

The Many Ways of Being Muslim: The Practice of Immanent Critique in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

Kepentingan Kritikan Dalaman dalam Pembentukan Identiti Islam di dalam novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* Karya Mohja Kahf

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ABSTRAK

Agama Islam sering diperkatakan sebagai agama yang tidak boleh menerima kritikan dan perubahan, menjadikannya agama yang lapuk dan tidak boleh dipraktis di zaman moden. Untuk menyangkal dakwaan ini, Irfan Ahmad telah memperkenalkan teori kritikan dalaman yang menggunakan tradisi dan doktrin dalam agama Islam itu sendiri untuk menggalakkan perbincangan ilmiah dan terbuka mengenai Islam. Beliau mengesyorkan bahawa praktis ini dapat membantu penganutnya membentuk pemahaman agama yang tersendiri untuk diamalkan dalam kehidupan harian, sekaligus membuktikan bahawa agama Islam adalah agama sepanjang zaman. Makalah ini membincangkan bagaimana teori ini telah digambarkan di dalam novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), hasil karya Mohja Kahf. Novel ini menceritakan pengalaman Khadra Shamy, seorang wanita Islam berketurunan Syria yang tinggal dan membesar di dalam sebuah komuniti dakwah di Indiana, Amerika Syarikat. Teori kritikan dalaman ini digunakan dalam membincangkan bagaimana beliau menggunakan ilmu yang diperolehi dari pengajian dan pembacaan penulisan mengenai ajaran Islam oleh ulama'-ulama' tersohor untuk membentuk kefahaman sendiri, yang membantu beliau untuk membentuk identiti sebagai seorang Muslim yang komited terhadap pendirian agamanya. Ini membolehkan beliau melepaskan diri dari kongkongan ibubapa dan komunitinya yang terlalu tegar dengan identiti dakwah mereka sehingga sering kali tidak dapat menerima perbezaan pendapat di dalam ajaran Islam. Selain itu, konsep kritikan dalaman juga menggalakkan beliau untuk cuba memahami kepelbagaian dan perbezaan komuniti Muslim di Amerika Syarikat, menjadikan Khadra Shamy seorang yang lebih toleran dan berfikiran terbuka dan tidak cepat untuk menghakimi orang lain.

Kata kunci: Islam; kritikan dalaman; novel; wanita Muslim; Mohja Kahf

ABSTRACT

There is a stereotypical understanding of Islam as a religion that is inherently hostile to critique and changes, making it no longer relevant in modern age. To dispel this, Irfan Ahmad proposes the theory of immanent critique in the Islamic tradition where doctrines within the Islamic tradition itself are used to develop different interpretations of religious understanding. This article discusses how this theory is applied in the novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Mohja Kahf (2006). It narrates the coming of age story of a young American Syrian Muslim woman, Khadra Shamy, who lives within a pious small Muslim community in Indiana, United States of America. As she lives under the watchful eyes of her parents and the community, she grapples with her understanding and acceptance of various Muslim communities around America who have different ways of practicing the religion. The article uses Ahmad's theorization to discuss how the practice of critique allows the protagonist to free herself from being governed by specific individuals in her understanding of Islam. The concept allows the protagonist to actively engage with Islamic teachings in order to develop their personal position within the doctrines of the religion. Furthermore, the article also suggests that the practice of critique helps to develop an independent selfhood that is strongly committed to Islam while at the same time, tolerant of differences that may exist in the society that she is living in.

Keywords: Islam; immanent critique; novels; Muslim women, Mohja Kahf

INTRODUCTION

The plot of Mohja Kahf's (2006a) *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* covers the early days of Muslim diasporic communities in America in the 1970s to the more troubled days of Muslim-American relationship of the 1980s and 1990s. Fawaz A. Gerges (2003) pointed out that the 1970s saw the growing numbers of Muslim migration to America from the Arab world, but this did not particularly alarm the American public. This was partly due to the existing active co-operation between the American and the Arab world leaders where they were united against the secular Arab nationalism led by President Gamal Abdel-Naseer of Egypt (Gerges 2003: 75). This was also due to the region's positioning near the Soviet Union, which saw America, from as early as the 1940s, drafting their foreign policy with the aim of "protecting the region from 'communist subversion'" (Akmal 2006: 27). However, the reaction changed after several important political events that caused the American officials and public to view Islam as a threat to Western interests – the Iranian Revolution, the Iranian Hostage Crisis, the Gulf War, the Palestine-Israel conflict, and the Bosnian war (Gerges 2003: 74-78).

