

# Muslim Feminist Agency and Arab American Literature: A Case Study of Mohja Kahf's *the girl in the tangerine scarf*

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## Abstract:

Mohja Kahf's novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* highlights a broad spectrum of Muslim feminist agencies. In this essay I look at how her literary representations negotiate religious and feminist discourses in doing so. I further argue that her focus on empowerment through self-defined spirituality and religion sets her novel apart within the canon of contemporary Arab American literature, as most other Arab American feminist narratives focus rather on re-appropriations of orientalist Scheherazade figures to reclaim the transnational histories of Muslim women's agency. The genre of the Arab American novel has experienced a veritable boom in the post 9/11 era. However, this rise is located within contemporary neo-Orientalisms and remains in an uneasy relationship to stereotypical audience expectations and to the marketing demands on 'Muslim women' to represent not themselves, but the supposed blanket oppression of women in Islam. Steven Salaita points to the inherent tensions between orientalist audience expectations and artistic self-representation in Arab American cultural production. Mohja Kahf picks up on this tension in her own theoretical work, but shifts our attention to the intersectional specificity encountered by Muslim feminist writers who have to work within both Western Orientalisms and the disapproval of Muslim conservatives who denounce feminism as a Western import and refuse any critique of their own patriarchy. Kahf suggests a constant double critique and careful contextualization to counter this double bind, and in this essay I not only analyze how she translates this approach into her own creative writing, but I also explore how her novel connects literary activism to Muslim feminist religious scholarship by developing a more expansive, non-binary way of conceiving Muslim women's agencies.

1 Mohja Kahf, a Muslim feminist, Arab American writer, dedicates her scholarly and creative work to fighting orientalist stereotypes and systemic intersections of sexism and racism. Muslim feminist authors in the US often find themselves in a double bind: common Western perceptions of Muslim women's victimhood ignore Muslim women's agency, while patriarchal Islamic scholars consider feminism a Western import and thus foreign to Islam. As a result of this double bind many people, in the so-called East and West, consider feminism and Islam mutually exclusive positions (Badran). Kahf's literary fight thus cuts both ways: against a Western reception environment where Orientalism construes any critique of patriarchal and oppressive instances in Muslim communities as 'proof' of Islamic backwardness, and against conservative Muslim circles who condemn feminist critiques from within as airing dirty laundry (Kahf "The Pity"). Both reactions dismiss or obscure the concrete and varied concerns of Muslim women and Kahf's poetry and fiction set out to challenge this double bind that also threatens to limit her means of literary expression.

2 In this essay, I trace how Kahf translates her own Muslim feminist agency into literature and I argue that her aesthetic choices help us to better understand ambivalences in Muslim feminist political agency at large. Her novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006) relates the coming-of-age story of Khadra, a girl born into a religiously conservative family, who grows up to be an independent, self-defined Muslim American woman. Her experiences growing up reflect the interlocking discriminations Arab and Muslim American women experience in the US and the narrative develops an explicitly Muslim feminist outlook. I propose to read Kahf's novel thus not only as a manifestation of Arab American literature, but also as a re-evaluation of religious agency and as an act of feminist self-writing. I argue that Kahf draws from both the tradition of women of color literary activism in the US and transnational Muslim feminist perspectives in her writing, but that it is also important to specifically highlight her representation of women's religious agency – a neglected perspective within secular Western feminisms that may hold the potential to undermine the power of the double bind over Muslim feminists' artistic and personal possibilities.

### **Toward a Muslim feminist agency in Arab American literature**

3 Contemporary Arab American women's literature is transnational in its genesis and development. It is born out of a dialogue and exchange of various multi-ethnic US literatures and feminisms and defined via a simultaneous/hybrid authorial east- and westward gaze (see Ludescher; Williams; Salaita; Majaj; Hassan and Knopf-Newman). In the contemporary US context, the growing presence of literary-politically active Arab American woman writers, like Mohja Kahf, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Etel Adnan, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Diana Abu Jaber has significantly strengthened and defined an Arab American feminist movement within literature. In the US, Arab American feminist writers struggle not only with patriarchal frameworks in Muslim communities that consider feminism a Western intervention, but their work is often caught in between mainstream US Orientalisms and global feminisms' stereotypes – the above mentioned double bind. US imaginations about ethnic literatures at large are fraught with such hegemonic pitfalls, but the development of a simplistic Western global feminist attitude toward the oppression of Muslim women has become a particularly prominent part of this trend, reflected in the post-9/11 boom of Muslim women's memoirs in the US. Such memoirs sell 'Muslim women as victim' narratives and position their authors as native informants who can reveal the hidden lives of Muslim women to Western readers. In these texts, the veil is frequently cited as a symbol of oppression, which confirms existing stereotypes, but also facilitates access of Muslim authors as native informants into the literary

market and public discourses (e.g. *Reading Lolita in Teheran* by Azar Nafisi (2003) or the purely fictional *Honor Lost* (2006) by Norma Khouri sold as non-fictional memoir). Such memoirs have helped to promote the contemporary peak in negative and orientalist stereotypes<sup>1</sup> about Muslim women and oppression (see Abu-Lughod; Lazreg; Adulahdi et.al), which forms an inevitable backdrop for the production and reception of Arab American literature.

