

Orientalism and the iconography of the veil in Mohja Kahf's *The girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006)

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Mohja Kahf's novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) tells the story of Khadra Shamy: an Arab-American Muslim woman's journey of self-discovery. This article is devoted to highlighting the experience of Arab Muslim American women in the United States. The main issue that is raised here is how the Islamic veiling practice constitutes an impairing barrier to Muslim American women who are "otherized" and exiled from their native lands to the USA, and then ostracized in the USA, on account of their religious adherence. This article also seeks to shed light on how disillusioned these women are after coming to the United States, for them a land of liberty *a priori*. Their disillusionment is nurtured by the intensified Islamophobia and the historically-sedimented burdens that Islam has come to carry in the West.

Orientalizing the Oriental: The Process of Othering

With regard to the relationship between the Arab Muslim world and the West, little has changed in the Western Orientalist discourse about the Orient. The Western view of the Orient insists on the representation of the Arab Muslim in terms of a demonic barbaric alterity. It also intensifies the narcissistic view of the West positing its model as the universal norm and rendering the notion of civilization *per se* exclusively Western. This discourse has reached its most acute form following the 9/11 events to embrace an ideological discourse associating Islam with terrorism. At this level, the representational discourse is manipulated by the West that continues to reinforce the process of "otherization" that sets apart "us" from "them." Edward Said provided a clear-cut metonymic example of the East-West relations in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978)¹ in the following passage:

There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was "typically

Oriental”. My argument is that Flaubert’s situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled. (6)

Thus, Kuchuk Hanem cannot speak for herself but needs a spokesperson to represent her and speak for her, and this is no other than a Western enlightened man as Gustave Flaubert. Hanem’s silence and inability to represent her emotions, presence and history are justified by her uncivilized status as well as her debased woman status. In this example, Hanem and Flaubert are synecdochical of the Orient and the West respectively. Flaubert stands for the powerful, virile, civilized and knowledgeable West, while Hanem represents a feminized Orient, fetishized and inviting possession.

What is dramatic in the Orientalist discourse is the eagerly repeated mantra of a “mysterious East” and the necessity to civilize its people as well as the prejudiced discourse about “the Arab mind”². With regard to Islam, the main tenets of Western narratives are: “That Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies” (Ahmed 152).

Khadra is an “other” in many respects. First, because she originally comes from an Arab country i.e., Syria, she is thus culturally considered as backward. Second, she is a Muslim woman who ardently believes in the practice of hijab and chooses to veil, she is thus regarded by Americans as a debased woman who submits to the patriarchal norms of Muslim societies by her own volition. For these reasons, Khadra’s community constitutes a civilizational threat within the American nation.

As a Muslim living in a country hostile to Islam, Khadra experiences the same estrangement as Rica in Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* who writes to his friend Ibben in the letter number thirty about his inconveniences in Paris. Rica explains that he is always being regarded as an object of acute curiosity and gaze for French people on account of his costume. Finding this situation onerous, Rica explains, “I therefore resolved to change my Persian dress for a European one, in order to see if my countenance would still strike people as wonderful” (41). To his dismay, he discovers that he “sank immediately into the merest nonentity” (41). Now that he did not look Persian, he tells his correspondent that if someone in his company would discover that he was, he would wonder “Oh! Ah! A Persian, is he? Most amazing! However can anybody be a Persian?” (41).

This point can be echoed in the context of Khadra’s struggle over how she can be considered American without compromising her religious Islamic values. Right in the first pages of the novel, we learn that Khadra’s father Wajdy self-exiled from Syria because he thought that “Syria was a mean government” for having imprisoned his elder brother Shaker for expressing views against it. Wajdy vehemently defends his brother who “has told the truth to its face and that’s called

standing witness and that's what a good Muslim should do" (20). For Wajdy, "Shaker died a hero. A martyr" (20). Being a daughter of a dissident exile, Khadra knows nothing about Syria except what her parents tell her. Likewise, she is deprived of befriending Americans who are always demonized by the Shamy family that regards Americans as blasphemous. For Khadra's parents, Americans are materialistic and individualistic, their only preoccupation is how much money they can get, whatever the consequences are. Ebtehaj and Wajdy always speak of Americans in a mean way, regarding them as libertine people who allow many social ills as adultery, fornication, alcohol and so on: "All in all, Americans led shallow, wasteful, materialistic lives" (68).

