibility," Kahf and Ghadbian represent their strategy of resistance, emphasizing the need to conduct a historical "dual critique of external and internal structural injustice regarding gender, including all its entanglements with ethnicity, class, and power" (476). Unmasking the predominant US Islamophobic ideology, "gendered" "Islamic discourses" (476), besides the veil controversy as a marker of violent political inscriptions on Muslim women's bodies, Kahf and Banah Ghadbian write,

> The epistemic violence behind the drive to know and unveil the Muslim woman structures the dominant frameworks in which Muslim women are expected to tell their stories. It claims to shape how we understand the contours of our bodies and how we navigate the world. Women's bodies become an object of the need to conquer the racialized, feared

> geographic spaces in which Muslim women are imagined to live. This is how the abstract space between hyper- and invisibility collapses onto real women's bodies, with real and violent consequences. (477)

Critiquing liberal feminists who recycle the Orientalist discourse regarding the Muslim woman "as an object to be saved" (477), Kahf foregrounds that Islam brought her to voice (Davis, Zine, and Taylor 2007, 383). In her 2013 article "She Who Argues: A Homily on Justice and Renewal," she explains that the Qur'an dictates that woman can engage in a logical "dialogue" with decision-makers over rights. Delving into pre-Islamic times and the Quranic archive, Kahf takes Al-Khansaa[2] and Khawla as cases in point that epitomize Muslim women's agency, narrating the story of the Arab male poet who described Al-Khansaa as the best poetess "among those who have breasts" (Savage 2017). Voicing her counter-body politics, Al-Khansaa described herself as the best "among those who have testicles, too" (Savage 2017).

Khawla bint Th'alabah, the woman in the Quranic *surah al-Mujadala*, is Kahf's role model of the vociferous Muslim woman who subverted "long-embedded traditions" (Kahf 2013, 298) of patriarchal injustices. Following her husband's irrational moment of anger that caused him to swear that she was to him like his mother, or what was called at that time "*zihar*", Khawla argued with Prophet Muhammad over her physical rights following Islamic Shari'a. Her consequent complaint to God led to the revelation of the Quranic *surah al-Mujadala* doing her justice. Choosing the adjective '*al-Mujadila*' over the title/noun '*al-Mujadala*' to highlight the woman's agency, Kahf develops "the *mujadila* method," "the yank and tug, against custom and against established religious authority" (298).

"Often when the radical voice speaks about domination we are speaking about those who dominate…Language is also a place of struggle," hooks writes (2015, 146). Tracing the genealogy of the word "*al-mujadila"* to re-inscribe the woman's body as originally mobilized, liberated and creative, Kahf writes,

> The term *mujadila*, "she who argues,"… comes from the verb *jadala*, which means to "coil" or "braid." Many Qur'anic Arabic words have very tangible ancient meanings related to the flesh and bone of life in pre-Islamic Arabia, then acquire more abstract meanings as Arabic develops. The verb *jadala* means "maneuvering left and right," as one does in *braiding hair*; later it came to mean "to debate." In medieval Islamic discourse, *jadal* came to mean dialectics, a method used in the field of classical theology...No one needed to explain all this to Khawla. She was debating theology, without knowing this activity had a name, without knowing such debate would later be abstracted from practical applications into a field of its own. (2013, 297)

The above politics of location, politics of articulation, and politicized memory constitute Kahf's strategy and the crux of the selected narrative under study.

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf

The narrative traces the journey of the protagonist across time, space, cultures and ideologies in quest of wholeness and “the soul at peace” (Kahf 2006, 122). Deciphering the deeply engraved cultural inscriptions on the woman’s body is intricately interwoven with another consecutive process of therapeutic cleansing and creative re-inscribing, metaphorically represented by bathing and scrubbing of those bodies. The narrative begins with the epigraph “…my creative life is my deepest prayer…” taken from Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. Foregrounding a transcultural path of global affinity with oppressed bodies, the words highlight Kahf’s politics of location, setting the tone for the protagonist’s journey.