Coincidentally, the American-Muslim writing products are also subjected to the religious and cultural profiling based on the American policy towards Arab-Muslim countries. This became especially apparent after the events of September 11th 2001. There was an increase support for American nationalism which called for the definition of what it means to be a U.S citizen. Muslim societies became the target of the demands for integration "within certain rigid boundaries of what it means to be a U.S. citizen or resident" with an attempt to 'visualize' Muslim identity through race which resulted in the vilification of American Muslims by the larger public as well as the stereotypical perception towards them (Hilal 2013: 1). This is mirrored in the production of works of fiction, with many works fulfilling specific ideas which are "remarkably counternarrative, reactionary, and corrective in their overall propensity" (Gana 2008: 1577). In another piece of writing, Kahf (2006b) argued that this situation particularly affects Muslim female writers, resulting in their writing being marketed as either

a 'Victim Story' or 'Escapee Story'. Their female protagonists are often expected to fulfill a limited repertoire where the patriarchal Muslim culture is seen as abusive towards its female members, who must then fight to 'free' themselves or become victims of this oppression. Thus, the publication of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* in 2006 is an attempt to revert these popular stereotypes while addressing the changing and complex background of the relationship between America and the Arab and Muslim world, and how it affects the Muslims residing in America. This is done through the presentation of "Muslims in the West [who] can have a normal life and not only retain their Muslim identity and Islamic belief but also enriches it" (Ruzy Suliza & Nor Faridah 2009: 554). Kahf presents Khadra Shamy, a young, practicing Muslim female protagonist who considers Islam not only as a way of life in the West, but also as an important element in developing her identity as a Muslim in America.

Khadra Shamy grows up in a fictional town of Simonsville, Indiana. There, she finds herself the constant target of the growing resentment and hostility against Islam and its believers as she grows up surrounded by the largely Anglo non-Muslim community. The novel opens with Khadra's recall of how her family is first welcomed in Simonsville – they are greeted by "[a] crash of glass[,] [b]eer bottles, a pile of brown and gold shards at their doorstep" and a shout that tells them to go "BACK WHERE YOU PEOPLE CAME FROM! [sic]" (Kahf 2006a: 6-7). This sets up the setting of inhospitality and anger that is echoed throughout the novel as the narration spans over twenty years, covering her childhood and early adulthood. As a child of Syrian parents who moved their family to America first, in pursuit of education, and later, in answering what her father, Wajdy describes as "a call in the land [with] the love of God controlling his steps" (14), Khadra grows up in a small religious Muslim community where her father is the Chapter Coordinator of the Dawah Centre.¹ Both he and his wife, Ebtehaj, along with the members of the tight-knit community, play a major role in creating the foundation of Khadra's and her two brothers' lives. In Wajdy and Ebtehaj's attempt to preserve their children's cultural and religious identity, they emphasize the importance of religious commitment in their children's lives.

However, in their eagerness and fear, they are also guilty of instilling superiority in the children by being suspicious and critical of members of the larger community, particularly the non-Muslims, who do not share their religious beliefs. As a result, there is always a tensed co-existence between different members of the society. This does not bode well for Khadra. She grows up to be a recluse who is unable to be a part of the larger American society that she is a part of. The novel is a bildungsroman which charts the development of the protagonist's identity as a Muslim growing up in a non-Muslim environment thus, scholars have paid attention to Kahf's description of this process. In Ulayyan and Awad (2016) for example, the different journeys that Khadra takes throughout the novel are argued to have helped "[transform] her identity and her self-perception" (33), allowing her to eventually recognize herself as an American, without losing her connection to Syria, her homeland. One chapter in Firouzeh Ameri's (2012) doctoral thesis meanwhile, has a similar aim of discussing the process of identity development. However, she charts this development through the discussion of the novel's narrative technique which portrays Khadra's consciousness and longing. It intertwines allusions from both Muslim and non-Muslim worlds to reflect the influence that each has on Khadra, suggesting her quiet and often unrecognized responses to her identity (Ameri 2012: 194).