Such stereotypical views from both sides i.e., Americans viewing Arab Muslims as backward and Muslim Americans regarding Americans as blasphemous and *kuffar*, do not stand for what Khadra thinks of the ones or the others. Although Khadra is aware of the othering process to which she is subject in America, she is also cognizant of her estrangement in Arab countries, since she would be regarded there as a westernized American woman. As a result, Khadra's knowledge of Syria and America is rudimentary; this is why she absolutely needs to experience her own stories of both nations.

Therefore, it becomes evident that Orientalist discourses are countered by Occidentalist representations in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*; although they are not damaging to the Western self as is the case of Orientalism. This is mainly explained by the fact that knowledge is contaminated by its entanglement with power³. It follows, then, that the Western man-made story of the Middle East serves the imperialist purpose of domination whereas the Occidentalists' labor of always having first to dismantle tenacious myths about the Orient comes to seem Sisyphean as it simply serves the purpose of self-defense. As Orientalism (the institution) precedes the nascent movement of Occidentalism in the Middle East and Africa, it follows that Occidentalism is devoted to the cause of countering Orientalist discourses.

In Orientalist discourse, the Western way of life has emerged as a modernizing vector and has been set as a universal one. This, in fact, is opposed to the difference-blind principle of equal dignity for all cultures and has given rise to a "clash of civilizations." The latter determines cultural problems as the primary and dominating source of conflict that has dominated world politics since the twentieth century⁴. The notion of the clash of civilizations applies to *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* that elucidates the relationships between Orientals and Westerners showing how incompatible world civilizations are and how differences produce clashes relative to the superiority-inferiority dichotomy.

However, Kahf's profiling of the discrepancies between civilizations is not circumscribed to the clash between Western and Islamic civilizations; it also explores intra-civilizational clashes, most notably the one between the Sunnis and Shias and the one between Iranians and Arabs, although they all belong to the Islamic civilization⁵. An example of such intra-civilizational clashes is illustrated through the relationship between Khadra and her Iranian roommate Bitsy. Right at

the first meeting, Bitsy explains to Khadra, “I want to make it clear that I normally loathe and despise Arabs and have successfully avoided them all my life” (347). For Bitsy “Arabs caused the ruination of the once-proud Persian people by corrupting their culture, religion, language, and race” (348). Bitsy’s loathing of Arabs is so acute that she refuses to communicate with Khadra, although she is her cohabitant. For urgent communicative purposes, Bitsy only leaves notes “on little yellow stickies around the house for Khadra” (348).

Likewise, Khadra does not grasp why Auntie Dilshad Haqiqat does not fold her hands after the first *Allahu akbar* when she prays, nor does she understand why she puts a piece of rock in front of her. Although Auntie Dilshad explains to Khadra, “It’s how Shia pray” and that “the rock is from Karbala where the evil caliph of Syria killed the grandson of the Prophet” (34), Khadra continues to otherize the Shia members as she believes that “All the Sunnis knew the Shias had wrong beliefs but tried to be polite and not talk about it. At least in front of them” (34).

Similar diatribes are launched against Sunni Muslims like the ones of Ramsey Nabolsy who contends, “Sunni Islam is just a sellout . . . It’s just a load of compromises and lies told by cowards too cowardly to fight for what they believe in” (151). Ramsey further explains that he does not “get how anyone could even be Sunni after finding out about Karbala”⁶ (151). These historical facts did not convert Khadra into Shia Islam but incited her to find the truth about it. After a discussion with her father who has provided weak arguments in favor of the Caliph Yazid Ibn Mu’awiya, Khadra becomes compassionate with the Shia Haqiqat sisters. This particular experience and Khadra’s reversal of attitude towards Shia members from an otherizing to a tolerant one are so symbolic of the possibility of replacing stigmatizing alterity with tolerance towards differences by combating what scholar Edward Said names “the clash of ignorance”⁷. Hafid Gafaiti best explains Said’s view of how institutionalized ignorance affects our attitudes vis-à-vis the other. He claims:

Said’s concept of “ignorance” is especially pertinent in this context. It is clear that fear and conflict among individuals, communities, cultures or whole nations develop because of a mutual absence of consideration and understanding. However, one needs to go beyond Said’s notion of a natural ignorance among entities separated by geography, history and cultural spaces. Indeed, and unfortunately, this mutual ignorance is not a given. In fact, it is constructed and institutionalized. Thus, we are bound to face “*institutionalized ignorance*” – that is, an epistemological system, a state and its institution that intentionally and systematically produce misrepresentations of the Other in a discourse whose objective is to maintain its citizens’ ignorance about the rest of the world. Clearly, these systematic misrepresentations of the Other often provoke conflicts. (103-4; emphasis mine)

Thus, it might be wrong to confuse the historically contextualized conflicts with a clash of supposedly organically contrasting civilizations, especially in the case of the cultural continuum of the Abrahamic religions⁸. Mohja Kahf represents well this culturereligious continuum throughout the discussions between Khadra and her Jew roommate Blu who recognizes “Islamic fiqh as a parallel structure to Judaic law” (316). For Khadra, “It was a relief not to have to explain every little thing” and it was “cool to find an American who was not even a Muslim but got it” (316). Blu’s understanding of Khadra and tolerance towards her traditions is explained by the multiple similarities between the two, especially in terms of dietary laws⁹. For instance, Khadra is happy when she learns that Blu does not eat pork and that she keeps kosher, she is also pleased to have Blu celebrate a Ramadan *iftar* with her (320). Khadra and Blu agree on so many things, the only issue that sets them apart is politics as the narrator informs us, “Where Khadra and Blu repeatedly reached a wall was Israel. Religion was one thing, politics another” (319). The narrator’s opinion that religion and politics cannot be regarded as one entity and the entente between Khadra and Blu over religious issues but not political ones backs up Mohja Kahf’s argument that civilizational conflicts are not predicated on religious differences but on geopolitical ones. It also demonstrates the culturereligious rapprochement between Jews and Muslims and the geopolitical discord between them over the Palestinian / Israeli territory. Khadra says to Blu that, “Israel was illegally made – by terrorists emptying out villages and forcing a mass exodus of Palestinians” and Blu answers her, “You don’t understand: my grandmother died in the Holocaust. My mother grew up saving pennies in her little land box. You’re insulting their lives. Their deaths” (320). Both Khadra and Blu evoke the painful experience of exile that consists of the plight of their respective brethren. It is after all a matter of LAND that sets people apart and produces conflicts between them.

Mohja Kahf profiles the Saidian “clash of ignorance” through a micro-society whose members are culturally and religiously disparate and shows how cohabitation and peace are rendered possible by tolerance and mutual understanding. Exploring these possibilities in a micro-society, so heterogeneously populated, can only be symbolic of the possibility to establish peace and tolerance in an international society presently spoiled by an insatiable geopolitical appetite for land and power.

Thus, it becomes urgent to call for mutual understanding and comprehension in order to eradicate this institutionalized ignorance and replace it with a tolerant peaceful world governed by respect for all entities. To achieve such an objective one should be vigilant when dealing with “political knowledge” whose aim is to manufacture knowledge so that it serves politics. Edward Said rightfully warns against this kind of knowledge in *Orientalism* when he tells his readers:

What I am interested in doing now is suggesting how the general liberal consensus that “true” knowledge is fundamentally non-political (and conversely, that overtly political knowledge is not

"true" knowledge) obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced.
(10)

Therefore, Said's iterative emphasis on the relationship between politics and knowledge underscores the role of power in the institution of knowledge. Political knowledge is predicated on hegemonic imperialist discourses that completely erase subaltern stories. In fact, this leads to the conclusion that with regard to alterity, the politically instituted knowledge is a subjective self-interested one.

The Iconography of the Veil in The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf

The Muslim woman as oppressed, debased, and desirous of progress and liberation has become an enduring *topos* in the Western imagination and representation of the Muslim woman. Two main issues are raised when the debate on the oppression of Arab Muslim women is launched i.e., the veil and polygamy. The Muslim woman has been represented in Western discourse as disgraced by her backward and misogynous religion, the veil being the most tangible sign of these characteristics. Islam is also regarded, in the West, as a religion inimical to women's social progress. Within socio-economic terms, the veil is used as a symbol of women's debasement and it needs to be lifted by U.S democracy to liberate the Muslim woman. According to Mohja Kahf, "The Muslim woman is being victimized" is a litany of a later age in Western discourse" since "the beginning of the question of liberty for Muslim women coincides with the beginning of the whole question of liberty in Western political discourse" (5, 7). In fact, this is how veiling has come to signify women's oppression and unveiling has become a sign of secularism and modernity. However, one may predict that if the Middle Eastern socio-economic conditions change and the Middle East runs out of oil, the Orientalist debate over hijab is most likely to disappear.