Driving her car, the “olive-skinned” (1), veiled immigrant is in a conflicting relation with white Indiana. Her agency is further enhanced by her powerful gaze, the camera, the Quran, and the map of space she possesses, besides the American cultural politics she holds under surveillance. Her subversive word “Liar” (1) highlights the Us/Them ideology generated by a national discourse that dons the mask of democracy, equality and freedom. Nonetheless, Khadra is possessed by an internal conflict and identity crisis. As a journalist, she has to photograph an Islamic conference for the magazine she works for. However, Khadra is repelled by the idea of contributing to the imperial discourse that stereotypes Muslims as oppressive/oppressed bodies/objects. As the third-person narrator puts it, “She cringes at the thought of putting her own community in the spotlight. 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” (48).

Interrogating racist Indiana, Khadra gradually sees through the “darkness” (436) of the Muslim world as well. Resisting the media’s epistemic violence at the novel’s end, she rejects taking photos of Muslim people and joins public prayer. Agency is further enhanced in the final symbolic race scene through Hanifa, Khadra’s friend, driving “a *race* car” (437; see Hasabelnaby 2016, 121). Recalling the Sunni Imam and theologian “Abu Hanifa,” the founder of the Hanafi school of Shari‘a, the meticulously selected name associates empowered women with profound knowledge of Islamic law, theology and sociology. The novel thus delineates the journey of the wounded body from the state of anxiety and agoraphobia to a therapeutic state of wisdom, and serenity.

Deciphering Body Politics

The novel’s opening introduces the empowered protagonist through the politicized language that depicts her eyes “peering” (Kahf 2006, 2) at the landscape. The space expands horizontally to exhibit hegemonic capitalism through economic institutions and advertisements that propagate consumerism and a nationalist discourse of racial purity where products are “100% American” (3) and “KKK 100%

USA" (82). The opening highlights macro politics impacting micro politics. Kahf's 2016 article "Human Rights" is illuminating in this respect as she argues how Western "consumptive lifestyle" and policies are responsible for the "devouring of the world's resources," constructing consumerist bodies and generating extremism, violence and anti-liberal Islam which are "being conducted over bodies, soil, and societies that have been shattered."

Consequently, the journey from the public to the private and from macro to micro politics unravels the impact of power structures on the daily lives of people. Subverting the gaze of the "white men in denim" who "screw their eyes at her" (3), Khadra gazes back at American and Arab cultures to narrate her coming-of-age story. As the third-person narrator puts it, "She rolls the window up, tamps her scarf down on her crinkly dark hair and tries to calm the panic that coming back to Indiana brings to her gut" (3). Susan Bordo's argument, in her article "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity" (1997), can highlight the protagonist's feelings. Bordo studies "the role played by our bodies in the reproduction of gender" (93); she argues that agoraphobia, hysteria and anorexia disorders represent an aggressive gendered "cultural statement" that has always been associated with women (94). Hence, Khadra is, on the one hand, torn between the gendered agoraphobic body that defensively encapsulates itself in the car to escape hierarchical reality, and the resistant body that struggles to subvert oppressive structures, on the other. The scene of the one against the many introduces the Muslim woman as an "actor in the theatre of power" (Richard 2000, 208) and a battleground for the clash of civilizations.

The protagonist's politicized memory recalls the 1970s that witnessed the hate crimes and violence against Muslim American immigrants. In her article "Bodies-Cities" (1999), Elizabeth Grosz examines the "complex" (382) relation between bodies and cities, contending that the "city" is by far "the most immediate locus for the production and circulation of power" (386); it "is a reflection, projection, or product of bodies" (382). However, the city is also "the place where the body is representationally re-explored, transformed, contested, re-inscribed" (386). Hence, in remembering her childhood, the protagonist engages in a process of re-exploration.

In Indianapolis, woman's body is seen in flux, oscillating between docility and resistance. Subjected to gender-based violence, the protagonist recalls her parental home as a place of exclusion and othering where borders are constructed and bodies are segregated. "The house number 1492" (Kahf 2006, 5), inhabited by the Shamy family, exudes the Us/Them ideology and a whole history of cultural conflict, persecution and xenophobia. Memories of the American neighbor's racist words subvert the welcoming sign in the novel's opening. Homophobic words are inscribed along the same lines of the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain in 1492. The school is similarly transformed into another "battle zone" (123). "America was mad at Khadra personally" (119), the third person narrator says. The attack of Iranian revolutionaries on the American embassy is countered by an attack on Khadra's body. Hunted by the schoolboys, Khadra desperately resists the "ripping" of her scarf in two. Violence traumatizes her body as "the topaz scarf brooch" opens, "poking

her skin, drawing blood" (124). Though seen by the American teacher, the attack is totally ignored, epitomizing the ambivalent politics of veiling/unveiling, invisibility/hypervisibility. Consecutive scenes consolidate the image of the Arab woman at "the crossroads," (7, 14), "surviving the minefield of each day" (126).