Following this, this article aims to contribute to the established discussion on the protagonist's individuality. I pay attention to how Islam is utilized as a tool for her self-development, thus Khadra's attachment to religion becomes the prerogative towards the development of her identity. I argue that Khadra's strong understanding of Islam allows her to notice the ease that is available in Islam and its teachings. In particular, Khadra utilizes what anthropologist, Irfan Ahmad (2011) describes as the concept of immanent critique in Islam, which encourages the practice of critique in a believer's engagement with Islamic practices and edicts. It allows her to develop an independence from authoritative influence that expects her to blindly follow specific definitions of religious practices. Consequently, Khadra is able to become an individual assured of her place within the society while being respectful towards the differences that exist around her.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION

This article utilizes Ahmad's (2011) formulation of 'immanent critique' in the Islamic discursive tradition. It is a form of criticism from within the tradition itself, and uses its own tenets, doctrines and principles in its arguments. This is an attempt to dismiss the popular stereotype regarding Islam, where Western dissenters have often argued how Islam is a religion which is inherently hostile to critique. It stresses on the fact that as a tradition, Islam has always been open to critiques and suggestions.

This theorization is based on Talal Asad's (1986) call for the acknowledgement that there are diverse ways for Islam to be practised in any attempt to study and understand Islam. He suggested that the study of Islam must be approached "as a *discursive tradition* that connects with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledge" (Asad 1986: 7, emphasis added). Asad's view of Islam as a discursive tradition emphasised both the need for regular references to the founding texts of Islam, the Qur'an and the *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad, and for the religion to be understood as an ongoing tradition, within different social structures, beliefs and customs. While tradition relies on the continuance and preservation of the past so that it can be practised today, there is also the need to create a link between the past and the present. Thus, the Islamic tradition cannot overlook the importance of considering the current conditions of the world, as well as those of its believers. Asad (1986: 14) pointed out that the Islamic discursive tradition is in fact, "simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present". This opens up the tradition of critique and arguments over the ways the religion can and should be practised. Viewing this as a virtue, in another work, Asad (1993: 214) further suggested that social criticism within the Islamic tradition is expressed both through formal debate and the informal practice of advice-giving or *nasihah*, which means "advice that is given for someone's good, honestly and faithfully". He further argued that criticism in Islam is related to the act of *da'wah*, which is a continuous effort to encourage for the cultivation of religious doctrines and virtues. Thus, criticism is necessary in Islam.

In an extension to this theorization, Ahmad (2011) argued that the Islamic discursive tradition cannot have an exclusive focus on the Qur'an and *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly as it has a wide variation of believers. This is because Muslims also rely on other texts that document differing opinions of scholars on the matters of religion. The concept of 'immanent critique' in the Islamic tradition therefore, notes that Islam acknowledges the contrastive interpretations of various doctrines and encourages for a discussion of these discrepancies through the use of its own "tenets, histories, principles and vocabularies [in order] to criticize it in its own terms" (Ahmad 2011: 109). Modernity has pushed for the practice of critique in Islam "to become more salient, more pervasive, and therefore different from how it was conducted in pre-modern times" (Ahmad 2011: 117).

Ahmad (2011) suggested that current practice of immanent critique in Islam needs to fulfil three conditions. First, the object of inquiry must be active and not passive, as critiques derive from within social practice. Secondly, critique requires social and/or territorial distance that allows one to view one's culture in a different light, which would allow for the objectification of culture. This distance need not be physical, but can simply be a result of one feeling out of place within a familiar environment. Lastly, immanent critique relies on one's commitment with time, which can be seen through how one relates one's present conditions to future expectations. The future becomes an essential point as the break with the past and traditions causes societies "to take hold of the future by human interventions [which reflects] the self-production and self-transformation of the social order" (Ahmad 2011: 120).

In the context of the novel, immanent critique is used to understand the disagreement and criticism that the protagonist faces in her way of understanding specific Islamic doctrines – in particular, the issue of abortion. This issue is scrutinized as it marks the turning point for the protagonist which leads to the beginning of a journey towards self-discovery. I use this theorization to explore how she responds and answers to characters who do not share her opinion on the matter. I pay attention to how the argument does not stem from personal sentiments, but is instead constructed on the opinions of established scholars based on each individual's personal conditions. I also present how the practice

of critique encourages her to develop an identity that is free from outside influence that she finds overweening.