For Westerners as well as westernized Muslims, Hijab is a handicap for Muslim women willing to climb the ladder of social mobility and modernity. Having an "otherizing" image of veiled women already established in Western discourse, Muslim women are left with few choices: either to adopt the Western "modernist" value system in order not to stick out in a world hostile to their religion, or maintain the Islamic "old fashioned" value system that, according to Westerners, does not conform with modernity. Western discourse on hijab has also succeeded in effacing the symbolic significance of hijab as a sign of belonging and created instead a debate about it questioning its "oppressive" aspect as opposed to the "modernizing" lifestyle of the Western woman. It is anecdotal, then, that if modernity depends on how much uncovered one is, the nudists are the most modern people on Earth!

Hitherto Western representations of hijab have been stigmatizing, biased and excluding. The "otherization" process seems to veil Muslim women's role and value in society, while it simultaneously sets up the image of the Occidental woman as a template. This hegemonic discourse about Muslim women identifies this

category of people in terms of a “despised difference”. Donnell explained this view of Muslim women when he emphasized:

The familiar and much-analyzed Orientalist gaze through which the veil is viewed as an object of mystique, exoticism and eroticism and the veiled woman as an object of fantasy, excitement and desire is now replaced by the xenophobic, more specifically Islamophobic, gaze through which the veil, or headscarf, is seen as a highly visible sign of a despised difference. (123)

It follows that Muslim women’s “otherness” is relative to what the West conceives of as the “familiarity” of Occidental women. These dichotomous representations of an Occidental woman as opposed to the Oriental Muslim woman in terms of modernity have produced what is now called gender apartheid. In “Tear off your Western Veil,” Azizah Al-Hibri explains this new kind of apartheid made possible by the above-discussed Saidian notion of “clash of ignorance:”

Western Feminists do not attempt to educate themselves about Islam as a world religion, or about the points of view of Muslim or Arab women. Instead, western feminists hold an Orientalist view of Islam, and act on that view. This attitude has already resulted in western feminists silencing Muslim/ Arab-American women not through coercion, but rather by their astounding inability to hear us, regardless of how loudly we protest. And that inability to hear is not the result of a cultural gap. (160-1)

However, the espousal of Western modernity with a Muslim woman’s dress has been made possible through the efforts of many European designers such as Yves St Laurent, Christian Dior and others to reach a voluminous Muslim feminine market¹⁰. For example, the caption alongside a National Geographic magazine photo of an entirely veiled Muslim woman reads, “A designer veil sports the logo of Yves St. Laurent. Most accept the veil for privacy and protection from male harassment, not as a symbol of oppression, and cling to a tradition that defies Western understanding.” Commenting on the photo, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad et al. write:

The woman in this photo remains a mystery, an object wrapped in secrecy not penetrated by the camera’s lens, and the caption gives no detail about when or where the photo was taken. But the irony captured on film is what Westerners find to be not only surprising but incongruous – a combination of the Islamic veil with a French designer emblem. Can East really meet West in such a way? By showing this union of cultural symbols, the photo hints at the

specter of the global spread of Islam, and the continued salience of a tradition that defies Western understanding. (21)

Kahf and the Fanonist approach of resistance

To counter such hegemonic and patriarchal constructions of the veil, Mohja Kahf presents *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* as a narrative of resistance, a counter-hegemonic narrative that defies Western interpretations of the veil. Throughout *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Kahf constructs a Fanonist approach of resistance through national garment and joins a great number of scholars in their belief that Western representations of the veil have been politically construed to serve colonial and imperial projects. In “Algeria Unveiled,” Frantz Fanon, for instance, comments on the situation in Algeria in the 1930’s, when the veil was used to fissure national and resistance movements. Sociologists revealed the solid and dynamic existence of matriarchy that united Algerian society while remaining behind the veil of patriarchy. This is why it became important to control women. This discovery, according to Fanon, has shaped the political doctrine of the French colonizer who concluded, “If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves...” (“Algeria Unveiled” 74). Thus, Fanon opines that it became known in the colonialist program that the Algerian woman was able to weaken the Algerian men. Fanon argues, “Converting the woman, winning her over to the foreign values, wrenching her free from her status, was at the same time achieving a real power over the man and attaining a practical, effective means of deconstructing Algerian culture” (75).