At home, Khadra's body is controlled by the representatives of East and West, the American boy as an "assailant" (4), on the one hand, and her brother Eyad and his friend Hakim as saviors, on the other. The American boy drives Khadra to run, scream, fall and scrape "her cheekbone on the cracked asphalt" (4). The scene is cast in light of a war zone where Khadra's body resists the violence of the boy "gunning for her" (4). Creating consciousness of biological differences, the brother/rescuer soon alerts Khadra: "Get off Hakim's bike and get on mine. 'Cause he's a boy and Mama might see you" (5).

Elizabeth Grosz argues that "the body is psychically, socially, sexually, and representationally produced" (1999, 381). Eyad's above words unravel how Khadra's parents shape the way she sees herself. While the mother inscribes her gendered perspective on Khadra's body, the father at times, contrastingly, breeds in her a free spirit. The scene of Western persecution anchored in misconceptions about Islam as a threat is subverted by the scene of the father playing joyfully with his daughter, while teaching her the first *Surah* of the Quran, foregrounding the image of Islam as the religion of mercy and love. The words "In the name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate," uttered in Arabic by Khadra while struggling to swing, are intertwined with her father's liberal, empowering words to her to swing on her own: "Lift your legs hard going up. Push them down hard going down" (Kahf 2006, 9). Khadra's fluidity casts her in light of "an astronaut" (9). The symbolic scene can be comprehended through Kahf's words in one of her interviews: "We swing…between invisibility and hypervisibility, erasure and silencing and being objects of interest" (Savage 2017).

Nonetheless, the parents' relation is depicted as gendered violence; marriage from their cultural perspective defines the roles of both man and woman. Though the mother has "a college degree," she deliberately "chose to stay home" based on her belief in her biological role: "She patted her belly, which globed firm and round in front of her." "Her most important work," as the father says, is "making more Muslims…Good-quality Muslims" (Kahf 2006, 21). Confined to domestic borders, the mother's body is consumed by daily chores, performing a role the daughter initially internalizes, yet, later interrogates and subverts.

More ideological borders are inscribed on Khadra's body through her parents who practice a religion devoid of the real spirit of Islam. Khadra recalls ablution as a symbolic act of rebirth and spiritual purification: "*May my hands be instruments of peace, may my mouth speak only truth, may this nose smell the fragrance of holiness, may this face shine with the light of compassion* (11). The previous words delineate the body as a catalyst that generates peace, tolerance and altruism, highlighting the real meaning of "*jihad*" as that with the self and not the other. However, the discourse is soon subverted by the doubly traumatized mother who suffers from the traumatic

memory of rape by her school teacher, and the cultural trauma of immigration. Trauma thus leads the mother to project her fears on the bodies of both her children and the American other.

The fear of the contaminating American other is represented through the body as a medium and water as a metaphor. Seeing Khadra and her brother "mud-spattered," and filled with "impurities" after playing in nature (66), the mother, hysterically scrubs her daughter's body, screaming, "We are not American" (67; see Hasabelnaby 2016, 107). In unconsciously attempting to erase her trauma through hot water, the mother takes her daughter's body as the objective correlative for her pains, reproducing another gendered body. Additionally, voicing her cultural trauma, the mother yells at Eyad: "'Don't go anywhere!'...'You're next!'" (Kahf 2006, 66). The scene can be contextualized within the imperial relation with the previously colonized races where both males and females are gendered. In merging with American landscape, Khadra and Eyad cast themselves as geographical spaces to be occupied by settler colonialism.

At the Dawah Center, located "at the crossroads of America" (14), a map of "The Muslim World" (34) is depicted, separating Muslims and non-Muslims, on the one hand, and Muslim Shi'as and Sunnis, on the other. Body language exercised in Muslim prayers at the Center is politically deciphered as cultural difference. According to the mother, "the *juloos* posture" that the American converts find difficult is the outcome of a stagnant, mechanical, materialistic life that epitomizes the hegemonic imperial system. "Americans hardly ever sit on the floor," Khadra's mother observed; "Their bodies forget how to pray after sitting at tables and desks, working to gain the wealth and glitter of this world" (34).