DISCUSSION

IMMANENT CRITIQUE: BREAKING PARENTAL CONTROL

As a group of minority in an overwhelmingly Anglo community, the Muslims of Simmonsville find themselves susceptible to prejudice and racism. The Dawah Centre where many of their communal activities, including prayers and religious lessons are held, often falls victim to vandalism which "the police couldn't seem to stop; they only came and took pictures every time it happened" (Kahf 2006a: 119), particularly during the Iranian Hostage Crisis of 1979. They were further shaken when a young woman named Zuhura, a beloved member of the Muslim community, was raped and murdered in what seems to be a religiously motivated hate crime (Kahf 2006a: 95). Khadra feels that these attacks on the community are in themselves personal attacks against her Muslim identity. This suspicion is validated when she becomes a victim of racism in school, where her decision to wear the hijab results in a physically violent attack against her. The hijab, while being a marker of her Muslim identity, is a symbol of the division between Khadra and her American peers (Susan Taha & Ida Baizura 2013: 103). The experience results in Khadra developing a sense of personal exclusivity as an attempt to salvage her pride in her culture and religion. This attitude is encouraged by the Muslim community of Simmonsville, who use their religiosity to create a boundary and to validate their distrust towards the larger community. They view the "Americans" – specifically the Anglo non-Muslims – as the ones who are "[leading] shallow, wasteful, materialistic lives" and are clueless about and hostile towards Islam, regardless of the fact that "Islam could solve many of their social ills, if they but knew" (Kahf 2006a: 69). There are also the American-born Muslims whom they refer to as "lost Muslims" (Kahf 2006a: 103) because they do not seem to practice 'actual' Islam. Therefore, Khadra grows up with the sentiment that Islam is not compatible with America, while personally feeling isolated and secluded, reflective of what Ramadan (1999) outlined as the devastating result of racism experienced by Muslims in the diaspora .

However, as she grows older, Khadra's antagonism towards America reaches a crossroad. Personal circumstances lead her to feeling as if she has lost her Muslim identity as "an Islamic warrior woman... in exile" (Kahf 2006a: 141) when she and her family members have to apply for the American citizenship as their passports have nearly expired. They are not able to renew them or to return to Syria due to her parents' anti-government activism. The citizenship therefore, becomes an irony that provides safety while forcing Khadra to join the fellowship of the very people who have rejected her identity. Furthermore, her parents' sudden acceptance of America is also bewildering. America is now "more Islamic than the countries of the Muslim world... [with] [l]aw and order, cleanliness, democracy, freedom to work and honestly seek the provision of the Lord... freedom to practice religion", while the previously esteemed homeland is "sick and corrupt" (Kahf 2006a: 143-144).

This experience enhances Khadra's sense of displacement. She already feels estranged from the larger non-Muslim community, and her parents' sudden change of tone towards America brought out a feeling of distrust towards those closest to her. This suspicion however, becomes a ground for Khadra to carry out an attempt at practicing immanent critique. Psychological distance experienced in the feeling of homelessness is an integral part of practicing critique, thus, leading her into becoming wary of her parents. She begins a personal approach towards understanding Islam, leading her to become obsessed with the idea of an 'authentic' understanding of religion. She adapts different ideological perspectives, ranging from the "black scarf" days of political Islam (Kahf 2006a: 149) to the "white scarf with tiny flowers" days of "neoclassical phase" (Kahf 2006a: 193-194). For Khadra, her parents are no longer always right – their words and actions are carefully monitored, giving Khadra a whole new perspective of the people she has once fully trusted. As Ahmad (2011) argued, distance is the prerogative of critical evaluation as it encourages the familiar to be viewed in a different light, but consequently, critique also narrows this very distance. It is through this ambivalent distance that Khadra begins to be able to "[engage] with issues of religious formation and informed dissent, as well as a kind of faithful self-formation" (Haque 2014: 801). This also marks Khadra as an active member of the society as she

watches the people around her with a keen eye – another prerogative towards immanent critique. Here, her past experiences come in contact with her present perception and condition, in order to have a better engagement with the present and the future. The practice of immanent critique can be seen in an argument that results from the failure of Khadra's brief marriage. What starts off as an ideal marriage begins to flounder when the couple is unwilling to compromise with one another, pushing Khadra to consider divorce when the marriage is still in its infancy. On the verge of her decision, she finds out that she is pregnant. She does not change her mind; in fact, much to the shock and dismay of her family, she also opts to abort her unborn baby:

"You're going to have children sooner or later," Ebtelah launched at her. "In two or three years, or now, what's the difference?"

"Your life is not in danger," her father said, beginning this line of argument for the fourth time that evening...

Khadra's father said, "My mother died having me. They told her it was risky, but she went ahead and had me."...

"Well, I don't want to die in childbirth," Khadra said sarcastically...