According to Fanon, the colonizer’s reverie of a total domestication of Algerian society was to be achieved throughout “unveiled women aiding and sheltering the occupier” (75). Fanon concludes that the *haïk*¹¹ was not only a visible marker of Algerian women’s identity, but also a potential signifier of an Algerian reality of resistance to French domination. Fanon states that the abandonment of this clothing code and the adoption of the colonizer’s one would signify Algerians’ acceptance of the French colonial project as a “civilizing mission:”

Every veil that fell, everybody that became liberated from the traditional embrace of the *haïk*, every face that offered itself to the bold and impatient glance of the occupier, was a negative expression of the fact that Algeria was beginning to deny herself and was accepting the rape of the colonizer. Algerian society with every abandoned veil seemed to express its willingness to attend the master’s school and to decide to change its habits under the occupier’s direction and patronage. (76)

Thus, the attempt of unveiling Algerian women, according to Homi Bhabha, turns the veil into “a symbol of resistance, it becomes a technique of camouflage, a means of struggle – the veil conceals bombs” (“Remembering Fanon” xxiii).

Like Fanon who viewed the Algerian *haik* as a symbol of resistance to French colonialism as it “conceals bombs,” Kahf presents her narrative as a mode of resistance to western hegemony as she concludes in *Hijab Scenes* 7 with

Yes I carry explosives
they're called words
and if you don't get up off your assumptions,
they're going to blow you away. (Lines 11-14)

A clothing code is thus an important element of identification and attachment and the ban of the veil can be interpreted as an attempt to detach subjects from their land of attachment. In order to de-ottomanize Turkey, for instance, Atatürk has launched an attack against wearing the fez that symbolized the tie to the Ottoman past. In a similar vein, Mohja Kahf, following a Fanonist approach, highlights how unveiling operates as a means of reinforcing the power dynamics. She uses Syria as an example to demonstrate the way Muslim women had to endure government oppression because of the Islamic veil and how the Ba'ath party of Hafiz al Assad insisted on unveiling as a way of breaching the Muslim Brotherhood party. Kahf uses Khadra's aunt Razanne's story as a historiographical account of the Hama Massacre of 1982¹². Back in Syria, Khadra learns from Aunt Razanne about the experience of her daughter Reem:

The day the paratroopers tore our veils; you could strip off your hijab and jilbab, or get a gun to your head ... Well Reem was on foot, coming back from the seamstress. She tried to duck into the lobby of an apartment building but it was the buzzer kind and she couldn't get in ... The paratrooper grabs her by the arm, with a soldier right beside her. She slips off the scarf right away. Why endanger your life for it? But then, the paratrooper barks at her to take off her manteau, too. Well my Reem is only wearing a cami and half-slip under the manteau that day, as it happens... With the soldier prodding her with the rifle, she starts to unbutton. She is mortified ... So the paratrooper can't even wait for Reem to take off her clothes. So she rips off the manteau herself, and holds it up in the air and sets it on fire with a blowtorch. (281)

The paratroopers' ferocious behavior towards veiled women shocks Khadra but makes her understand how exile was the only alternative for her parents and how such a decision was important for her parents who were eager to stay true to themselves. Even though Razanne's husband Uncle Mazen tersely comments that it was those dissidents like Khadra's parents who politicized hijab and have made life

hell for them, Khadra explains that her parents “stood taller in her sight,” and that at least “they had not stooped. Had not twisted their minds to fit into a cramped space, had not shrunk themselves like poor Uncle Mazen and Aunt Razanne” (282). Being proud of her parents’ dissidence and her mother’s refusal to take off her hijab are elements that define *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* as a counter-hegemonic narrative of resistance that defies Western interpretations of the Muslim veiled woman.

