

## “Homeland America, bismillah” Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and the Dissonance of Nationhood

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**Abstract** Mohja Kahf’s 2006 novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, follows the protagonist, Khadra, in her journey ‘back home’, to the State of Indiana, where she grew up and where she ran away from, in search of herself, her identity, and a less ‘dissonant’ existence first in her native Syria, then in Eastern US. Her personal and intimate search becomes an exploration into the multilayered and intricate articulations of the Islamic faith, of its positionings inside the US, and its negotiations with US nationhood. Kahf’s is a work of fiction that is also a (sometimes quite explicit) dissertation on Islam, the Muslim-American community, issues of inclusion, exclusion, identity, whiteness, and the national narrative of the US vis-à-vis the Ku Klux Klan, 9-11, Orientalism and patriarchy. This article looks at Kahf’s novel in the light of a critical discourse emerging in Arab-American fiction in relation to the boundaries and predicaments of US nationhood. In particular, the analysis will focus on Mohja Kahf’s poetics of dissonance that challenges dominant narratives of American national identity and its exclusionary cultural politics.

**Summary** 1 Homecoming, Inhabitation, Desolation. – 2 The Praying Body. – 3 Nationhood and Gendered Postcolonial Dissonance.

**Keywords** Arab-American literature. Nationhood. Islam. Feminism. Diasporic women writers.

### 1 Homecoming, Inhabitation, Desolation

Syrian-American writer Mohja Kahf’s novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* was published in 2006,<sup>1</sup> within the framework of a remarkable increase in literary production by Arab-American writers and poets, starting at least three decades ago. New urgencies have indeed emerged in US racial politics over this time, producing (new) exclusionary forces that have made it imperative for Arab Americans to ‘self-identify’ and ‘self-fashion’

1 Mohja Kahf is a Syrian American writer, poet and academic. She was born in Damascus and as a child moved with her family to the US, where she is currently based. She is the author of two poetry collections titled *Emails from Scheherazad* (2003) and *Hagar Poems* (2016), the novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), and the critical study *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman. From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999).

their own narratives, “with younger writers able to take for granted the existence of a community” (Majaj 2008). This, indeed, had not been the case for the previous generations, immersed in a different national and international context that produced intense assimilationist cultural politics in the US for Arab – especially Muslim – immigrants. This article looks at Mohja Kahf’s novel in light of a critical discourse emerging in Arab-American and Muslim-American fiction in relation to the boundaries and predicaments of US nationhood. Kahf’s narrative specifically addresses issues of Muslim-American identity, which in turn however cannot be completely separated, in Kahf’s case, from the complexities of Arab-American identities and the politics of racialization that Islam has undergone in the past fifteen years in the US (Selod 2014; Alsultany 2013). Such politics are, at the same time, also part of a foundational process of exclusionary identification at the basis of the American nation itself (Beydoun 2013). In light of such premises, the analysis will focus on the poetics of dissonance used by Mohja Kahf to re-configure the charged narratives of the American nation, while also re-mapping commonly circulating narratives of Islam, and of the (female) body-politics of Islam, in terms of the symbolic power assigned to the corporeal and sartorial practices of women, both inside and outside Muslim-majority countries.

A Muslim woman and the inhospitality of the American Heartland mark the story from the beginning:

Burly beardless white men in denim and work shirts sit in front of a burned out storefront. The giant charred store sign, Marsh’s, leans against a telephone pole. Possibly their only grocery for miles. The men’s loose jowls have the cast of a toad’s underbelly. She feels them screw their eyes at her as she drives past, her headscarf flapping from the cross current inside the car. She rolls the windows up, tamps her scarf down on her crinkly dark hair, and tries to calm the panic that coming back to Indiana brings to her gut. (Kahf 2006, 3)

This, on page three, is the first mention of a scarf in the novel; the scarf belongs to Khadra, the protagonist of the story. The title of Kahf’s book announces a girl with her hair covered, a sartorial practice of religious significance, and also, as we learn from the very start of the novel, a cultural sign. The opening scene, in fact, shows Khadra returning to Indiana, where she grew up. The scene conjures immediately at least three elements that will permeate the entire novel: Islam and its material and discursive practices, Khadra’s sense of un-belonging in the very land where she grew up, and a territory that is completely devoid of the sparkle and wealth that is normally associated with the dominant geo-cultural idea of ‘America’. The men outside the burned store, the scene of desolation, and the unwelcoming feeling of a person who is actually (or should be) ‘going

home' are striking. Indeed, the book actually begins with the word "Liar". This is the novel's incipit:

"Liar," she says to the highway sign that claims "The People of Indiana Welcome You." The olive-skinned young woman drives west on the old National Road. A small zippered Quran and a camera are on the hatchback's passenger seat in easy reach, covered by an open map - *States of the Heartland*. Khadra Shamy spent most of her growing-up years in Indiana. She knows better than the sign. (1)

Kahf offers a presentation of Khadra that speaks to and of geography and identity; not only Khadra's identity, but also, more broadly, the coordinates of a map in which nation, belonging, and identity fluctuate but never really coincide. We learn first of the woman's uneasiness with her 'home-state', then of her Quran and her camera (which in the course of the story turn out to be the two unwavering elements she clings to), then her scarf, set against the desolation of the 'Heartland'. We are thus presented with the woman protagonist, but also with the land, as protagonist.

*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* follows Khadra in her journey back to the State of Indiana, a 'home' she had run away from, to seek herself, her identity, and a less 'dissonant' existence first in her native Syria, then out in Eastern US. Her search for 'surrender' - clearly a reference on the author's part to the meaning of the word 'Islam' and the many ways it can be interpreted and practiced - to herself and her place in the world (and in Indiana) becomes an exploration into the multi-layered and intricate articulations of the Islamic faith, of its positionings inside the US, and its negotiations with US nationhood. As Carol Fadda-Conrey observes in relation to the opening description of Khadra's return,

[t]he immediate sense of trepidation that overcomes the adult Khadra when she crosses into the state of Indiana in the novel's opening pages is a testament to the deep scars she maintains from the bigotry directed at her Muslim community while growing up in that state. Rather than being a homecoming, then, Khadra's return to Indiana as an adult becomes an entryway into reassessing the trajectories of belonging to the places and homes to which she has been imaginatively and physically connected throughout her life. (Fadda-Conrey 2014, 70)

This reassessment of trajectories, announced in the very incipit of the book, lays out an emotional and identity-architecture that brings Khadra to necessarily pursue continuous, almost concentric homecomings, or "journeys of return and re arrivals" (68), that are both spiritual and physical. In fact, Khadra seeks to construct - rather than find - her identity throughout the entire novel, certainly in a spiritual/religious path, but one that always also

implies a physical movement, the actual, material change of ground under her feet, of her body inhabiting specific spaces and relations, of the bodies surrounding her, and of the scents, horizons and architectures embracing her. Khadra searches for and builds her identity as much as 'her' land, and her own her geo-graphical signification.

The story *Kahf* builds follows the protagonist's coming of age, told through a series of flashbacks which eventually become an (almost) linear narrative, from her childhood in Indiana, where she arrived with her family from Syria, after an initial stay in the Rocky Mountains, in the 1970s, to become part of a close-knit Muslim community; to her college years, her marriage and divorce, her search for some kind of roots in Syria, and her becoming the successful photo-journalist that is going back to Indiana at the beginning of the novel, on an assignment about that very Muslim community and cultural centre in which she grew up.

Khadra functions, in a way, as an agent for Kahf's explorations into not only her personal memories, given the resonance of the story with the writer's biography, but also into the layerings and re-significations of signs and symbols associated with Arab-American identity, Islam, and Muslim-American identity. As observed, again, by Fadda-Conrey, the "political histories defining the relations between the US and the Arab world" intervene, in Kahf's writing, in the renegotiation "of the Arab-American body, specifically the female body, [... inscribing] transformative understandings of the Arab homeland into the US terrain" (68).

Khadra's body is described as inhabiting the desolation and flatness of the American 'heartland', in a re-configuration of the American nation that always, also, involves the singularity of specific territories, such as that of Indiana; nationhood is clearly shown as a multi-dimensional construct. Kahf interestingly deploys a narrative device that puts her text inside a multi-directional and polyphonic dialogue with a number of other texts: she inserts at the beginning of each chapter an epigraph from works of fiction, poetry, history, philosophy, and from the Quran. The quotes provide a complementary commentary to the narrative, while sometimes changing and sometimes being changed by Kahf's text. Some of these epigraphs refer explicitly and significantly to the territory of Indiana. For example, one of the first chapters is introduced by a quote from *Little House in the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder (1935):

As far as they could see, to the east and to the south and to the west, nothing was moving on all the vastness of the High Prairie. Only the green grass was rippling in the wind, and white clouds drifted in the high, clear sky.