4 The associations of Islam with oppression of women have become so prevalent after 9/11 that gender and religion have been collapsed and completely merged into one category, which is often visually represented by the image of the veiled, oppressed Muslim woman. Miriam Cooke has coined the term “muslimwoman” to denote this conflation in language as well (Cooke “Rejoinder” 117). The overwhelming power of this image usually precludes any deeper discussions about the real-life needs of Muslim women, but Kahf’s novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* uses literature to tap into the popular appeal of the trope of the oppressed veiled Muslim woman to then subvert her audiences’ expectations. She dissects the detrimental impact of orientalist stereotypes on Muslim women’s lives and highlights women’s agency within religious contexts, while simultaneously taking aim at Muslim patriarchal practices. Leading Arab American scholars Steven Salaita and Gregory Orfalea praise *the girl in the tangerine scarf’s* for its political relevance, but at the same time they consider its representational politics too “didactic” (Orfalea 187). Salaita states that “*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* often reads like a social document embedded in the genre of fiction” (*Modern* 40). This view implies a lesser literary value and importance of the novel for the development of Arab American fiction. In this essay I propose a different reading of Kahf’s supposed didacticism. I theorize her aesthetic choices as a form of literary activism that foregrounds Muslim feminist agency within contemporary developments of Arab American literature.

5 Feminism has always had a special affinity to literature, offering a creative platform to envision political changes in both Eastern and Western contexts (Goodman 2). Prominent examples in Middle Eastern literary feminisms include, for example, Assia Djerba’s work in Algeria or Nawal El Sadaawi in Egypt<sup>2</sup>. Djerba and El Saadawi both use literature and

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<sup>1</sup> Lazreg sharply criticizes that contemporary global feminism, heir to Second Wave feminist universalism, studies the world, but excludes itself from the subjects of study. Especially Western readers of Arab women’s memoirs practice a “triumphant feminist discourse” (29) that does not address actual diversity but merely “difference from itself” (30) to assert the superiority of a Western feminism and its conception of freedom (29-39).

<sup>2</sup> Assia Djerba develops an alternative to Western cultural forms of feminist resistance, fighting women’s double oppression by both colonialism and political Islam in Algeria. She bridges not only Arab and French feminist ideas but also creatively re-works feminist figures of Islamic history and Scheherazade’s fictional agency in

storytelling as tools of feminist resistance fighting the intersecting oppression of strict Islamic gender codes and colonial state legacies. Kahf continues this tradition of a double critique in the US, but her specific post 9/11 double bind emerges out of the intersections of American and Muslim patriarchies with Islamophobia and sexism. A re-evaluation of women's religious agency is essential to redressing the notion of Muslim women's supposed inferiority in both these contexts and literature may take a key role in this endeavor. In their 2011 anthology on Arab American feminism, Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber explicitly call on fiction, rather than memoirs, to fight orientalist stereotyping via "strategic narration instead of confessional or positivist testimonies" (xxx). In this light, Kahf's intellectual battles have direct significance for the development of the contemporary Arab American novel and, as I will argue below, for the development of a more multifaceted understanding of Muslim feminist agency.

6 Kahf herself is acutely aware of the limitations Orientalisms and global feminisms produce in literary publishing for Arab American women writers (Amireh and Majaj). She addresses the unavoidable discursive confrontation with Orientalisms writing in English in the US and the importance of reception environments in her scholarly work, but she also deals with the expectations of being a native informant for an US ethnic literary market creatively in the frame tale of *the girl in the tangerine scarf*. The meta-story to the coming-of-age narrative is Khadra's return to Indiana as an adult. Adult Khadra works for a liberal East Coast magazine as a photographer and is sent back to write a report about her old Muslim communities. Her editor is thrilled that she is a former member of the local religious community and he represents liberal American orientalist ignorance in that he wants a story on "Behind the veil! Wow! A keyhole view of the hidden, inside world of Muslims" (Kahf, *the girl* 48). Khadra only reluctantly accepts the job when he guarantees her full artistic liberty to show and represent whatever she chooses. Once she arrives at the conference she then finds herself pressured by her former local community leaders to not write about issues of gender discrimination; for example, Khadra comes to cover a local concert at a religious conference and the scheduled performance of a girl group caused such an uproar that their performance was subsequently cancelled (413). Despite being "tired of everyone putting that on us. Every single thing we do has to 'represent' for the community. (...) For the Prophet's sake, just let us *be*" (399), Khadra resists the pressure from both sides of the double bind and

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saving other women from cruel violence (Hiddelston 231). The life and writings of El Sadaawi in Egypt further reflect how inseparable her creative work is from her activism (Cooke "Nawal" 215). El Sadaawi used her public voice to criticize both oppressive Egyptian state rule and Islamists increasing influence on restricting women's public lives (218).