Repeatedly faced with the biased interpretation of the veil as a sign of backwardness, Khadra learns that wearing the veil had caused her mother Ebtehaj much agony after her mother died, and her father got married to a Turkish secular Kemalist¹³ woman called Sibelle. Téta explains to Khadra that Sibelle “was a Kemalist, totally secular ... Militantly, spitefully secular” (275). Kahf presents Sibelle as a colonial agent who gradually westernizes, or Kemalizes, the Syrian family. This argument is backed up by the fact that Sibelle succeeds in having Ebtehaj’s father going in her direction “making light of his prayers, dropping out of his first wife’s pious circle, allowing wine at his table” (275). By reforming the religious foundation of Ebtehaj’s family, Sibelle establishes a new secular household where Ebtehaj becomes a persona non grata because of her hijab. Khadra learns from Téta that Sibelle “mocked her [mother] for wearing hijab. Most fashionable people had stopped wearing hijab by then ... the city was against it, the tide was against it” (275). Ebtehaj was not only ridiculed by her stepmother, but was also harassed and bellicosely disparaged by her as Téta recounts,

Sibelle loathed the sight of that hijab. She made fun of it – she tried everything – she’d yank it right off her head. I heard she put it in the pot and shat on it – no I’m not kidding. She was embarrassed to be seen in public with her stepdaughter in it. Made Ebtehaj walk on the other side of the street . . . (275)

Sibelle’s disruptive influence on Ebtehaj’s father and household is the cause behind Ebtehaj’s exile into the United States as dwelling in Sibelle’s household has become impossible. Ebtehaj’s feeling of homelessness had been exacerbated when her stepmother tried to force her to marry a man “who drank and whored, just to make her misery lifelong” (276). Moreover, Sibelle “yanked her out of that Quran circle she was in for just a few months – her deceased mother’s circle” and warned Ebtehaj that, “she wouldn’t have anyone in *her* household as connected to it” (275-6; emphasis in original). Conveniently, Téta pointed to Ebtehaj’s homelessness by insisting on the function of the deictic pronoun “her” in Sibelle’s appropriation of the household through the following remark, “‘Her’ household, imagine! As if your mother had no place in her own home anymore! Yanked your mother right out” (276).

Khadra suffers from the same harassment as her mother but in a different environment. One of Khadra’s childhood experiences in America was when she was cornered by two schoolboys at school: Brent Lott and Curtis Stephenson who

harassed and plagued her because of the veil. Khadra still recalls how aggressively and mockingly the two boys grabbed her Malcolm X book and asked her to “take off [her] towel first” (124) before they would give her back the book. Therefore, Curtis ends up yanking her scarf off her head and comments, “Look, raghead’s got hair under that piece a shit” (124). No matter how Khadra tries to resist, the boys hold her down until they tear her scarf and Khadra reacts by screaming, “I hate you.” Not being able to understand her rage because the boys have seen her hair, Brent shouts at her, “It’s just hair, you psycho” (124).

This scene is not of the scopophilically-arranged kind that focuses on appearance since there is no mysterious titillation in the act of unveiling. Moreover, although Khadra’s hair has become the object of the boys’ gaze, she is unfetishized. However, the unfetishization of Khadra’s hair is engendered by the hatred felt for her. This unfetishization might be explained through the principle motive behind the boys’ behavior that was their curiosity, and curiosity, in this case, overwhelms voyeuristic conduct. As a result, the veil acts here as a protector against the curious phallic scopophilic gaze in a heterosocial world. Khadra conceives of the veil as that element that empowers her by removing her body from male scrutiny that reduces women’s value to fetish objects. Veiling, in Khadra’s case, is a way to enable men to see behind the veil that veils and hypnotizes the phallogocentric nature of men who then become able to appreciate women in a non-fetishizing way. Following this line of thought, the veil becomes liberating as it frees women from the fetishizing male gaze that circumscribes the treatment of women to a scopophilic approach. Thus, veiling is voluntarily adopted by Khadra in order to direct the male gaze at her intellectual value, yet the boys are not interested in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (the books that slipped to the floor), rather their own preoccupation is with the mystery that lies behind Khadra’s veil. Being disinterested in what Khadra reads, the boys are not interested in what she thinks but in what she looks like.