However, the Dawah Center is also a place of women's empowerment that resists borders and creates future *mujadilas*. Muslim girls there are taught "the Five Pillars" at the hands of the "black" "Uncle Taher who instills in them the right interpretation of Quranic verses and Hadiths (35). Manifesting the first feminist seeds of the woman theologian, the little girls question the meaning of the word "men" and the absence of "women" in "all men are equal." "Men and women are equal," the young girl concludes. Contesting body politics, Uncle Taher sees the girls as the "How Come Girls" (37), foreshadowing an alternative path, grounded in the Muslim women's archive initiated by Khadija, Aisha and Fatima, as three Muslim women who were, respectively, the first to become Muslim, the first theologian, and the closest to Prophet Muhammad's heart (36).

The interconnectedness of body politics, the city, and the nationalist discourse is moreover highlighted in the zoning scene. In *The Color of Law*: *A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, Richard Rothstein examines immigrants and "racial zoning," foregrounding that "Americans are more segregated than they were a 100 years ago." He concludes that "segregated suburbs" are the creation of "local officials" and "national leaders who urged them on, to keep African Americans from being white family neighbors" (quoted in A Better Cambridge). The Dawah Center thus falls subject to the persecution of American racists. From the perspective of Hubbard, a nationalist, homophobic old army officer, the Center is

threatening to American security and culture. Penetrated by the "zoning inspector" (Kahf 2006, 43), the Center exhibits the politics of invisibility/hypervisibility prevalent in both cultures regarding women.

The Victorian house draws upon a whole colonial/imperial history where women's bodies are depicted as battlegrounds. The vociferous Kenyan Zuhura, whose dream is to become a lawyer, presents an oppositional discourse that contests body politics, calling the inspector's attention to the racism of the zoning law. Ironically, Zuhura is invisible to both, the American inspector and Khadra's father, the Dawah's employee. Utilizing a gendered body language, Wajdi orders her to leave: "The white man nodded politely but paid no attention to her…Wajdi gently but firmly signaled for her to go back into the house" (43).

Kahf exposes hierarchical cultural relations through the Muslim parents who ironically act as docile bodies. As a discourse of power, American citizenship penetrates borders and empowers the Shamy family to embark on their long-awaited pilgrimage. The mother's previous words to her children, "We are not American," soon melt when the family takes the oath to "defend the US in war when and if called upon to do so" (142). The father's politicized religion is manifest: "America…is like Islam without Muslims. And our sick and corrupt Muslim home countries – they are Muslims without Islam" (144). Interrogating the parents' double standards, Khadra conjures up all the dead bodies sacrificed by colonial powers in Deir Yassin and Sabra and Shatila by "American guns" (142). "The ugly mask" (149) donned by the parents generates dissidence in "the sixteen-year-old daughter" (149). Khadra radically dons "black headscarves," "stern" clothes and "gaze" (149) and expresses her will to become an "Islamic activist" (154), sacrificing her body for her beliefs.

Reading Body Politics in the East

The protagonist's journey to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Syria is illuminating. "The nakedness and vulnerabilities of (Muslim) bodies" in Mecca during *Haj* epitomize the essence of Islam as an "equalizer" (159). Nevertheless, Saudi culture of segregation between sexes, classes, races and cultures is soon unmasked. Ironically, the veil acquires juxtaposed meanings, oscillating between the sacred and the profane.

The veil is first depicted as an act of transcendence through the feminized body of "*the K'aba*" as "the Lady of Night" and the mother on whose "Lap" the "pilgrims threw themselves" (162; see Hasabelnaby 2016, 110-112). Centrally located, "just as the heart was the center of the body" (163), the Ka'ba generates magical spiritual energy that fertilizes bodies across the globe. Drifting with "the massive tides of pilgrims," Khadra's body is magnetized by "wave after wave" to the center. Her mother's words, "Hold onto Jihad!" (162), signify a rebirth where "the river of people" seems to be "flowing like blood through a vein" (163).