"I'm not suggesting you do so," he said quietly. "I'm saying, my mother sacrificed everything for a child. Sacrificed her own self."

"Well, I am *not* your mother," Khadra shot back. "I don't want to be your mother."

... Khadra thought sullenly [:] You raised me to go out and learn, but deep down you still want me to be just like your mother. So where did you think all these contradictions would lead me if not into this frustration, this tone of voice? But I am not going to kill myself to fit into the life you have all mapped out for me (Kahf 2006a: 244-246).

This is where the notion of immanent critique takes its place. Her decisions on the divorce and the abortion are signs of Khadra's knowledge of the Islamic teachings and a realization of her rights within the Islamic discursive tradition. Khadra comes to her decision after an active engagement with religious sources, in which she discovers the lesser known opinion of a respected thirteenth century Muslim scholar, Al-Ghazali. He is of the opinion that abortion is allowed even if only because a woman "[do] [not] care to lose [her] figure" (Kahf 2006a: 225). In her article, Marian Holmes Katz (2003) pointed out that Al-Ghazali suggested several situations where a woman may consider abortion – categorized as valid and invalid reasons – and one of the valid reasons to do so is the purpose of the woman's maintenance of beauty – just as Khadra claims in the novel. While Al-Ghazali was of the belief that abortion

constitutes a *jinaya* or an offense, it does not have the same extent of transgression as murder. However, this depends on the stage of the foetus – the longer it is in the mother’s womb, the more serious the offense.² He however maintained that while it is permissible to abort a blood clot and a drop of semen, it is not permissible to abort the pregnancy once it has progressed into a clump of flesh. This explains Khadra’s eagerness to abort her pregnancy as soon as she finds out about it. As Al-Ghazali is an esteemed scholar, his opinion gives her the knowledge to disagree with her parents’ perception. They are bent on accepting the more mainstream opinion of Muslim scholars in that abortion is not an option because Khadra’s life is not in danger. She however, interprets the idea of health and life beyond that of a physical ability. Her perspective centres on mental and psychological health – her waning marriage to Juma is a good reason for her to worry about her current and future personal well-being. By utilizing Al-Ghazali’s opinion, Khadra marks herself as an active member of the Muslim society, in that she has the knowledge to put into discussion the matter that are of no clear jurisdiction in the Qur’an and Hadith. She understands that the issue of abortion carries divided opinions among religious scholars even though the majority prefers the more restrictive view of its prohibition due to its resemblance to murder (Bowen 2003).³ Khadra’s disagreement with her parents illustrates the intricate discussions among Muslim scholars with regards to abortion and its prohibition. It is imperative to note that Khadra is not advocating abortion. In fact, she recognizes that there are specific time limitations to the practice. She is simply pointing out that there are differences of opinions, and would like her parents to acknowledge the matter.

As Khadra views this agreement as a clash of religious opinions which requires discussion, her parents’ outright objection disappoints her. This brings about a sudden realization that her religious knowledge and commitment is simply a result of her parents’ dictations and expectations rather than on her own personal understanding. The abrupt comprehension causes a religious breakdown when, for the first time in her life, Khadra questions all her religious convictions:

It took her by surprise, the sudden revulsion she felt for everything. For her whole life up until now. She wanted to abort the Dawah Center and its entire community... Twenty-one years of useless head-clutter. It all had to go. All

those hard polished surfaces posing as spiritual guidance. All that smug knowledge. Islam is this, Islam is that. *Maybe she believed some of it, maybe she didn’t – but it needed to be cleared out so she could find out for herself this time. Not as a given. Not ladled on her plate and she had to eat it just because it was there...*

She missed fajr after fajr, sleeping through her alarm. It made her feel ill to miss a prayer. It was so drummed into her: the first thing a believer will be asked on the Day of Judgment is prayers. His foot will not move until he has accounted for the five dailies. She made up the late fajrs contritely at first. Then she began to be angry. The rest of the five, duhr, asr, maghreb, isha, she banged on with fierce uncaring rotteness, pecking the floor with her forehead. Peck, peck, peck, one rakat after the other.

There, she said, flinging it at God. Here’s what you demanded. Two rakats? Four? Four-three-four? Take it, take them all! Was this what prayer was for, to stave off an exacting bean counter? Ticks on some kind of score card He was keeping on her? Fuck it (Kahf 2006a: 261-263, emphasis added).