Summarizing her view of the current debates equalizing hijab with backwardness and highlighting this falsity about the veiling practice being opposed to modernity, Mohja Kahf writes in *Hijab Scene # 7*¹⁴:

No I’m not bald
No I’m not from that country where women can’t drive cars
No I would not like to defect. Thank you,
I’m already American
What else would you like me to explain
relevant to my opening a bank account,
buying insurance,
reserving a seat on a flight?
Yes I speak English
Yes I’m legal. (Lines 1-10)

Here, the speaker addresses common assumptions about women wearing hijab. The speaker's irritation heightens as she contends with assumption after assumption. In this poem the speaker emphatically stresses her Americanness in spite of her silent interlocutor's stubborn belief in her foreignness because of her "lurid" dressing code. After all, is not wearing or not the veil a matter of individual liberty that need not be decided but individually? Is not this individual liberty worth respect as other Western liberties such as polyamory?

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Notes

1. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains that the latter "can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3).
2. See, for example, Rafael Patai's *The Arab Mind*, Long Island City: Hatherleigh Press, 2002. In this work, Patai presents a compendium of racist stereotypes and Eurocentric generalizations such as Arabs understand only by force or that the Arab mind is fully engrossed with sex. According to Philip S. Golub, this book has become "the bible of the Bush administration's leading neoconservative lights" and "the most popular and widely read book on the Arabs in the U.S. military." For more details, see Philip Golub, *The Wasteland of Empire* (Book Review), *Logos* 3.3, Summer 2004.
3. Edward Said well explains this relationship between knowledge and power when he states, "Although the connection between a routine British classical education and the extension of the British Empire is more complex than Lewis might suppose, no more glaring parallel exists between power and knowledge in the modern history of philology than in the case of Orientalism. Much of the information and knowledge about Islam and the Orient that was used by the colonial powers to justify their colonialism derived from Orientalist scholarship: a recent study by many contributors, *Orientalism and the Postcolonial predicament*, demonstrates with copious documentation how Orientalist knowledge was used in the colonial administration of South Asia" (*Orientalism* 344-5).

4. In his famous article “The Clash of Civilizations?” published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, Samuel Huntington asserts that, “The fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future” (22). Said continues, “The West must exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states to support in other civilizations groups sympathetic to Western values and interests to strengthen international institutions that reflect and legitimate Western interests and values, and to promote the involvement of non-Western states in those institutions”(49).

5. It is important to stress, at this level, that Islam is not monolithic. In this regard, the difference between the Sunnis, the Shias, the Mutazilin and Sufism are cases in point.

6. Karbala is a city in Iraq; it is one of the holiest cities for Shia Muslims after Mecca, Medina and Najaf. Ramsey refers here to the famous battle of Karbala (in the year 680/ the year 61 in the Islamic calendar) in which the Prophet’s grandson Hussein Ibn Ali was killed by Yazid Ibn Mu’awiya’s army because he had refused to recognize him as caliph.

7. In response to Samuel Huntington’s article “The Clash of Civilizations,” Edward Said published an article entitled “The Clash of Ignorance,” published in *The Nation* in October 2001, in which he criticizes Huntington’s thesis that differences between civilizations are inertly a source of conflict.

8. Backing his argument on Jan Assman’s magisterial article “The Mosaic Distinction: Israel, Egypt, and the Invention of Paganism” (*Representations* 56, Special Issue: The New Erudition, Autumn 1996, pp, 48-67) Hafid Gafaiti explains that, “In essence, like Judaism and Christianity before it, Islam is a counter – religion. Every religion emerges on the basis of and establishes itself against the ones that preceded it. Assman’s argument begins with the first form of monotheism under the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaton, which asserted itself against the polytheist credo of the high priests. Similarly, the Jewish people instituted their novel monotheism and the rule of YAHVEH in opposition to their Egyptian heritage and the local gods of Israel. Then Christianity, with its new values, distinguished itself from the God and the Jews by claiming that its own God, incarnated by Jesus Christ and the values he represents, is a superior God. Positing itself as the last revelation, and its Prophet as the “seal of prophets,” Islam functions along the same lines. Its foundational principle is not that Islam is first and foremost a new Revelation, but that the People of the Book – the Jews and the Christians – strayed from the original

word of God. In this respect, the first part of the Koran and, in particular, the first Medina sura, Surat' El Bakara (which appears as the second sura in the codified Koran) consists essentially of a recapitulation and assessment of the Biblical message, as well as a refutation of the preeminence of Judaism and Christianity. However, it is crucial to note that Islam does not sever itself from the Abrahamic tradition. On the contrary, beyond the historical conditions and specific cultural dimensions of its context and expression, it situates itself structurally, from a metaphysical as well as a cosmological point of view, within the continuum of the monotheist tradition of Judaism and Christianity" (115-6).