she decides to report anything and everything, as complete a picture as possible. This fictional frame negotiates central concerns Kahf also develops in her own scholarly writings. She asks her readers not to reduce Muslim women to being either victims, escapees or pawns of their culture<sup>3</sup> (Kahf “The Pity”). To reach beyond this limited frame of reception, Arab American writers often adapt orientalist tropes to gain public visibility and then subvert audience expectations from within. The most popular approach in this regard is the re-appropriation of the Scheherazade narrative as a precedent of Muslim women’s historical agency in contemporary Arab American literature (Sabry; Darraj). Kahf herself draws on the Scheherazade trope, especially in her poetry, but her novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* points to a yet another avenue for reclaiming Muslim women’s agency that has so far been not as widely considered: The role of religion and the specific possibilities of a Muslim feminist authorial agency in the emergence of Arab American feminist literature.

7 Feminist religious scholars and authors share many of the pressures and double binds outlined above. Religious scholars who look to the Qu’ran to re-claim women’s rights have also struggled to formulate their own project in between the hegemonic Othering of colonialists and the androcentric and patriarchal scholarly traditions perpetuated by Islamic religious authorities (Lamprey 27-8). Fatima Mernissi, a leading Muslim feminist scholar of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seeks to unequivocally situate feminism as an integral part of Islam stating that “[w]e Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of Muslim tradition” (viii). Mernissi has helped to publicize a form of Muslim feminism that bases itself on egalitarian reinterpretations of the Holy Scriptures and the celebration of early female leaders in Islam; a strategy embedded in a longer history of emerging Muslim feminist thought, and carried on today by feminist theological scholars like Amina Wadud in the US. However, the relationship between Islam and feminism remains complex. Lamprey points out that prioritizing precedent has been an important stepping stone for Muslim feminisms, but it is not sufficient to break through all the red tape of androcentric, patriarchal religious authority (32-3). The assertion of interpretative agency over Islamic scripture remains the only viable option for religious feminist resistance at the time, but recent scholarship has had

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<sup>3</sup> Leti Volpp argues that “to posit feminism and multiculturalism as oppositional is to assume that minority women are victims of their cultures” (“Feminism” 1185). This old argument opposes race to gender and provides a theoretical basis for imperial feminism, because it renders certain cultures or religions as inherently violent against women, while turning a blind eye to Western culture’s oppression of women. It thus posits women will be better off without their respective cultures, which not only obscures the agency of women within patriarchal societies, but also condones and even encourages US violent interventions.

to grapple with the limitations of this approach as not all passages of the Qu’ran can be re-interpreted in an egalitarian way and the question of feminist agency within Islamic theology remains unresolved as Western terms of feminist agency may end up being rather oppressive than expressive for Muslim women. However, the ambivalence of different approaches to how a Muslim feminist approach could look like constitutes a useful tension that can foreground “diversity among women and traditions” and is further “not only an assertion of agency but also a position adopted in reaction to hegemonic, androcentric, and patriarchal discourses” (Lampthey 27).

8 Lampthey thus suggests that new, multifaceted and complex approaches are necessary to develop truly egalitarian Islamic discourses and she envisions a broader, more comparative Muslima theology in religious studies to this end. From a literary and cultural studies perspective, she is essentially calling for a re-evaluation of religious agency within a framework of transnational feminist ambivalence. Transnational feminism highlights local differences within feminist practices and is as a theoretical intervention into the facile global feminisms outlined above. I then propose to turn to Kahf’s writing as a literary platform that can productively hold the ambivalences and tensions embedded in Muslim and transnational feminist scholarship and thus develop new, multifaceted visions of Muslim feminist agency embedded in daily life and religious practices. A less biased understanding of women’s religious agency, which is nevertheless committed to feminist political goals, is the key to this vision and to more realistic public representations of Muslim women’s lives outside the East/West double bind. To begin such a re-evaluation of Muslim women’s agency in literary terms, it is instructive to turn to Saba Mahmood’s ethnographic analysis of the socially conservative Egyptian Mosque Movement, as she explores the stakes and possibilities of Egyptian women’s varied, also explicitly conservative, agencies within religious authority.

9 Mahmood is invested in rethinking the concept of agency as more than just a mode of resistance and subversion of representations (10). Despite being unconformable with religious aspects in public life herself, she nevertheless challenges Western feminist blind spots that reduce women’s agency to normative perceptions of progressiveness. Monolithic secular views of a ‘backward’ Islamic revival cannot account for the complexities Mahmood observed within this movement, such as pro-democracy Islamic parties, Islamic welfare organizations and its popularity among people. Mahmood follows local women dawha<sup>4</sup> leaders who claim power via their public performances of piety. These performances allow them in turn to raise women’s issues and utilize the space for negotiation awarded to them as

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<sup>4</sup> Dawha is the umbrella term for missionary movements in the Islamic revival of the last decades that urge fellow Sunni Muslims to greater piety (Mahmood 57).

pious women within the patriarchal system of the four accepted schools of Islamic law. Mahmood's and Kahf's work share these dawha women as a point of departure. Kahf's protagonists, Khadra's family, are also part of a dawha movement and settle in the US to preach to local Muslim communities in Indiana. Further, both Mahmood and Kahf aim to broaden our understanding of the modalities of agency within conservative women's lives to find ways of doing and thinking feminism that do not violate other ways of life or cooperate with neoimperial politics that simply cast Muslim women as victims of Islam to justify Western military interventions in the Middle East.