The quote above reflects Khadra’s anger at her own willingness to take “whatever was foisted on her without examining it” (Kahf 2006a: 263). Clearly, she has religiously performed prayers throughout her life because of her parents’ expectations and warnings, rather than her own willingness to carry them out. Khadra’s despair therefore, is not a rejection of Islam and its practices; instead, this breakdown points out to her own dissatisfaction at her blind following.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CRITIQUE: SELF-DEVELOPMENT AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Khadra’s argument with her parents encourages her to begin developing a self-sufficient individuality that she is lacking. She finds that the best place to start this journey is in Damascus, Syria, the land “where she came from... [and] where her fathers died” (Kahf 2006a: 266). There, through her stay with her grandaunt, whom she calls Têta, she meets people who are imperative in helping her assess her individuality. In the first days of her travel, Khadra engulfs herself in “a withdrawal of love, a pulling away of the kind of love that had been given to her old self automatically, as long as she abided by its conditions” (Kahf 2006a: 269-270). As she starts questioning the validity of her practices of religious rituals, she invites a feeling of despair as she understands that these practices are God’s commandments. Her failure in performing them leads her to feel that God is angry at her for questioning His orders. This feeling lingers until she meets ‘the poet’, who pushes her towards self-evaluation. Their conversations often reflect her personal sense of confusion⁴:

"Why do you spend so much time worrying about what God thinks of you?" the poet asked her once. She was startled at his directness; his low voice seemed to come right out of her own gut. She didn't think she'd shared that much of her state of confusion. "It's the other way around, you know. God is what *you* think of God, you know" (Kahf 2006a: 301).

The poet's bluntness pushes Khadra to realize that the starting point for the re-exploration and re-definition of her Muslim identity should begin by examining her relationship with God. Since childhood, she views God as an All-Powerful figure, whose wrath must be avoided, thus, her commitment to Islam is a result of fear. Now however, she begins to understand that God is the symbol of love, acceptance and forgiveness and her devotion must be based on these ideals. Khadra discovers that, the solution to her disenchantment with religious practices actually lies within Islam itself and not outside of it.

Khadra, however, needs to understand that she has to forgive herself, and that she must stop judging those who do not share her perspectives on religion. This happens when Khadra visits an old synagogue in the city of Damascus where she meets an old rabbi, whose friendliness brings about a sense of familiarity until Khadra is able to imagine him as her grandfather. This experience brings a great shame to her as she has always found it difficult to accept those who do not share her faith. She laments that "all this time, she'd thought of them as Them, these people over There, not all the same of course, she knew that, but, still not part of Us. Never." (Kahf 2006a: 305-306). This experience allows Khadra to return to the figure of God. She begins to perform prayers again:

She called out for a caller to call to her and listened; she was the caller and the call. *Your Lord delights in a shepherd who, on the peak of a mountain crag, gives the call to prayer and prays...* and if he comes to Me walking, I go to him running... *Let not any one of you belittle herself...* And no soul knows what joy for them has been kept hidden... *I was a hidden treasure... and I wished to be known.* O soul made peaceful, return to your Lord, accepted and accepting. Come in among my worshippers, and in my garden, enter. *Come to prayer, come to prayer.*

Khadra came to prayer. She felt as though she were praying now for the first time, as if all that long-ago praying, rakat after rakat, had been only the illusion of prayer, and this – what she began to do now – was the real thing. All that had been lost was returning. All that had been disconnected was connected again... (Kahf 2006a: 306-307).

The narration is filled with references to God, suggesting a re-establishment of her connection

to God. Even so, it does not indicate her reverting to old habits of performing prayers. In fact, this particular prayer is no ordinary prayer. This time, Khadra has finally begun to understand the significance of the ritual as one that extends the need to fulfil God's orders. It is performed because it is a sign of the love and attachment she has for God. The act of praying brings about a sense of closeness with God that she has never experienced before.

Khadra's most significant action however, is the taking off of her hijab for the first time since she first began to menstruate:

Her scarf... was slipping off the crown of her head. She reached to pull it back up. Then she stopped...

... The scarf was slipping off. She shrugged. The chiffon fell across her shoulders... and she knew... that this was alright, a blessing on her shoulders. *Alhamdu, Alhamdulillah.* The sunlight on her head was a gift from God. Gratitude filled her. *Sami allahu liman hamadah.* Here was an exposure, her soul an unmarked sheet shadowing into distinct shapes under the fluids. Fresh film. Her self, developing (Kahf 2006a: 309).

