

Daniel S. Jeremiah

Prof Valdina

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**THE GIRL IN THE TANGERINE SCARF**  
**A SHORT ESSAY REVIEW**

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Mr. Khadra illustrates the degree to which the interplay between personal autonomy and cultural heritage can work through the relationship she has with her family, therefore directing attention to the social pressures on Muslim women in the present-day US. Examining these family relationships alongside the ones in reality and using the feminist viewpoints of Kecia Ali, the essay shows the way in which traditional gender roles and religious norms establish and frequently limit women's identities.

Before I fully get into writing, it is worth noting that my references for the book are drawn from the digital copy of the novel, which has a different pagination from the physical copy. For that reason, the references might be off when referenced with the physical copy. To mitigate that, I will attach a link to the digital version, which can be used for proper citation.

To begin this essay, I would like to invite our analytical minds to the following assertions made from the following contexts in the novel. Immediately after Khadra's marriage (*Kahf* 163, *digital*), it is expected that she be with a child. In her conversation with her Aunt Fatma, Khadra is being lectured on the plotting of the West to ensure the sterility of women who care about their

reproductive rights. Essentially, it is a means to give further justification to her religious belief on pregnancy and abortion as a sacred and unholy phenomenon, respectively.

This portrayal of societal pressures on Khadra aligns well with contemporary feminist critiques of traditional gender roles. In this scene, Khadra's conversation with her Aunt Fatma highlights the cultural expectations placed on Muslim women and reveals the tensions between religious beliefs and personal autonomy.

However, an argument may exist for One author, Kecia Ali (*Ali XV*) argues for the benefits of these existing religiously held notions. Kecia Ali argues that the established notion of a woman being viewed as a childbearing figure, serves to protect the woman from the unfavorable conditions that non-muslim women (particularly Western women) are facing.

For instance, Kecia Ali (*Ali, XV*), in her argument for the more appropriate schema of sexual protection, argues that the notion of women being primarily child-bearers sets up women for protection within the family and societal structures that all exist therein. In this argument, Kecia Ali, for clarity, adds importantly that this trope is more normalized in non-authoritative pre-modern instances of Islamic states where the sexuality of a woman is apparent to be more at stake than her child-raising capabilities.

This argument made by Kecia Ali is a reflection of society's valuation of an Islamic woman as primarily a child-bearing component of the family. For Khadra, in this case, I would argue that her non-immediate acceptance of these norms reflects the broader experiences of women who

navigate their embedded identities in both the immediate Western world and the Islamic society they live in. I would argue that these worlds, with different modes of operation, create an asymmetric dichotomy within an individual that appears in both. A fracture, so to speak, of the existing values in the individual.

In this scene, Khadra is the analog of real-world women who tread the fine line between religious identity and beliefs versus that of a major organized society. Her disapproval of this notion of women being held more importantly as child-bearers rather than their own autonomous individuals is a demonstration of this conflict and, additionally, the adoption of Western concepts from the perspective of her Aunt Fatma.

Family dynamics are similarly another means by which societal pressures can act to influence the beliefs and ideas held by an individual. In Khadra's case, we can see how Khadra's role as a wife and mother (*Kahf* 174-176) is constantly reminded by Juma, her husband. Juma expecting Khadra to cook for him after she came back from work while he remained indoors all day indicates that there is the expectation that a married man would rather not cook but instead wait on his partner to serve him fully prepared meals.

The absurdity of this request can only take place in family dynamics that reflects the broader problems the contemporary feminists try to bring down. In these institutions, it is harder for women to maintain their individuality from compromise from both the external and internal

pressures. However because of Khadra's integration to the western society, I believe the opposite was true for her, and is probably true for a wide range of individuals.

As we see Khadra become more independent religiously, with the support of her family, it is clear that there is a world of difference in religious autonomy and freedoms that one can attain depending on the country they are in. When in predominantly Islamic states, religious autonomy for women becomes a topic that is designed to be centered around the principal male figure in their lives rather than their own selves. In the documentary that was watched, the Judge, we could see the general sentiment held by men about her position within the religious court, giving rulings according to the will of God and the law of the land.

When comparing Khadra and the Judge from Palestine, we can find some similarities in how they conduct themselves. We see similarities that, if not for their places of origin, set them as perfect parallels. At the same time, the defining similarities between these characters are in some way the defining property of their core differences. While it would be unfair to Khadra to dismiss the pressures from the immediate society she grew up in; it would also be inaccurate to say that Khadra and the judge have stories with similar origins. Khadra grew up in the United States, while the Judge from Palestine was in Palestine her whole life.

The challenges of reconciling cultural history and personal desires are the themes focused on in Kahf's novel. The essay embodies the merging of Khadra's existential issues, academic insights, and worldly issues; thus, the author clearly demonstrates the significance of her ideas in the debates about gender, faith, and self-image. The experience of Khadra enables the manifestation

of the power of women who set forth to be the architects of their own identity in the face of the diverging requirements of culture and modern society. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a piece of literary work that recognizes the necessity for a balanced and well-thought-out approach to tackle the problems that women encounter in multicultural societies; the author persuades the readers to think about the social transformations that are needed to attain gender equality and cultural coherence.

## CITATIONS

Ali, Kecia. *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections On Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*. E-book, London, England: Oneworld, 2013, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb30834.0001.001>.

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