10 While they share a broader understanding of agency, Kahf nevertheless engages much more directly in developing an alternative Muslim feminist vision that may emerge out of women's religious convictions. Mahmood calls for more humility and for the acknowledgement of "feminist uncertainty" (196) in terms of understanding non-progressive movements in feminist analysis, but she stops short of asking how then more diverse Islamic/Muslim practices, or even the performance of piety in the Mosque movement, could promote change of the prevailing norms. To better understand the potential political implications of conservative practices by Muslim women, it is helpful to expand Mahmood's view of agency with Serene Khader's analysis of adaptive preference. Khader's conception of adaptive preferences acknowledges "agency in people who perpetuate their oppression" (304). This may be easily misconstrued as another perpetuation of colonial stereotypes about Muslim women's victimhood, but Khader's work offers a nuanced understanding of how oppressed women develop preferences that actually support their subordinate positions to better survive in unjust circumstances. This is in itself a form of agency within patriarchy, but it does not preclude feminist political goals for change – if the situation were to improve, then their preferences would change too. Such adaptive preferences, which perpetuate oppressive norms, are by no means restricted to 'Third world' women. Khader further points out that also Western women adapt their own preferences to meet, for example, sexist beauty standards or the demands of a gendered labor market. Rather than ignoring such pressures on women, the acknowledgment of adaptive preferences makes material constraints placed on women visible and at the same time it reveals that they are by no means 'true' preferences, but rather mechanisms of functioning within patriarchies that display agency in "active reflection about norms and options" (313).

11 In her writing Kahf then brings together a multifaceted understanding of Muslim women's agency within various, intersecting US American and Muslim patriarchies and a feminist political vision that builds on the tenants of Muslim feminist re-interpretation of

Quranic sources as well as on Kahf's own experiences as an Arab American feminist and scholar trained in the US. I argue that it is the combination of these approaches that allows Kahf to work within and beyond her specific double bind as a US based Muslim American feminist writer. She adapts her writing to some degree to orientalist and religious audience demands; an adaptive preference of sorts that allows her writing to function on the US literary market and to maintain an unapologetic affiliation to a Muslim identity, but her positive emphasis on women's religious agency utilizes this public visibility to change the terms of discussion that frame Muslim feminist agency altogether. Kahf's choice to highlight a broad spectrum of Muslim feminist agency, progressive and non-progressive ones, thus also goes beyond the more common Arab American feminist re-appropriations of orientalist figures like Scheherazade, which sets her novel *the girl in the tangerine scarf* apart within the canon of contemporary Arab American literature. Finally, her creative exploration of how to improve women's lives and rights within multiple, intersecting oppressive forces develops a Muslim feminist literary agency that strives to upset the exclusionary terms and material consequences of both ethno-nationalist Orientalisms and religious patriarchy – a deeply political, transnationally feminist goal.

### **Beyond the Double Bind with *the girl with the tangerine scarf***

12 In *the girl with the tangerine scarf*, Islam is represented as being part of America. The mere fact of placing Islam as a heterogeneous religious practice within American culture directly challenges East/West binaries (Salaita 32). In the novel, Kahf tells the coming-of-age story of Khadra, a girl born into a conservative missionary Muslim family that settles in Indiana. Khadra grows up as a devout believer who draws strength from her faith while encountering hypocrisies in various Muslim as well as broader American communities. In her adult life, she marries but then decides, despite family pressure, to abort and divorce, to be able to continue her studies. She recovers from this blow, living for a while with her wise grandmother Téta in Syria, and when Khadra returns to the US she has become a self-conscious American Muslim woman who defines her own life and faith, drawing on her ancestry and her own interpretation of Islam.

13 The basic plot lines and settings already go beyond the nationalist-orientalist East/West binary that usually frames the Muslim feminist double bind. Set in the American heartland, the novel likens the missionary parents of Kahf's protagonist Khadra to early Anglo-European missionary settlers: the parents have moved to the US to create a dawha community and preach to Muslim migrants. Kahf thus writes her Muslim Arab American

characters into the national US American Ur-archetype of religiously motivated settlers, which puns on contemporary anxieties over Muslim immigration. The trope of the pilgrims and settlers helps to legitimize the idea of Americanness as white, Christian and with European roots – also the quintessential ‘Western’ part in implicit orientalist binaries. Kahf’s appropriation of these national myths does not just invert, but actually destabilizes this binary altogether. The citational analogy of Khadra’s parents as dawha preachers to archetypal Christian missionaries highlights the arbitrariness of inclusion mechanisms of national mythologies, while the religious analogy undermines orientalist Othering of Islam versus Christianity. Her literary agency allows Kahf to poke fun at the national origin myths, but she also lays a serious claim to Americanness entailing both Arabness and Islam within its boundaries, metaphorically and literally.

