

## Voiced or Voiceless: A Study of Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

**Mirza Sadaf Fatima**

Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Jamia Millia Islamia  
New Delhi

### Abstract

Muslim women have been a highly debated topic for the longest time, be it the hijab or their lack of agency. She has been talked about, categorized and judged both by the west as well as her own community. There are a lot of stereotypes surrounding this diverse group. But what has been missing in this debate is her perspective. Her side of the debate is either missing or being (mis)presented by somebody else. The paper aims to look at one such work, by Mohja Kahf, where she is trying to put forward experiences of a regular Muslim girl. The paper looks forward to analyzing Kahf's debut novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, in an attempt to see who really a Muslim woman is. Does she have a voice or not? The stereotypical image of a Muslim woman is problematic because the diverse group cannot be categorized and homogenized and at the same time it suppresses the basic human rights of these women.

**Keywords:** Muslim Woman, Stereotype, Voice, Agency, Coming-of-age, Perspective.

Muslim woman is a highly debated topic. A simple definition would be a woman who believes in the teachings of the Quran and the Hadith, thus follows Islam as her religion. Over the years this term has come to be associated with multiple stereotypes that have become part of the definition making it complex and contentious. The term comes with multiple connotations. When we talk about Muslim women, we are not talking about a monolithic group but a mosaic of different cultures, traditions, colors, races and identities.

It is important to study Muslim woman in her own environment and look at her identity both as a Muslim and a woman through her own eyes. It is important to analyse how she is seen and how she sees her own self. Over the years we have seen numerous books written about Muslim women or women in Islam. These works were either written by men or somebody from the West as an instruction manual to Muslim women. These books tell how the ideal Muslim woman should be, how she should behave and what should be her perspective. Narratives from the western academia show her as oppressed, a victim who needs to be saved. These works may have had high value academically, but they did nothing for the women they talked about. Her individual experiences and struggles, her lived reality were missing from the entire debate of which she was the central character. The patriarchal writings by men talked only about the role of women in the Quran, the status she has in Islam, but no work was done about their ground reality and application of the status she had.

In her book titled *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History and Ideology*, Lamia Ben Youssef ZayZafoon talks about how, as a 'single category' the 'Muslim woman' is an 'invention' in all discourses, be it of the East or the West. It is a subject 'produced' to serve political and ideological ends. The writer considers "Muslim Women" as a heterogenous group based on their racial, class and educational differences, as usually they are taken as a homogenous group based on their religion. (Zayzafoon,3)

Generally Muslim women are emancipated and highly vocal, but the stereotypes claim otherwise. The popular stereotypes categorize Muslim women to be oppressed, lacking agency, victims and so on. There are Muslim women in sports, politics, academics, journalism and every field possible. Though when we hear about these women from diverse backgrounds doing great in different fields we only see them as Muslim Women breaking boundaries which is problematic because these women are breaking glass ceilings and reaching places difficult for women in face of patriarchy and male dominance. In the process creating a path towards inclusivity of Muslim Women. Instead of being the 'Other' she should be a part of the fabric of the mainstream narrative.

Mohja Kahf, an Arab American writer in her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* weaves a beautiful journey of a Muslim girl's growth both physical and mental, which lies in her journey from being a Muslim just because of being born to Muslim parents and ends up with understanding and acceptance. It is a coming-of-age novel. Mohja Kahf's work deals with a number of relevant issues like religion, culture, veil and identity. In her work we find traces of cultural dissonance. Nation and nationhood hold central stage. Her analysis of belongingness in an adopted nation is really refreshing and helps in understand the need for an Arab-American literature. In her article *Spare Me the Sermon on Muslim Women* published in 2008 in the Washington Post she says, "Being Muslim is a joyful thing". It is a refreshing piece that talks about joys of being a Muslim especially a Muslim woman and the joy the colorful veils give her, instead of the usual lamentations about the veil and its oppression. Her character again is nothing like the stereotypical Muslim woman. These are women who one can related to rather than the stereotype trying to define them. She also talks about the rights Islam gives her as a Muslim Woman and long before other women got them. As a poet she has won critical acclaim. She has also written a scholarly critical work *Western Representation of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* which was published in 1999. Her 2006 novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a work of fiction with some resonances from her life.

*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* was the debut work of Mohja Kahf, published in 2006.

Mohja Kahf (1967) is an Arab-American author, poet and professor. To her credit she has numerous scholarly works, prose and poetry as well. She has published in numerous journals and anthologies. She serves as a faculty member in University of Arkansas. She is one of the prominent voices coming out of the Muslim world in general and Arab-American in particular questioning the stereotype of the "Muslim Woman". She not only problematizes the issues women face outside the community but also within the community. Prominent themes in Kahf's work are culture, Islam, Muslim Woman, politics, feminism, human rights and race. The constant tussle between home and adopted nation and the issues of identity finds place in her works. The struggle to fit in and still maintain one's individuality is seen in her works.

Mohja Kahf in her works tries to "demystify" Muslims and their practices and also tries to 're-work the incorrect image created of the "Muslim Woman"'. This aim of her to show Muslim Women in the right light as regular people and not some exotic creatures, is evident

in her works across genres. In her prominent work of poetry *E-mails from Scheherazade* (2003), in her scholarly work *Western Representation of Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999) and also in her novel *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf* (2006) you can find her breaking the popular stereotypes against Islam, veil and Muslim Women. Her aim is to educate and empower as Khaled Mattawa says, "Aiming to educate non-Muslim audiences and to empower fellow practicing Muslim Women...".