The quote above demonstrates references to God that reflects that her decision as a form of her renewed attachment to Him. She takes off the hijab not as a rejection of the practice, but as a way to review her initial decision to wear it. She started wearing the hijab not out of coercion, but at the same time, she knew that it was expected of her, particularly as, it marked her out as a member of the Dawah Center community who "had acquired vestments of a higher order" (Kahf 2006a: 112). Thus, the taking off of the hijab marks a new beginning of the self. She realizes that her putting on the hijab earlier has not automatically made her out to be a good individual, and neither has the taking off of it marks her as a liberated self. She recognizes that the hijab symbolizes a journey on which she has embarked. Toossi (2015) argued that the act of taking the hijab off is significantly set in Syria rather than the United States, which avoids reading the action as "a gesture of embracing secular values or a celebrated moment of sexual liberation" (652). For Khadra, this act is liberating, but it is "only liberating in the sense that it marks a step towards her maturity and establishing an affiliative relationship with her faith, and is not an end in itself" (Toosi 2015: 652). In Syria, she is away from the microscopic lens of her parents and the Dawah Center community, allowing her to re-evaluate the hijab in relations to an independent self. This journey continues as she is on the plane

heading back to America. This is when Khadra decides to put the hijab back on, albeit not in the same way that she used to wear it:

On the plane, she pulled the tangerine silk out of her handbag. Pulled and pulled. And drew the head-covering out longer and longer in her hands like an endless handkerchief from a magician's pocket. Before landing in Chicago, she draped the *depatta* so it hung from the crown of her head. Not tightly, the way *Ebtehaj* wore it. Loosely, so it moved and slipped about her face and touched her cheek, like the hand of a lover (Kahf 2006a: 313).

This self-observation is a mark of Khadra's new definition of her Muslim identity, symbolized by the scarf. In one aspect, she no longer feels righteous by the wearing of the hijab and allows "her body [to] speak to her, from the inside out – rather than having it handed to her as a given" (Kahf 2006a: 374). In another, the action represents one Muslim woman's ability to take control of her life. The hijab is not a sign of restriction, but rather one of independence. She no longer feels required to wear it to fulfil her parents' or the *Dawah Center Muslims'* expectations. When she puts it on in the plane, the action marks her sense of individuality and independence. The bright colour itself contrasts with the usual dark and dull colours that Khadra used to wear when she was living in *Simmonsville*. It also marks her pride in being a Muslim and a continuous effort to be a better one.

THE NEW KHADRA: ACCEPTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

Khadra's spiritual journey can be related to Katherine Frank's (2006) suggestion that one's opinions and outlook with regard to the practices of Islam are a reflection of the believer's psychological and emotional perspectives. She argued that experience and interpersonal interactions with members of the same society play an important role in creating individual consciousness that helps in developing religious commitment – whether one feels attracted to or disengaged from religious practices. This suggests that individual consciousness is not a personal process; instead, it comes as a result of the influence others have on the believer.

This can be demonstrated by Khadra's move to Philadelphia, upon her return to the United States of America, which begins as a method to escape her childhood home. There, she meets a large and varied Muslim society:

Philadelphia, unlike Indianapolis, had a diverse array of mosques to choose from. Besides the one with her father's friend [Arab/South Asian mosque], there was the Black Sunni, the Shia center, the NOI [Nation of Islam] place, student enclaves at each university, and suburban mosques full of immigrant professionals. There was also a radical mosque in a little apartment over a shop on Chestnut Street, where a small colony was congealing around a Libyan sheikh and his Kuwaiti sidekick. There was even a gay/lesbian congregation that met in a secret location that changed every week. ... there was a Circassian community center which gathered in a lot of Chechnyans, Turks, Bosnians and Albanians...

Then there was the Sufi lodge – the *dergah*... (Kahf 2006a: 327).

The move first opens a way for Khadra to become receptive of the differences in religious understanding and practices, encouraging her to learn to respect these variations. This does not indicate an acceptance, but instead, it suggests a tolerance towards others. She no longer believes that there is one specific way to be Muslim, and she finds herself constantly evaluating these differences and to "[try] to get to a place where [she] could reconnect the two [sides], and be a whole person" (Kahf 2006a: 395).

Khadra also soon realizes that she is unable to completely detach herself from her past. She is forced to face her parents, who are worried of her new outlook towards Islam:

"Our biggest fear was always losing you," *Ebtehaj* sighed... "Losing our children to America. Having you not keep Islam one hundred percent."