14 The refusal of East/West binaries and destabilization of monolithic views of religion, within both Christianity and Islam, characterize also Kahf’s literary vision of Muslim feminist agency. Khadra’s experiences reflect the multiplicity of Islams in America as well as the ethnic diversity and multiple approaches to gender within Muslim communities. In this mix Khadra represents a Muslim American feminist outlook. She draws part of her agency from her religious knowledge and her conservative upbringing. Her Uncle Taher teaches her about the crucial role of women and female leaders in early Islam already as a young girl (Kahf *the girl* 36). This religious proficiency enables her to work toward a Muslim feminist independence later in life. Khadra claims her rights through knowledge of scripture, which speaks directly to Muslim feminist scholarship that reinterprets historical Quranic precedents to frame women’s rights as a religious right. However, literature allows Kahf to push the question of feminism and Islam further than scholarly discourses usually do. She also includes a wide array of female characters, ranging from her converted, fervently religious aunt Khadija (24) to her rebelling, secular high school friend Hanifa, who becomes a race car driver (438), to represent agency on a wide spectrum from conservative to avantgarde Muslim women. This avoids replicating an orientalist subtext that religious gender identities are of ‘lesser’ value, a key tenant of a transnational Muslim feminism.

15 On the other side of the double bind, Kahf’s representations of Muslim American womanhoods also challenges convenient Muslim imaginations of ideal womanhood in form of a ‘modern’, yet devout and selfless Muslim woman and wife – views defended in the novel by Khadra’s husband Juma (224). Juma is a kind man and Kahf makes a point to portray their marriage as happy and sexually fulfilling, but his narrow views on the proper behavior of a wife soon prove too limiting for Khadra. Kahf’s narrative consistently criticizes such intra-

Muslim experiences of gender oppression, but without catering to Orientalisms. She rather places a tongue-and-cheek challenge to ‘ignorant’ Muslims, resorting to a Muslim feminist outlook, claiming that they perpetuate gender stereotypes due to a lack of religious knowledge: “The prophet never asked his wives to do anything in the house for him,’ Khadra snapped. What was the use? It took a Dawha Center man to appreciate that sort of thing. A reg’lar Muslim from the Old Country like Juma wouldn’t get it” (241). This quote carries a very clear political message, but it is more than just didactics. Kahf’s narrative playfulness works against an orientalist appropriation of her critique of gender oppression as representing Muslim women’s victimhood, and while she locates resistance to such oppression within Islamic revivalism, the quote’s sassy tone also defies any religious expectations of performances of piety as a proper form to voice concerns. In short, her humor, irony, and skill as a narrator weave these multiple social dimensions into an artful Muslim literary-feminist aesthetic.

16 Kahf’s Muslim feminist authorial agency challenges orientalist stereotypes in her general audience, with little knowledge about Islam, but it also pushes conservative Muslim readers to recognize heterogeneous and self-defined expressions of Muslim womanhood beyond narrow, patriarchal idealizations of devout, selfless motherhood. Kahf’s narrative is intricately linked to intersectional realities of myriads of different patterns of injustice stemming from patriarchal Muslim *and* patriarchal US views on ‘proper’ gender roles. The plot lines about the destiny of Khadra’s friend Zuhura (94-5) are case in point of this literary multiplicity. Zuhura is a young, bright Muslim American woman activist, and despite pressure from the conservative establishment in her local Muslim community she continues to study after her marriage until she is found murdered and raped by the local KKK clansmen one day. This episode criticizes both the hypocrisy of patriarchs in Muslim communities, who believe Zuhura’s independent behavior ‘invited’ such an attack, as well as the ignorant and brutal reaction of local press and law enforcement who dismissed her murder as an honor killing without ever investigating local right wing communities. Instead, they simply suspect and deport her innocent husband and belittle Zuhura’s activist achievements and religious convictions. This particular narrative further connects the Muslim American feminist struggles to the fight of US women of color against the interlocking oppressions of race-gender hierarchies. The bottom line is that for Zuhura, as a Muslim woman/women of color, the greatest physical danger in the US comes from a racist-sexist society and being visibly Muslim.

17 To go beyond the double bind, Kahf practices a double feminist literary agency that draws from Eastern and Western genres. She combines references to the feminist precedents within Islamic scripture with an appropriation of the Western literary genre of the Bildungsroman. This genre centers on a growth narrative of a central character toward self-awareness, often the coming-of-age process and integration of a young person into adulthood and society. The ethnic Bildungsroman, however, typically conceptualizes this growth narrative as a character's assimilation into the cultural norms of a given hegemonic society (Fielding 201-2), which is also a staple of orientalist narrative patterns. Kahf maintains the main formal criteria of a Bildungsroman, but she plays with her audiences' orientalist expectations of the life trajectory of a Muslim woman from supposed Eastern oppression to Western freedom. Kahf takes apart the conventions of such 'Muslim women's stories as victim narratives.' She cites the orientalist trope of Western emancipation, a familiar narrative for her American audiences, but in her narrative Khadra's transformation to adulthood takes place in Syria, facilitated by a woman (her grandmother Téta), and rooted in a Muslim feminist/female power tradition (Kahf, *the girl* 270). Téta also resembles a modern-day Scheherazade figure whose storytelling recapitulates the history of Arab feminist traditions. Like many other Arab American authors Kahf reclaims the Scheherazade trope to build on a different discursive legacy of Muslim women's agency outside Western orientalist binaries and feminisms. However, these Scheherazade references remain relatively marginal in the novel and Khadra's direct grappling with religion is the most important element of her coming-of-age.