Nonetheless, a hypocritical discourse of gendered violence is unmasked. The previous scene is subverted by a patriarchal culture of objectification and commodification through the discourse on man as a savior/aggressor. Scenes of

herded female bodies and dehumanized men violate the sanctity of the place as Khadra is violently attacked by an old man who is, ironically, protecting his wife:

> A small elderly man jabbed Khadra in the ribs without being aware of it. He was scrambling to keep up with a litter bearing what looked to be his wife. Suddenly a wall of Arab Gulf men stormed through, elbows locked around their women kin. They shoved everyone aside, barking "We have womenfolk, make way for them! …" (162-3)

The veil is also a marker of class distinction generated by a capitalist system, hegemonized by the US. In the Tihamy luxurious home where the Shamy family is hosted, gendered bodies are segregated. The harem world is highlighted through politicized religion where the power of the Saudi *mattawa* police embodies a similar politics of invisibility/hypervisibility. Arrested for going to the mosque without "*a mahram*"[3] (167), Khadra interrogates Saudi body politics, arguing with the *mattawa,* and later with her father, on the discrepancy between Islamic teachings and reality. Negotiating her rights, Khadra uses the *mujadila* method, citing Aisha and Omar's wife as exemplary liberal Muslim women who subverted the harem culture by praying in the mosque as a public space. Khadra's intellectualism is ridiculed by the *mattawa* who utilizes an essentialist discourse of othering: "Listen to *this* woman quoting scriptures at *us*!" (168).

Patriarchal culture is moreover unveiled through the moral laxity of the Tihamy daughter 'Afaf, whose name ironically means chastity. Violating the sanctity of Mecca, Afaaf, unveiled, secretly meets her boyfriend amongst others in the desert. Exposed to sexual harassment at the hands of the rich Saudi, Khadra screamingly foregrounds her Arab identity. Recalling the mother's bathtub scene, Khadra reproduces her mother's hysterical words. The wild nature of the American landscape that contaminates Khadra and Eyad's bodies, from the mother's perspective, is paralleled to the wild-threatening nature of the Saudi landscape. "The desert turns cold on you at night," the Saudi boy tells her (177). Consequently, Khadra believes she "would never emerge pure as a new born babe" (179). Paradoxically, water as a purifying medium in the Haj scene is subverted to signify corruption and contamination. The journey to "*the* Muslim country" (177) culminates in the body engulfed "under such wave upon towering wave of darkness" (178-9). Nonetheless, Khadra's interest in Islamic studies is the positive outcome of that journey.

The narrative sheds light on the body politics exercised in the US by the representatives of both cultures. Though acknowledging Khadra's flawless recitation of the Quran, the Mauritanian *sheikh* denies Khadra the right to join the Quran "contest" on the grounds of an exclusionary patriarchal discourse that sees women's voice as '*awra* (199). Khadra oscillates between invisibility and hypervisibility, power and erasure; she is both angelic and "a Quran-reciting vamp" (204). Such ambivalence runs along the same lines of the paradoxical relation between the Campus Muslim Council and the US regime. Though, according to the media

discourse, the Council is threatening, its members are objectified by the Regan regime as means of colonial intervention. "An official from the Regan State Department was going to explain to the CMC how to expedite trips to Pakistan in aid of the Afghan mujahideen effort against the Soviet Union" (201), the narrator says.

Ironically, the Campus Muslim Council where Khadra meets her future husband promulgates body politics that foreshadow a patriarchal marriage. The "Muslim modesty dance" as a "delicious" (182) cultural practice performed inside the Campus epitomizes how gender is socially/culturally constructed. Based on "the lowering of the gaze" as its "basic move," the dance specifies gender roles, constructs identities, as well as controls bodies: "Having a male gaze lowered before you said, you are a *Woman* to me, with a capital W. What a thrill for a woman newly hatched from her egg of girlhood…Her gaze lowered too, and her lashes lay down on her flushed cheeks" (182). Defining femininity and masculinity, the dance sets the rules for male-female relations. Ironically, the ambivalent pure/voluptuous dichotomy is enhanced through its association with "delicious" food, casting the body in light of "a desiring machine" (Richard 2000, 208). Lowering his gaze in front of her, Jum'a wins Khadra's heart. Like her mother, Khadra, in another scene, reproduces a gendered discourse. "'Your hands are pretty,' he said. 'No—I've always thought of them as dishpan hands.' Her hands made her think of only either prayer or cleaning chores," the narrator adds (Kahf 2006, 211).