"It's a great country, Caroline," Pa said. "but there will be wild Indians and wolves here for many a long day". (Kahf 2006, 38)

The choice of *Little House in the Prairie* is significant, as a classic of the imaginary of a specific, white, 'pioneer', (racist) America. Inserted in Kahf's narrative, it unearths the rhetoric of a dangerously inhabited land, with the 'haunting' presence of "wild Indians and wolves." The narrative of the American nation is revealed in its constitutive violent element: the constant idea of 'the enemy' to be warded off and hunted down. This same rhetoric recurs in many attacks, of varying degrees of violence, that Khadra's community endures. It is a logic that critic Steven Salaita has qualified as "imperative patriotism", which "relies on a certain ethnic imagery to produce a distinction between 'us' and 'them,' with 'us' representing good Americans and 'them' representing evildoers" (Salaita 2011, 88). Imperative patriotism, Salaita adds, "is more likely to arise in settler colonies, which usually need to create a juridical mentality that professes some sort of divine mandate to legitimise their presence on indigenous land" (Salaita 2005), thus repeating and legitimizing the logic of identifying and isolating 'the enemy'. It is evident, throughout the entire novel, that, in the heart of the US, Khadra and her community are the "wild Indians and wolves". One instance of such oppositional designation stands out, like the block letters it is written in, signifying the violent shouting that Khadra's father faces in response to his complaint to the neighbors that their children are bullying his: "- ACCUSING MY CHILDREN - OFF MY PORCH - BACK WHERE YOU PEOPLE CAME FROM!" (Kahf 2006, 6-7).

The specific scenario of predominantly white, non-urban and typically economically depressed America constitutes the backdrop of cultural and intimate isolation that recurs in much writing by Arab-American women writers. In Jordanian-American Diana Abu-Jaber's first novel, *Arabian Jazz* (1993), for example, suburban New York State is the site for inscribing difference and questioning the categories of 'normal' and 'abnormal', through the grotesque but also painful existence of a Jordanian-Palestinian immigrant family. In another dislocation of the white desert of non-urban US, in Texas, Palestinian-American Randa Jarrar sets the semi-autobiographical narrative of *The Map of Home* (2008), where the young woman protagonist is forced to live a personal, isolated grief, inside an isolated family, and inside a type of cultural desert made of shopping malls and barren landscapes (Cariello 2014). Here, the provincial communities, often deserted by the hegemony of urban culture, become juxtaposed with the alienation of migrants and minorities, who find themselves 'alienated from the alienated', so to speak.

The chapter that opens with Laura Ingalls Wilder's epigraph begins with Khadra's friend, Zuhura, an immigrant black Muslim woman, posing outside the Muslim Center in a sort of oppositional corporeal geography between her and the hostile outpost of onlookers, across the street:

Zuhura stood on the porch of the Dawah Center Home Office in a full skirt, one hand on her hip, the other shading her eyes from the sun as

she looked out across the street at a red pick-up truck, around which a klatch of locals hostile to the Dawah was gathering. The Center was only a mile from the Fallen Timbers Townhouses at the edge of Indianapolis, but technically lay within the city limits of Simmonsville, a small, economically depressed town. Many of its residents were not so happy about the Muslims doing God's work there, and some of them were the men Zuhura was watching. (Kahf 2006, 38)

Zuhura will be murdered at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan (though the case is never officially solved). Her murder haunts Khadra all her life, functioning as a pivotal event that not only underscores the racial nature of power relations in the US (at the time of the murder, in the 1970s, but also stretching through the novel and thus to today), but also puts under interrogation a number of categories that the entire novel grapples with. Kahf indeed engages with the dominating discourses of 'Americanness' and of Islam, but she also positions herself - through Khadra, and, very strongly, through Zuhura - in an intersectional conversation with Western feminism. For example, when Zuhura is murdered, the media coverage is telling of a number of issues involved in the ultimate and violent rejection of a black immigrant Muslim woman from the local community:

Clearly it was religious bigotry, the Muslims said. Salam Mosque and Dawah people agreed. It was related to her vocal espousal of Muslim causes on campus, it was political. The *Indianapolis Freeman* [...] said it was about race, said how could it not be, in light of the Skokie affair and the recent rumblings from the Klan? It called Zuhura "a young black woman" and didn't mention that she was Muslim at all. On the other hand, the *Indianapolis Star* pretended like race wasn't there at all, calling Zuhura a "foreign woman" and "an [Indiana University] international student," as if her family didn't live right there in town. The *Indianapolis News* article treated it like just some random crime, giving it one tiny paragraph in the back pages. The front-page news was about a march. A photo that showed a group of white women yelling "Take Back the Night!". (95)<sup>2</sup>

The reference to the white feminists marching addresses the problematic of intersectionality, bringing together all the various power dynam-

2 'The Skokie Affair' refers to the Supreme Court ruling of 1977 (Nationalist Socialist Party of America vs Village of Skokie) that granted a group of Nazis the right to march through the streets of Skokie, Illinois, a town whose population of 70,000 counted 40,000 Jewish residents, 5,000 of which were Holocaust survivors. The right to march was granted on the grounds of the First Amendment, though eventually an agreement was made and the Nazis marched in Chicago instead of Skokie.

ics mentioned in the news accounts and interpretations of the woman's death. Religion, race, migration, and gender all conflate into shaking the ground of dominant discourses, including that of feminism. Islam, too, is discussed in relation to Zuhura's murder, since she is also said (by some in her community) to "have been asking for trouble," since she goes to college in a different town and generally leads a life that crosses some limits imposed by a certain view of Islam. Surely, the fact that Zuhura's murderers are never found and the police make no serious effort to find them "also points out the complicated relations of power and exclusionary processes at work in the society against Muslim minority groups" (Borhan and Anushiravani 2016, 11).

In the scene where she stands outside the Dawah Center, Zuhura's body performs a personal and collective challenge to the hostility of the economically depressed suburban environment. Her body is also, however, the body of (deadly) exclusionary relations in America. Four days after she has gone missing, her death is confirmed:

Days later, Zuhura's body was found in a ravine near Beanblossom Bridge. Murdered. Raped. Cuts on her hands, her hijab and clothes in shreds - the grown-ups didn't want to give details in front of the children, but it was in the news. (Kahf 2006, 93)

Zuhura's body becomes news, occupies, albeit briefly, both the private and the public discourses of America, of Islam in America, of immigration, and of racism.

## 2 The Praying Body

Kahf construes spaces of inhabitation for 'dissonant bodies' not only through Zuhura's body, which, both alive and dead, inhabits a strong space of resistance, but also through the meticulous description of the Muslim prayer, a practice that recurs throughout the book, from Khadra's childhood into adulthood. When she and her family have only recently arrived in the US and are living in the Rocky Mountains, she befriends a Spanish-speaking girl, who one day asks if she can watch them pray:

Her parents called her and her brother in: prayer time. "Hafta go," she said under the Shy Tree to Alessandra-called-Sandra.

"Why?"

"Hafta pray."

"Can I come?"

Khadra made her wait at the door, by the tin box where the milkman left cold bottles of milk at fajr time. "Mama, can Alessandra-called-

Sandra watch us pray?"

"Welcome, welcome to the guest," Mama said, sitting the little girl on a slatted wooden chair. [...]

Her father was calling the *qad qamat*. Eyad spread the prayer rugs. Khadra ran to splash her ablutions fast-fast so she wouldn't miss the bow and have to do the whole *ralat* over. [...]

Alessandra-called-Sandra swung her little ashy legs against the chair, bumpity-bump, while the family whispered the *Fatiha*, arms folded across chests. When they all knelt down-down-down, and put their faces on the floor for the *sajda*, her legs went still and her eyes got round as saucers. (Kahf 2006, 10-11)

After the family moves to Indiana and Wajdy, Khadra's father, begins to work at the Dawah Center, they take periodic trips across the country, driving to different chapters of the Center to help develop Islamic awareness. The travels involve interesting adventures, and unexpected prayer sites of all kinds:

They made ablutions in the Great Salt Lake (it really *was* salty!) and prayed *duhr* at Mount Rushmore with the giant faces of the presidents gazing down upon them ("Carved by a Klansman," Wajdy said). [...]