18 Throughout the novel, Kahf posits a particularized, fluid Islam as an integral part of Khadra's Arab *and* American subjectivities. Her spiritual journey spirals back and forth between Eastern and Western interpretations of Islam, input from her local family, university, Muslim feminist sources as well as zealous, revolutionary forms of Islam and finally secularism. In the end, Khadra neither assimilates into rigid rituals or orthodox Islamic interpretations nor into a mainstream US culture. She realizes that any interpretation of Islam "was just one point on a whole spectrum of Islamic faith. It wasn't identical to Islam itself, just one little corner of it. What was difficult to accept was that these other paths had always existed beyond the confines of her world, and yet were still Muslim" (233). Kahf's embraces Islam, America and Arabness as open categories, which only make sense in a particularized form that cannot be co-opted by either side of the double bind. The various characterizations multiply and particularize so many different possibilities of Muslim religious and ethnic subjectivities that the binary orientalist reception frame of the novel collapses: The spectrum

of Muslim characters includes Khadra's black American Muslims friends, "the fake Muslims" (23), shia Muslims (34), the deeply committed dawha-style versus popular versions of Islam (108), Sufism (183), assimilated second and third generation immigrants from earlier Arab immigration (184), Gulf capitalist Islam (220), academic Islamic studies, and finally also secular/agnostic Muslim friends (318).

19 While this individualization of religious identities and practices clearly challenges hegemonic interpretations of what one 'true Islam' should look like, there remains a certain danger of co-optation into a neoliberal multiculturalism. Mahmood Mamdani warns that the terms of neoliberal US expectations of assimilated multiculturalness, or in other words being a "good," not overtly religious Muslim, actually rather reinforces orientalist binaries in that they devalue explicitly religious identities as then being "bad Muslims" (766). To counter such potential co-optation, Kahf uses subplots and character developments to practice structurally in her creative writing what Leti Volpp has laid out in legal terms as a strategy to talk about existing oppressions in Muslim communities without feeding into orientalist discourses. Volpp suggests doing a Geertzian thick description with a microanalytic focus of the particular situation or person at hand ("Framing" 97). Kahf's writing translates this practice into a literary practice in her formal choices. To "normalize and particularize complex norms of 'cultural identity'" (Volpp 102) helps Kahf to criticize gender oppression within Muslim communities in literature as well. Khadra encounters gendered discrimination on many occasions; for example, when she is banned from a Qur'an recital competition simply for being a girl (199) or when Khadra has to rebel against her own family's traditional expectations of her role as wife and mother to insist on her right to abortion and divorce (225). These negative experiences come out of specific encounters and situations that adult Khadra can counter with religious literacy *and* self-defined agency. Strategically, this is important because Kahf's critique effectively re-frames discussions on gender oppression in Muslim communities away from global prejudice to actual practices and concrete interventions.

20 These microanalytic literary representations help Kahf to transcend the double bind, but what do they imply for Muslim feminist agency? As I suggested above, Kahf also writes from a transnational feminist vantage point. Her location in the US expands her immediate feminist reference frames beyond Muslim feminisms and her novel functions as a transnational platform that connects radical US women of color feminisms with Muslim

feminist traditions<sup>5</sup>. I have shown above how Khadra represents Muslim feminist agency, but the microanalytical context of her character development, finding her own inner access to spirituality and faith, also relates her self-writing to the legacy of Gloria Anzaldúa's path to *conocimiento*<sup>6</sup>. *Conocimiento* links an understanding of spirituality as self-defined, lived practice with the constant process of self-writing as de- and reconstructing your own self outside hegemonic cultural imprints. Kahf's Muslim feminist vision and Anzaldúa's legacies are not by any means identical, but they share the imperative to write oneself or be written with other ethnic minorities in the US. In terms of feminist agency, the two approaches seem to be diametrically opposed at first glance. Anzaldúa's radical self-writing claims spirituality and subjecthood outside *any* hegemonic reference frame, while Kahf seeks to reclaim the possibility of a self-defined subjectivity for Muslim women outside *harmful* hegemonic terms. However, Anzaldúa's radical vision of claiming a subject position outside, but still in-between, commonly practiced identities is nevertheless a vision of engagement and activism. As a *nepantlera*<sup>7</sup> she adopts the position of a mediator who engages with and supports women that remain caught within patriarchal contexts and Kahf's Muslim feminist vision strives to do the same. In my view Khadra, as a Muslim feminist role model of sorts, ends up in a kind of *nepantla* – a neither/nor positionality – in that she refuses to locate herself in both traditional Muslim and hegemonic Global feminist identity categories.