9. Muslims and Jews share many dietary laws such as: the prohibition of swine by both sets of laws, both Judaism and Islam consider slaughtering animals (Shechita in Judaism and Dhabihah in Islam) an obligation, both Shechita and Dhabihah involve cutting across the neck of the animal and both require that the spinal cord be avoided during slaughter.

10. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad explains an anecdotal remark that has been made by Nuha al-Hegelan, wife of former Saudi Ambassador to the United States, in the early 1980's. Al-Hegelan told a group of high school social studies teachers, "The veil has always been more than a piece of cloth Lifting her Yves St Laurent shawl from her shoulders and slowly placing it on her head, she told them: "When this designer scarf rests on my shoulders, you see it as stylish and fashionable, when I cover my hair with it, you see it as a symbol of my oppression" ("The Post-9/11 Hijab as Icon" 261-262).

11. The *haïk* is the Arab name for the big square veil worn by Algerian women and that they wrap around themselves so that just their hands, feet and eyes remain visible. Fanon explains that this traditional cloth was a source of frustration for the European colonizer who despised the fact that a veiled woman sees without being seen. This lack of reciprocity in terms of sight disturbed the colonizer.

12. The Hama Massacre took place in the city of Hama, Syria in 1982 when the Muslim Brotherhood Anti-regime forces seized control of parts of the city of Hama and "called on all Syrians to join in a jihad against the government. Al-Asad responded to the Hama rebellion with ferocious brutality. The Syrian military, under the overall direction of his younger brother, Rif'at al-Asad, launched a deadly campaign against the city and its civilian population When the military operation was halted after two weeks, the Asad regime had preserved itself and crushed the rebellion, but at a terrible cost. Large portions of the city of Hama lay in ruins, and at least 10,000 of its inhabitants were dead, killed by the armed forces of their own government. The events at Hama sent a collective chill of fear through Syrian society. Hafiz al-Asad had issued a warning to other potential dissidents that his regime would use all the force at its disposal to remain in power" (Cleveland & Bunton 407).

13. Kemalism refers to the westernizing reforms that were determined in large measure by Mustafa Kemal, known as Atatürk (meaning father of the Turks). Cleveland and Bunton profile the secular reforms brought by Atatürk in the following passage, “Secularism was a central element in Atatürk’s platform, and the impatient Westernizer pursued it with a thoroughness unparalleled in modern Islamic history... Other secularizing legislation quickly followed. The office of shaykh al-Islam was abolished, the religious schools were closed, and the Ministry of Religious Endowments was eliminated. In 1926 the assembly went much further and voted to abolish the Mejlle and the shari’ah. In their place, the Swiss civil code was adopted, along with penal and commercial codes modeled on Italian and German examples. This was a direct break with the past The new civil code forbade polygamy and broadened the grounds by which wives could seek divorce. As a result of these reform measures, the *Ulama* lost the final vestiges of their role in affairs of state, and their numbers declined. Secularism affected not only official institutions but also the religious practices of the Turkish people. The Sufi orders were dissolved, and worship at tombs and shrines was prohibited by law. Atatürk launched a personal attack on the fez, the brimless headgear that enabled a worshiper to touch his forehead to the ground during prayer. To Atatürk, the fez symbolized a tie to the Ottoman past, and he was determined to force its abandonment. In summer 1925 the president took to wearing a panama hat during his public appearances, explaining that hats were the headgear of civilized nations. In November the assembly endorsed the president’s practice and passed a law that made it a criminal offense to wear a fez. Hats became a prime symbol of Turkey’s drive to Westernize One of the most controversial acts of secularization involved the translation of the Quran. Because the divine revelations were in Arabic, translations were prohibited, for they were seen as tampering with the direct word of God. But Atatürk commissioned a translation of the Quran into Turkish and had it read publicly in 1932. In the same year legislation made obligatory the issuing of the call to prayer in Turkish instead of Arabic” (Cleveland & Bunton 180-1).

14. *Hijab scenes* are poems that appear in Mohja Kahf’s short volume of poetry *E-mails from Scheherazad*. The poems are numbered but they defy chronological logic as the numbers either appear in a non-chronological way or are completely missing. The *Hijab Scenes* poems include poems 1-3, 5 and 7.

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