They purified for God in foul-smelling rest-area bathrooms. They prayed by the side of an Amish country road in the dirt and iron-weed, in the shade of a shagbark hickory tree. They made symbolic ablution by striking their hands against a rock in the Painted Desert. They prostrated in a windy corner of the observation deck of the Sears Tower in Chicago ("Built by a Muslim engineer, you know!" Wajdy told them). Once, lost trying to get to Mishawaka, they even prayed next to a giant roadside egg. Twelve foot high, made of concrete. The lettering beneath it declared, "Greeting from Mentone, Indiana - the egg basket of the Midwest". (99-100, 102-3)

Through the (physical) dissemination of prayer on the American territory, including some of its symbolic landmarks, Kahf construes a sort of performative transformation of the territory. Mount Rushmore, for example, becomes a place of worship, with the holiness of the American rhetoric and its symbols becoming a site for religious (Muslim, nonetheless) prayer. At the same time, Khadra and her family's praying 'anywhere' allows Kahf to let her characters inhabit, with the materiality of their religious belief, all and any part of the American territory, while narrating Islam as a fact of ordinary, everyday and anywhere- practice, not necessarily closed inside the walls of mosques or of inflexible dictates regarding behaviours, relations, or moral attitudes. In other words, the element of the prayer constitutes for Kahf a space for the pedagogical mission that her novel undoubtedly has, but at the same time, it is a chance to re-write the American territory



through a physical anchoring of Muslim practices and lives inside the dominant narrative of such territory.

The same can be said about the author's use of the veil, as religious and cultural signifier. Khadra is introduced as veiled, from the very title and, as seen, from the beginning of the novel. There are instances in her life when this element becomes a crucial symbol of belonging, and also the channel of violent interaction with her peers, as when she is attacked by two schoolmates:

"Oops," said a voice behind her. She whirled. Brent Lott and Curtis Stephenson. [...]

Curtis grabbed [*The Autobiography of*] *Malcolm X* off the pukey green floor.

"Give me that." Khadra glared.

"Take off your towel first, raghead."

"Give it!"

"Why don't we take it off for her?" Brent Lott's hammy hand clamped on the nape of her neck, yanking her backward. The scarf went down around her shoulders. [...]

"Look, raghead's got hair under that piece a shit," Curtis crowed.

Brent yanked again.

[...]

A ripping sound. Brent stepped back, waving a piece of scarf. Khadra lunged - tried to grab it - her scarf was torn in two, one strip in Brent's hand, the other wound tightly around her neck.

"I hate you!" she screamed.

"*I hate you!*" Brent mimicked in falsetto. "It's just hair, you psycho!" (124)

As Hanaà Berrezoug observes, "this scene is not of the scopophilically-arranged kind that focuses on appearance since there is no mysterious titillation in the act of unveiling" (Berrezoug 2015, 34). It is, in fact, an instance in which she is 'unfetishised': she is the object of hatred, and possibly curiosity. Any possible interest in her may lie, on the boys' part, exclusively in her outer appearance, rather than in what's 'beneath the veil', which, as confirmed by one of them, is "just hair" (34). The symbolism of the scene relies also on the books Khadra is holding when she is attacked: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, which elicit no interest in the two attackers. It appears, then, that Kahf's intent here is to construe the veil as an element that "frees women from the fetishizing male gaze that circumscribes the treatment of women to a scopophilic approach" (34). This narrative of the veil is common also among other women writers, such as Sudanese Anglophone Leila Aboulela, who, in her novel *Minaret* (2005), portrays a

young woman, forced to migrate to the UK from Sudan, who at one point decides to wear the headscarf and finds that

Around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn't see me anymore. I was invisible and they were quiet. All the frissons, all the sparks died away. Everything went soft and I thought, 'Oh so this is what it was all about; how I looked, just how I looked, nothing else, nothing non-visual'. (Aboulela 2005, 247)

In a sort of 'disappearing act' behind a visual signifier, in the face of the scopoc violence she has experienced since arriving in London, here too the protagonist experiments a new form of inhabitation of her relational space.

Furthermore, in Kahf's writing the veil serves also as a shifting signifier of identity construction and counter-hegemony in a number of different socio-cultural and geo-political locations of various characters in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*.<sup>3</sup> For example, when she travels to Syria, Khadra learns that her mother's choice to wear it had caused her to suffer abuse from her secularised Turkish stepmother. Similarly, Khadra's great-aunt (a grandmother-figure to her) tells her about the violence endured by veiled women during the Hama Massacre of 1982, with paratroopers attacking women wearing the headscarf and certain Muslim garb, in what is considered the worst massacre in Syrian history, and a mark of the complex and overlapping levels of political and religious tensions within the Muslim-majority country itself.<sup>4</sup>