21 Muslim feminist agency in *the girl in the tangerine scarf* thus functions as a mediating umbrella that accommodates the agency of religious women who seek a gradual improvement of their personal situation within a patriarchal system and of women who seek to change norms and options altogether. Khadra's re-claiming of an individual approach to faith becomes not just a fulfillment of a general Muslim spiritual duty, but she turns this quest for spirituality into an expression of Muslim feminist agency. This quest is not prescriptive in its progressiveness, which accommodates adaptive preferences and forms of agency that are not

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<sup>5</sup> Arab American and US women of color feminists have intervened and fought for the recognition of actually diverse feminisms that need to cooperate on equal terms in a transnational framework since the 1980s. However, the relationship between US women of color and Arab American feminists has been complicated. Despite structural parallels and different, specific concerns as women of color, Arab American feminists had been considered 'white' and gone unnoticed for a long time (Elia 223ff). After 9/11 Arab Americans were unambiguously racialized as Others, but it is important to keep the specificity of racisms and anti-Arab racism in mind.

<sup>6</sup> In her final essay "now let us shift" Anzaldúa summarizes her life experience and theories of how to go beyond resistance and achieve transformations in the path to *conocimiento*. This „guide“ to self-determination directly addresses her audience and encourages the reader to determine themselves what their lives mean, to de-program the oppressive cultural constructions, and to find a self-defined subjectivity (568).

<sup>7</sup> While Anzaldúa's earlier work departed from her vision for a *mestiza* consciousness, referring to a hybrid, new form of consciousness, her later work on the *nepantla*, the Nahuatl word for 'in-between,' goes beyond a *mestiza* consciousness in that the *nepantlera* cuts all ties to Euro-American and patriarchal reference frames – both as a means of self-protection and as an effective base for transformative world building (Koegeler-Abdi).

forms of outright resistance, but it redresses the invisibility of Muslim women's causes within both religious and Western feminist scholarship. The novel offers portraits of religiously conservative women alongside her protagonist, but the sum of her individualized stories never leave any doubt that the novel is challenging the patriarchal status quo. Taken together with her strategic re-articulation of the Bildungsroman, Kahf successfully destabilizes the orientalist tropes of 'inferiority/oppression of women and Islam' versus 'Western superiority and gender equality,' and claims a space for Muslim Arab American womanhood outside the East/West double bind but within a self-defined religious framework.

### **Literary Inspirations: Feminist Agency and Multiplicity**

22 What literary inspirations may a religious scholar like Lamprey then draw from *the girl in the tangerine scarf*? And what are the limitations of Kahf's literary Muslim feminist agency in claiming a multifaceted approach to gender equality within Islamic scholarship? A central advantage of theorizing via literature is that the "literary frames feminist critique as the opening to a difference, a creative resistance. For this – for the possibility of envisioning alternative social relations, outside of the dominant Common sense – feminist theory needs literature, and feminist literature gives rise to feminist theory" (Goodman 3). Goodman's view offers a literary equivalent to Lamprey's approach to ambivalence as a position vis-à-vis patriarchal dominance; combined their outlook opens a creative avenue to work with Muslim feminist ambivalence in literature to achieve wider political impact without resorting to hegemonic feminist certainty. In my reading, Kahf harnesses this creative potential of ambivalence in her writing when her plot lines address multiple audiences, that otherwise would not share political concerns, at the same time – for example, in her literary representation of veiling for her various Muslim audiences.<sup>8</sup> Kahf is careful to avoid orientalist appropriation of her flexible attitude toward veiling in that she presents Khadra's personal conclusion as only one possible and not *the* only approach to veiling. Her overall narration of a Muslim girl's own experience and flexible attitudes toward wearing a hijab, however, also disputes the increasingly wide-spread view in political Islam of veiling as a required expression of faith and modesty for Muslim women. Khadra's reassertion that the Islamic requirement of modesty can also manifest itself in behavior without wearing a hijab (312) is thus a crucial complement to her own Muslim feminist embrace of veiling. The sum

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<sup>8</sup> This exceeds the scope of this article, but it would be interesting to further explore how Kahf's multiple address links her writing to the specific histories of Muslim Arab writing in the US at large. For example, one of the earliest texts by a Muslim Arabized African American writer, the slave narrative *The Life of Omar Said*, written in 1831 practices what Ala Alreyyes calls "double utterances" (22) to address potential Muslim readers as a separate reader community within a specific text that is otherwise geared to American audiences at large.

of Kahf's representational choices invites Muslim women with very different views on veiling, from traditional, religious to secular anti-veiling, into a dialogue without claiming one form of veiling as the right one.