It is interesting to note that Khadra's rebellious nature is manifested through her ironic use of her husband's name. In a subversive scene, Khadra politicizes language by translating "Jum'a," her husband's name, to "Friday," calling him "my man Friday." Drawing upon a whole colonial culture of subordination and objectification, Khadra casts her bond in light of a Robinson Crusoe-Friday relation. Her rebellion and transformation are extolled by the chapter's epigraph: "Any insect that undergoes a complete metamorphosis has several life stories, one that describes how it lives in its immature, larval forms, what goes on in its... transformation – and how it behaves as a mature sexual adult" (221).

That said, Khadra gradually transforms from the docile girl who once "nestled her head in the crook of (Juma's) shoulder" (217) into the dissident girl who rejects patriarchy. Endeavoring to exercise his power of erasure, Jum'a opposes her participation in the campus demonstrations and her biking as a seductive act that exposes her body in public. In another scene, Khadra voices her indignation by shouting at her husband who utilizes a gendered discourse that confines women to domestic chores. Though Khadra's rebellious act of abortion can be read as self-inflicted violence, it, nevertheless, can be interpreted as a liberating act that demolishes the shackles of a patriarchal marriage, signifying her full control of her body. Seeing her body in light of a geographical space penetrated by threatening aliens, Khadra thinks that "It certainly was not a baby. It was a growth invading her body…" (247). Abortion in this light is an attempt at erasing all the hegemonic

structures that inscribed themselves on her body. “She wanted to abort the Dawa Center and its entire community” (261-262), the third person narrator elaborates.

Khadra’s painful experience generates a split self: “She loathed that girl, that Khadra. Despised her…Wanted to scratch her face...to cut her (264). Khadra’s self-loathing stems from her awareness that she is responsible for her objectification. Consequently, Sufism comes as an intrinsic therapeutic, liberating medium as the Sufist German professor she meets and the cultural practices she witnesses represent another turning point in her life.

Rape as Gender-Based Violence: From Erasure to Power

Khadra’s journey backward to decipher, cleanse, and heal women’s bodies, spans neocolonial, postcolonial and colonial times. The story of Khadra’s mother, Ibtihaj, that depicts Syria’s postcolonial history under the Baathite regime, is preceded by Teta’s story that is imbricated with the 1948 Palestinian Nakba. The narrative thus represents stories within stories of inscribed female bodies linked through rape as gender-based violence.

As Catherine A. MacKinnon puts it, “In feminist analysis, a rape is not an isolated event or moral transgression or individual interchange gone wrong but an act of terrorism and torture within a systematic context of group subjection” (1997, 42). Similarly, Wendy Harcourt contends that “Rape is not about sex but about power and domination; it involves the loss of control over the body (nation), sexuality and the core of the self” (2009, 97). Moreover, bell hooks highlights rape as a socially constructed discourse of violence that equates masculinity with accessibility to female bodies, arguing that “rape (is) the terrorist act re-enacting the drama of conquest, as men of the dominating group sexually violate the bodies of women who are among the dominated” (2015, 97).

Seen in the above light, the rape and murder of the Kenyan American Zuhura at the hands of racist Americans runs along the story of Ibtihaj’s objectification, first through rape at the hands of her school teacher, and second at the hands of her secular Turkish mother who violently unveils her in public, contaminating her scarf with shit. The story unravels the root of the mother’s anxieties about contamination and filth. As Aunt Razanne tells Khadra, after being raped by her teacher, the fourteen-year-old Ibtihaj “locked herself in the bathroom for hours…Used all the water in the house bathing” (Kahf 2006, 287).

Similarly, Khadra is haunted by memories of Zuhura’s rape and murder following her *henna* night where the femininity of Zuhura’s body is explicitly foregrounded[4]. Her beautiful skin and the act of braiding her hair are cast in light of the Medusa myth. “A feminine figure with slithering locks” (Hastings 2018), the Medusa is an ambivalent figure that oscillates between the sacred and the monstrous, power and erasure. The Medusa, according to myth, is similarly a victim of rape. In her article “The Timeless Myth of Medusa, a Rape Victim Turned into a Monster,” Christobel Hastings writes, “Since Ancient Greece, the snake-haired Gorgon has been a sexualized symbol of women’s rage.” The Medusa’s story transforms rape from erasure to an empowering act of agency that turns patriarchal male bodies to stones,

promising an alternative empowering path for women. The words of the 16th-century poet Gaspero Murtola written on her painting re-inscribe body politics: "Flee, for if your eyes are petrified in amazement, she will turn you to stone" (quoted in Hastings 2018). The painting freezes the moment of rape inscribed on her body, depicting her serpent-like hair and "severed head" dripping blood (Hastings 2018).