Muslim Women for the longest time have been represented by voices which are not their own. These voices do not get the nuances of lives of Muslim women and their lived reality.

*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is her debut novel, and it was published in 2006. The author insists it is not an autobiography, but she has borrowed from her own life in America. It is a story of a young Muslim girl growing up in America. Kahf looks into the cultural encounters of a Muslim woman in America, including racism among Muslims and prejudices from non-Muslim Americans. Purnima Bose in her review of the novel calls it "a female bildungsroman set in the American heartland." It won't be wrong to call it so because it is a typical 'coming of age' story, a story of growth both intellectual and spiritual of the protagonist Khadra Shamy.

Prejudice, bigotry, intolerance is faced by Khadra at different levels. How she overcomes these prejudices and outgrows them and unravels her identity, accepting and rejecting certain notions and norms. The narrative spans over a period of twenty years. We see Khadra grow from a kid to a mature young woman.

In the span of the novel we come across numerous Muslim women who celebrate the diversity present in Muslim Women around the globe. They are all different from each other the only uniting factor being their faith, even which they practice differently. Khadra's mother Ebtehaj, her grandmother Teta, Zuhra the martyr and Maryam her friend all are strong empowered women. They are nothing like the stereotypical image of the Muslim woman. Her mother wanted to be a doctor and serve the poor. She had a college degree, but she chose to stay home for the children, to raise a family. She presents the image of an ambitious woman. Her grandmother Teta, was another inspirational woman in her life. She was a telephone operator, when working woman was not an concept. She was among, "the very first wave of working women." (Kahf,271) She calls her friends and herself "New Woman" (Kahf,271) who did not conform to the norms of the society. Zuhra was murdered but she was strong vocal woman who stood for rights of women. She was a role model to her little sisters. Khadra's friend Maryam, is another independent and empowered Muslim woman. She presents to Khadra a different perspective. Kahf says, "This friend mapped Muslim space in a new way to Khadra. Maryam's thing was service. Service to the poor is service to God. "That's the Sunnah," she said. "I don't have to be working with only Muslims or Muslim issues or Muslim this or Muslim that. By representing impoverished defendants, I'm manifesting Muslim values in my life. We don't need a ghetto mentality." (Kahf, 367) Maryam is symbolic of a practicing Muslim and an American citizen, rolled in one. She has adapted her Muslim values and American life to create a new unique identity, that does not confer to patriarchal stereotypes or to the Western narrative of how a Muslim woman should be like. She focuses on the basic teachings of Islam, and believes Muslims need to demonstrate their faith in their behavior. Along with different women we also come across different opinions. These opinions help Khadra to understand the heterogenous community that Muslim women are rather than monolithic image that is usually presented. Also all these women present a picture which is opposite of the stereotypical voiceless Muslim woman.

Khadra can be called an Muslim Feminist, for sake of ease, as she doesn't discard her identity as a Muslim Woman but sets on a journey to get a better understanding of it and comes out with stronger and well-understood faith which belongs to her and hasn't been a hands-down from her parents or community. She does all this "within an Islamic framework". The standpoint she chooses to take is within her faith. The work is inspired by the authors own life. Khadra's experiences are similar to those of Mohja Kahf's, a coming-of-age narrative of a Muslim girl in America.

The works of contemporary Muslim women writers aim to normalize being a Muslim woman. Khadra's experiences as a Muslim woman is something millions of Muslim women around the globe resonate with, especially in the present times. The questions about veil, being Muslim and the rampant misconceptions are part of every Muslim woman's daily life, especially one who is 'visibly' Muslim.

Khadra's marriage and divorce bring to light important questions about rights of women. This stands true for women around the globe irrespective of religion. The image of the typical wife varies from culture to culture, but the general idea is the same. Women are expected to behave a certain way and fulfill a set of duties. And she is supposed to fulfill these duties according to her husband and their culture. Often it is sold to women as ordained by God and taught by religion. Khadra's husband Jummah expects her to behave differently after they are married. Things she did before marriage, like riding a bike and studying for an exam rather taking care for the house, suddenly become issues of marital conflict. The expectations that he has are not born in his mind, but it is what he has seen around him in his society and has absorbed while growing up. These unrealistic expectations from women are again a deep-rooted problem in our societies, where over the years a certain role for women has been set irrespective of her individuality and personal experiences. She is expected to juggle multiple roles irrespective of her capacity and needs.

In the analysis of the novel, the aim is not to build a new category of Muslim women but to observe the diversity and open up space for differences. No doubt there are women who are oppressed but in no way do they represent the diverse group called Muslim women. They cannot be the face of a vivacious group, like Khadra Shamy or Mohja Kahf do not represent a community but introduce us to the variations available. Difference in opinions is not a new concept. It is quite problematic when Muslim women are stereotyped and assumed to be a certain type. The negative image that is propagated is not acceptable to millions of women around the globe who are not voiceless, whose lives like other women around the globe are full of ups and downs, successes and failures. I would like to end with a quote by Meghan Markle,

"Women don't need to find their voice they need to be empowered to use it and people need to be urged to listen".

#### Works cited:

- Kahf, Mohja. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Public Affairs, USA, 2006.  
 Kahf, Mohja. Spare Me the Sermon On Muslim Women. Washington Post, 2008.  
 Zayzafoon, Lamia Ben Youssef. *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History and Ideology*. Lexington: USA.2005.Print.  
 Badran, Margot. *Feminisms In Islam*. One world: Oxford.2011.Print.