23 On the flipside of the double bind, however, Kahf's prominent references to veiling throughout the novel, and especially her occasional framing of veiling as a "sexy" (183) practice, walk a tight line between challenging and catering to the potential orientalist imaginations of her audiences. The trope of sexy veiling harks back to the British and French colonial history where the fascination with the veil included both a desire to unveil Maghrebi women as well as maintaining the veil as part of Western erotic fantasies (Alloula). Kahf's decision to cite and employ the heavily orientalized discourses around veiling so prominently, could be read as counter-intuitive for a Muslim feminist cause<sup>9</sup>. 'The veil' appears in her title, on the book cover, and as a running metaphor and device of characterization throughout her plot lines. The publishers' choice to have a veiled woman on the cover places the marketing and promotion of the novel in the context of visual omni-presence of veiled, oppressed women on memoir covers, 'Muslim fiction' and in the news media (Ahmad). Even if *the girl's* cover image of a woman with a loosely clad orange scarf, dressed in Jeans and looking assertively into the camera deconstructs typical orientalist assumptions about passive, backwards and oppressed veiled women, literary ambivalence can cut both ways. Kahf's play with orientalist views of veiling and their colonial legacies may also end up confirming the tropes she seeks to subvert for some readers. Steven Salaita has identified this tension between Arab American literary self-representation and orientalist audience expectations as foundational to the whole genre (*Arab* 109), but to better understand the stakes of Kahf's Muslim feminist agency in this tension it can be useful to return to Khader's conceptions of adaptive preferences in a literary mode. As Christina Civantos has pointed out in her work auto-Orientalism, that is, Arab essentialisation of the self based on orientalist stereotypes (22), the use of orientalist terms may provide access to publication and audiences for Arab American authors. To some degree, Kahf's ambivalent references to hegemonic orientalist tropes could thus be read as a form of 'adaptive preference' to attract a wider readership, even

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<sup>9</sup> Arab American and Muslim feminists have grown weary of constantly having to discuss the long history and multiple uses of veiling, which actually contributes to silencing them and making other concerns invisible. English translations of veil or headscarf do not represent the variety of functions and approaches to this mode of dress within the Muslim communities and all its varying political, sexual, religious and social meanings that overlap and have multiple signifying functions (Jamarkani 153-4). For the histories of veiling see, for example, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender and Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* or Christina Von Braun, "The headscarf—An 'empty signifier'," in *The return of religion and other myths: a critical reader in contemporary art*. For the political implications of the excessive Western attention to veiling, see Leila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" or Nawar Al Hassan Golley, "Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?"

if the novel as a whole thoroughly deconstructs orientalist binaries.

24 With regard to her Muslim readers, Kahf's own literary agency also reflects some adaptive preferences that allow her novel to function within the accepted standards of a religiously inflected Muslim dating culture. For example, when it comes to issues of sexuality and marriage, the novel offers a notably less diverse panorama as opposed to its multiple representations of faiths and ethnicities. Kahf's makes a point to highlight sexual pleasure and to promote a positive view of Muslim women's sexuality, challenging stereotypes of Muslim women's victimhood, but the life choices of Khadra place sex within heterosexual marriage only. The novel includes extra-martial sex or homosexual desire on the very margins of her narrative, but the protagonist Khadra is careful not to endorse a 'Western'/liberal approach to flirtation, dating, and casual sex. Kahf highlights that it is Khadra herself that takes this decision as an adult and as part of finding her own position in between her heritage and her personal needs. At the same time, her explicit valuation of sexuality within marriage in the novel helps Kahf to maintain her own connection to more traditional Muslim identity conceptions while she challenges many other conservative expectations of proper Muslim womanhood in her writing. Just as Wail Hassan points out that Arab American authors often use orientalist terms as a means of "contesting the identity assigned by the dominant majority discourse while at the same time utilizing its sanctioned narrative procedures to enter into its regime of truth" (80), so does Kahf's adaptive preference for heteronormativity use this majority discourse to facilitate that Kahf's voice is, or can be, heard in her respective conservative audiences.

25 In conclusion, I would like to return to Kahf's representational choices around veiling, which in their entirety serve as a metaphorical guide to how a Muslim feminist agency can operate within multiple normative views of religion, while fighting the double bind and without obliterating multifaceted religious agency among women. In Khadra's character development veiling comes to be a mode of dress *and* of being that defies orientalist binaries via its holistic, circular, and process oriented approach when she concludes that: "veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary" (309). She reclaims the hijab as a positive symbol and a facilitator to cross the threshold between the marked division of domestic and public spaces in Muslim traditions, but never as an impediment to freedom of movement (112). Strategically and narratively, Kahf locates gender injustice in human interaction, but not in a piece of cloth or choice of dress. This unequivocally feminist stance challenges Western stereotypes and conservative Muslim views alike, but it maintains her self-defined approach to veiling as an important, religious practice

for Khadra – a connector to her culture and an armor against losing her Muslim identity, an “outer sign of inner quality she wants be reminded of” (425). Kahf’s view of Muslim feminist agency suggests a concrete vision for empowerment in self-defined spirituality, but it also maintains an expansive view of agency and openness to dialogue with non-progressive forms of agency that may improve women’s lives. Her literary feminist agency empowers her to claim a mediating position between various religious schools of thought, which always centers Muslim women’s voices and their varied claims to agency.

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