In a similar mythical light, Zuhura in the *Henna* scene looked "stunning;" "her braids, gold-beaded in dazzling constellations, clicked pleasantly when she turned her head" (Kahf 2006, 80). The scene culminates in the violation of Muslim place "with rotten eggs and tomatoes," "toilet paper" and "white spray paint" covering "the windowpanes of the clubhouse" (82). The racist scene of the KKK foreshadows Zuhura's violated body. Both scenes represent the body as a text entangled by the politics of invisibility/hypervisibility. Murdered, raped Zuhura is found with "cuts on her hands, her hijab and clothes in shreds" (93). Zuhura's body regenerates itself, reemerging in the previously examined Haj scene in the shape of another girl to empower and stabilize Khadra. "Peace," she whispered in Khadra's ear" (163). Khadra, temporarily shocked by the ongoing male violence, "seemed to surrender herself to the chaos with a sort of trust in its ultimate direction" (163).

Khadra's journey to Syria to visit Teta and the "land that made a boomrang scar on her knee" (266) introduces the discourse of woman as nation. The imbrication of Khadra's story with her grandmother's is metaphorically delineated through Teta's body as a cultural text that unveils individual/collective history of oppression. The scene of Khadra's scrubbing and rescrubbing of Teta's body with soap and hot water is set in complete contrast to Khadra's previously hysterical bathing scene at the hands of her mother. In contrast to the mother who suppresses her pain, Khadra adamantly engages in a process of deciphering, re-inscribing and liberating women's bodies across times, empowered by politicized memory activated by Teta's body and narrative.

"Syria was Teta, sitting on a wet wooden crate in the bath with a modesty cloth on her lap...Her sloping back…soaping and soaping it, pouring warm water over it. Happy as a baby in the water and loving to talk" (270). Teta's story delineates her/Syria as an independent frugal woman who manages to maneuver her way through life difficulties. She saves money and recycles bathing water to water the house plants. In contrast to Khadra's parents, Teta crosses borders. In Indianapolis, Teta easily connects with Mrs. Moore, Khadra's neighbor (see Hasabelnaby 2016, 117). The meeting foregrounds a transcultural statement signified by the multiple languages both women used to communicate with, English, French and Arabic. Teta was the "new woman," the aborted promise for an empowered decolonized Syria that was doubly oppressed by patriarchal culture that rejected her love, on the one hand, and colonial powers in both Syria and Palestine, on the other. In eloping with her Circassian husband to Haifa, Teta was an eyewitness to the 1948 Nakba (272). Bathing and storytelling are therapeutic. "I can feel all my pores open," (276) Teta says.

Regenerated, Khadra travels back. In scrubbing Teta's body and witnessing the tolerance epitomized by representatives of different religions, Khadra heals her wounds as well. After death, Teta's body remains intact. Woman as land, cultivating new generations, is enhanced through Teta's identification with gardening, besides Khadra herself.

Unlike her mother, Khadra faces her fears and revisits Zuhura's murder site in the final bridge scene, transforming trauma into power. The hysterical tears of Khadra's mother while bathing Khadra as a child are countered by Khadra's therapeutic "wails and wails in the midst of the Clash of Civilizations," culminating in her "sane voice" (430). Recalling the childhood scene of the mud-spattered Khadra, the scene depicts the protagonist's body "covered head to toe in mud" (430). Contrastingly, water is intrinsic for erasing past oppressive inscriptions. The contaminating discourse is finally cleansed through the deliberate act of bathing as a cathartic therapeutic act of agency and spiritual consciousness. The scene that depicts both Khadra and her younger brother Jihad at the end is worthy of note:

> She takes his arm and pulls him down into the mud with her and gives a piercing wail…The body does it with its own will. The body becomes a reed for the sound to blow through…She has never cried over Zuhura before...the hate and hurt inside that eats us.…now takes the shape of white men in hoods and cops who beat what they call nonhumans and now takes the shape of Muslims who murder not for justice in the end, no matter their claims, but for rage and revenge and despair…Khadra wails and wails in the midst of the Clash of civilizations…I'm covered head to toe in mud. I need a bath. (428-430)

Khadra's bathing/cleansing signifies the beginning of a new path of wholeness, subjectivity and agency, anchored in embracing "love" of "all…families" (433) as she encouragingly tells her brother who is in love with his Mormon neighbor.