Khadra herself, however, at one time 'lets go' of her scarf, and does significantly so while she is in Syria. It accidentally falls off while she is in an orchard, with a man nonetheless (a poet, to be specific, but still a man). The scene is quite symbolic:

Khadra paused, standing there in the fading rays with her palms spread, her hands spiraled upward toward the sky like question marks. She was in a position like the first stand of prayer. A yellow butterfly fluttered by. The scarf was slipping off. She shrugged. The chiffon fell across her shoulders. (Kahf 2006, 309)

The relevance of the setting in which this transformation takes place is underlined by Ismet Bujupaj:

3 Kahf explores the theme of the hijab in a number of her poems, in particular in her "Hijab Scenes" (Kahf 2003).

4 On 2 February 1982, the then Syrian President Hafez al-Assad ordered troops to seize the city of Hama and bombed its center with fighter jets, crushing an armed rebellion by the Muslim Brotherhood. The 27-day military campaign that followed left between 10,000 to 40,000 people killed and almost two thirds of the city destroyed.

It is not to conform to 'looking American' that Khadra removes her *hijab*. Instead, it is in Syria and in nature that she is able to let her scarf slip off. Specifically, she is in an orchard during its fruiting season. At first, it is her instinct to preserve her scarf (from the cherry stains) that ironically causes her to let it go on slipping down her shoulders as she feels it loosening. Having lifted her hands upward to fix the scarf, she finds herself standing in the first position of ritual Islamic prayer, as the next sentence tells the reader. However, instead of expressing the certainty of the defined movements of that ritual, her hands are described as "spiraled upward toward the sky like question marks". (Bujupaj 2015, 21)

Certainly, then, there is a suggestion that Khadra finds some form of spirituality that transcends received or inherited prescriptions. There is also, however, a further reconfiguration of the headscarf as slipping signifier, revealing yet another way to practice Islam, and notably this emerges not in the US, but in a predominantly Muslim national space.

The detailed descriptions Kahf gives of (not only Muslim) rituals, practices, prayers, and sometimes scriptures are certainly part of an evident attempt, on the author's part, to 'educate' her readers on the varied and complex realities of Islam, appearing to address, in this sense, a mainly English-speaking, non-Arab audience. However, as seen, these detailed depictions of Muslim practices also contribute to the construction of a text that narrates but also performs difference, within Islam, and outside of it. Some parts do risk revealing an overpowering didactic character of the text, but Kahf's writing also reads as an exploration in itself, into an extremely wide array of variants of Islam and its relation to other religions, ultimately leaving the reader (any reader) with the idea that the potential articulations of a religion are endless, possibly down to each individual who believes. This operation disempowers the "discursive self-sufficiency of [...] dominating discourses, [exposing] their situatedness in history" (Borhan and Anushiravani 2016, 5); it disempowers, for example, the hegemonic discourses conflating Islam with terrorism, as well as the monolithic designation attached to the veil as based on the binary opposition of freedom and oppression, following a totalizing dynamics (Toossi 2014).

### 3 Nationhood and Gendered Postcolonial Dissonance

Though, as mentioned above, there is certainly a common terrain upon which Arab-American and Arab-Muslim-American women's narratives are inscribed in terms of re-writing the American nation, its cultural politics, and the body politics of female inhabitation, this common ground is clearly diversified in relation to a number of elements. As already underlined, the writers' positioning within the Arab-American community itself is distinct

from their identification with the Arab-Muslim community, or the wider, highly multi-ethnic Muslim community within and outside the US. Further diversification emerges from issues of readership politics, audience expectations and the individual author's response to specific historical contexts in which each literary work is published, and also set. In this sense, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* bears the burden, so to speak, of responding to a (relatively fresh at the time of publication) post-9/11 (again, presumably non-Arab-American) readership, and this certainly contributes to the urge on Kahf's part to 'educate' her readers on Islam and its many variants. The protagonist encounters such variants in her 'soul-searching' in Syria, but also, for example, in her Muslim Iranian roommate in Philadelphia who worries that Khadra is a 'fanatic' when she sees that she is veiled. However, the most powerful device Kahf employs to mobilise constructed sanctioned narratives (Hassan 2002, 9) of Arab-Americans, Muslim Americans, and especially Muslim American women, is her reconstruction precisely of Khadra's childhood in Indiana, as above analysed. This allows for a glance into a mostly negated narrative, namely that of Islam in the US, its communities of migrants, but also of converts, and the specific history of Black Muslims. Such communities, as the one Kahf describes, existed well before the (negative) visibility they gained after 9/11. Many Arab-American writers have indeed addressed, directly or indirectly, the narratives of othering that have taken form after 9/11, though clearly each in individual and situated ways. There is, however, a common challenge addressed at the dominant figurations of US nationhood. Indeed, as Fadda-Conrey observes:

9/11 constitutes a formative moment in self-iterations (literary or otherwise) that insist on portraying Arab-Americans through a transnational and anti-homogeneous lens. This formative moment has mobilized more vocal, assertive, and unapologetic claims to transnational enactments of Arab-American identities that problematize the assimilative pressures inherent in dominant performances of US citizenship and belonging. (Fadda-Conrey 2014, 140-1)

In particular, as already underlined, it is interesting that several Arab-American writers choose to portray poor, suburban, or rural America, whether writing in pre- or post- 9/11 contexts. This is partly due to the often-present autobiographical component in their writing, clearly a testimony to where and how certain communities of Arab migrants have grown in the US. In connection to the autobiographical element, there is also the search for a poetics of dissonance: the dissonance experienced first-hand growing up in a country that has always had complex and intersecting difficulties in negotiating with both Arab and Muslim identities, but also a dissonance that speaks more broadly of the discomfort in dealing with

the edifice of nationhood itself, read in the perspective of gender, ethnic and religious constructs, expectations, projections and reifications.

As in the case of Kahf's novel, through the re-writing of the tenets of charged terms such as identity, citizenship and belonging, postcolonial narratives often directly or indirectly address the complex issue of nationhood. The re-narration of nations certainly entails the intervention of what Homi Bhabha calls "the performative temporality" of the postcolonial, as opposed to the "pedagogical temporality" of the nation's narrative, where the latter comprises all the hegemonic constructions of Euro-American nation-states and their apparently transparent universalist ideologies of inclusion and exclusion, bordering, and progress (Bhabha 1994). Within this framework, where the postcolonial epistemic disruption invests the hegemonic discourse of 'America' as much as that of the rest of 'the West', it is particularly interesting to look at the counter-narrative that emerges in the voices of women writers from the Middle East, who 'translate' the ideas of belonging, homeland and nationhood through the dislocation of their own personal narratives, the acquired memories of lost lands, or the re-configuration of languages and grammars into accounts of statelessness or de-nationalised communities (Sassen 2002).

In particular, diasporic women writers from the Middle East - in Kahf's case, deliberately writing from a Muslim perspective, thus bringing into the picture the complexities of the Islamic faith and its the geo-cultural vastness - often bear voices that contest and appropriate the category of nation, not only through their act of 'translation' of the nation as migrants, but also through the act of narrating the space and presence of the female body(-politic), the writing of which produces a re-inscription of Western *and* Middle-Eastern predicaments of femaleness, homeliness, homeland, and nation.

*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* reflects upon the boundaries and predicaments of US nationhood (also) by exploring the specificities of the Heartland States - and Indiana in particular - as a disrupting 'heart' in the middle of a national narrative - the US narrative - that normally excludes the desolation of these territories, of 'poor white US'. Kahf uses a poetics of dissonance that works at once through emotional interruptions and irony to construct (and de-construct) the borders of nationhood, while also writing a coming-of-age narrative of a Muslim woman in the US; in a sense, a transformative process for the nation as well.

The irony of Kahf's writing emerges in all its dissonant and disorienting poetics when Khadra is landing back in the US after her stay in Syria:

Toto, we're not in Damascus anymore, Khadra whispered, as the wheels hit the ground. Homeland America, *bismillah*. (Kahf 2006, 313)

Through the reference to *The Wizard of Oz*, Kahf summons symbolic narratives and fairytales, stories and even archetypes. Khadra's frame of refer-

ence is clearly 'American', quoting Dorothy, and, indeed, calling America her "homeland". Yet, Dorothy's home was Kansas, and the cyclone had taken her away from that home, to the amazing world of Oz. Here, Damascus is the 'home' that the young woman has been taken away from, by another kind of cyclone: an internal, cultural, political and religious one, but this tornado has also re-configured her home, expanding it to the American ground that the plane is touching; *Khadra/Dorothy*, in the (Islamic) name of God - *bismillah* - is going 'home'.

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