Khadra rolled her eyes inwardly. She resented her mother assuming that she didn't "keep Islam" or love God just as much, just because she had come to disagree with her parents' idea of Islam. As if Islam belonged to them... "I'm not lost," she whispered. "I'm right here."

Ebtehaj looked doubtful. "You're not practicing proper Islam anymore. You're watering it down. That's the first step to losing it." (Kahf 2006a: 383-384).

Khadra finds herself to be fighting for her right to maintain her personal approach towards religion, while at the same time, yearning for others around her to accept her newfound self. She ends up feeling lost in this complicated web of societal relations, hence her refusal to return to *Simmonsville*. Thus, when the novel begins, she is brooding on these difficulties while expecting the worst out of the people back home. However, at the end of the novel, she reconnects with them, allowing her to slowly recognize their significance:

So here they are... My God, they're still pottering along the same way, the same old tired language, the same old restrictive ideas and crabbed beliefs.

... it's so – limited and cramped and – she sighs – just out-and-out *wrong*. Always stressing on the wrong side of religion, the fear-God side instead of love-God. Always stressing the outer forms over inner light.

Well, now wait, Khadra pauses... How arrogant of me. Do I know that for sure? Maybe they're right after all, on some other level I'm not aware of. A right principle wrongly applied, or something. Could be. *Yeah, uh, I don't think so, honey*, an ironic voice inside her says. *Stop making excuses for them...*

Okay. Fine. They're dead wrong. Yeah. They really are. About God and everything. God is not an asshole...

But *still*, Khadra reflects... Why not? If all paths lead to God, this one also leads to God (Kahf 2006a: 421-422).

Although Khadra is disappointed at what seems to be the unchanging conditions of the community, she also admits that just as she expects them to respect her newfound self and her new perspective towards Islam, she must also respect their rights to practise their own brand of Islam. Khadra realizes that there is a lot going on within the community which leads them to be as they are and she is not in the place to judge them. This is a growth of maturity, where she no longer rejects the community and their differences, but instead, her turning away is merely a variation of her practice of critique.

CONCLUSION

This article has outlined the important role of immanent critique in developing a young Muslim woman's personal development and identity as demonstrated in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. As the novel portrays, while Islam and its practices are opened to critical evaluation, the practice of critique goes beyond recognizing one's ability to disagree with one another. Critique is needed for one's development of religious understanding, while at the same time, has a far-reaching potential in allowing a Muslim individual to develop her own outlook of Islam, encouraging a genuine affinity towards the figure of God and religious doctrines and practices. Khadra's journey of self-discovery – from her brief renouncement of religious practices to reembracing them – is in itself a practice of critique. I demonstrate how the development of the protagonist's self-actualization is supported by the enduring capacity of Islam to be open to various interpretations. The novel suggests that Islam

promotes tolerance and meaningful discussions amongst Muslims of diverse backgrounds. The practice of immanent critique not only empowers a believer's right to disagree with specific sets of religious rulings, it also encourages the individual to achieve a personal definition of Islam. There is no place for a forceful conviction to a specified form of religiosity, bringing about the ability to develop one's own individuality.

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf is a counter-representation of Muslim women where the writing stands away from the stereotypical descriptions of women in Islam as subjugated, weak and lacking agency. By portraying a practicing female Muslim protagonist, it presents how Islam is not only a part of a believer's life, but is also imperative to her self-development. The novel also adds on to the repository of Muslim women writing in the West which, as I have mentioned earlier, has always been dominated by portrayals of stock images of Muslim women. Therefore, it provides readers with an alternative platform to understand the lives of Muslims and the practices of Islam.

NOTES

- ¹ This is a variation in the transliteration of the Arabic term *da'wah* (Arabic: دَعْوَة). In this article, the spelling *dawah* is used only when quoting directly from the novel as I prefer the former form of spelling as it is closer to the Arabic pronunciation.
- ² This differs from the opinion of the majority of religious scholars who prohibit or strongly disapprove of abortion in the first four months (Bowen 2003).
- ³ During the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in September 1994, Muslim scholars at first stood with the Vatican in unconditionally denouncing abortion. Later however, they retracted their stand and left open its permissibility according to specific circumstances (Bowen 1997).
- ⁴ As 'the poet' is an obscure figure in the novel, Ameri (2012) suggested that he is Khadra's conscience and not an actual person due to the use of magic realism in Kahf's narration of this friendship. This is done in order to emphasize the spiritual moments that her protagonist is experiencing.

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