The final chapter ends with the words of the Muslim Sufi Ibn Alarabi, "All Paths are Circular," crystallizing the protagonist's spiritual growth and the Sufi wisdom she harbors, a perspective that deconstructs dichotomies and tolerates Muslims, Jews and Christians of all cultures and sexes. Resistance to the ambivalent discourse of invisibility/"hypervisibility" culminates in creating a trans-cultural/trans-national discourse anchored in human rights and love as an inclusive healing force. Kahf's protagonist finds love in Sufism as a safe haven and a therapeutic "glorious" (441) path that grants her a "soul at peace?" (122) and "takes her…into the state of pure surrender" (441).

Conclusion

In her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf,* Kahf represents the macro politics that impact the micro politics or the daily lives of people in general and women in particular. The stories of Muslim women's bodies as cultural products are stories of power relations that are anchored in patriarchal, colonial/postcolonial/neocolonial

history. Appropriating selected Western feminist tactics, intertwined with the Muslim feminist concept of "*mujadila,*" Kahf introduces a protagonist who embarks on a journey of consecutive conflict with all discourses of othering, silencing, negation and appropriation through a constant process of re-visioning, deciphering, healing, and re-inscribing of Muslim women's bodies.

Kahf revisits the meaning of "Jihad," the veil, and the Muslim woman. The term "Jihad," as an explosive term deeply entrenched in Western collective consciousness and associated with Islam as a religion of terrorism and extremism, is contested and subverted through unveiling body politics. The term is re-explored to be the Jihad, or the conflict, with the Self for wholeness and peace. "Jihad" is the transcultural war waged through women's bodies against exclusionary discourses like "invisibility/hypervisibility," "Us/Them," "the clash of civilizations" and the "War on Terror," as signified by the symbolic merging of Khadra's body with Jihad's at the end. Through the Muslim woman's body, Kahf creates awareness of the threatening role of knowledge production embodied by such discourses as the real terror that has colonized minds and constructed borders. Voicing her politics of location at the novel's end, the protagonist states, "I cannot operate from fear any more" (436).

Body politics generated by hegemonic powers have terrorized people all over the globe, constructing homes as exclusionary places of intolerance. Based on human rights and the body as a medium, Kahf develops her argument from the ethnic and racist to the humanitarian/Sufist, deconstructing the borders of race, ethnicity and gender. Through her protagonist, Kahf occupies a "profound edge" and a "radical creative space" (hooks 2015, 209) that empower people to envision alternative homes of inclusion. bell hooks' definition of home is, therefore, worthy of note to highlight Kahf's cultural positionality and transcultural home:

> Indeed, the very meaning of home changes with the experience of decolonization, of radicalization. At times, home is nowhere…home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables varied and ever changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference… (2015, 205)

Like her protagonist, Kahf celebrates her fluid identity, representing the body of the Muslim American woman as a cultural text that embraces the two parts of the Self. As Khadra finally puts it: "*Hello, self! Can we meet at last?*" (Kahf 2006, 248).

Notes

[1] Nawal Els'adawy is amongst many Muslim feminists who critique the veil as a signifier of patriarchy and misinterpreted religious texts. In contrast, Martha Nussbaum, for example, rejects the policy of the bans of *niqab* in many Western countries from a human rights' perspective. Seeing it as "discriminatory," Nussbaum writes, "All human beings are equal bearers of human dignity" (2010).

[2] Sister of Mu 'awiya and mother of Yazid, the poetess was famous for the performance of her elegies, following the death of her children in battle during the 7th century.

[3] In the past, a foreign female could not get into Saudi Arabia without a male relative.

[4] Bidding farewell to a life and anticipating a more fertile future, the night exemplifies gendered body politics where female beauty and femininity as assets are celebrated by tattooing the body with *henna.*

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