

Beyond the Veil: Exploring Muslim Women's Multidimensional Identities in Laila Aboulela's *The Translator* and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

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Abstract

The article presents a critical analysis of two novels by contemporary Arab Muslim women writers, Leila Aboulela and Mohja Kahf. The article examines how these authors critique, resist, and disrupt the hegemonic discourse that presents Muslim women as a monolithic and homogeneous category. In *The Translator* and *The Girl in Tangerine Scarf* respectively, the female protagonists' religious experiences and identities are studied with reference to resistance narratives and disruptive postcolonial strategies. The unsettling of the monolithic image of veiled Muslim women is hereby pursued through providing an analysis of the cultural imagery of Muslim women, to deconstruct the image of the veil in today's world.

Keywords

Islamic Feminism, Veil, identity, Stereotypes, Struggle

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Introduction

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Islam, as a religion in general, and Muslim women, in particular, were subjected to various forms of abuse, stereotypes, and prejudices in the West. Whether in media texts, fiction, or pop culture, Islam was introduced as a violent faith, and the Muslim women were portrayed as its victims or fortunate survivors. This cultural victimization is discursively represented by Arab American novelists, and their attempt in their fiction has been to educate Americans and depict the real image of Arab women.

In the pre-9/11 era, Arab Americans were almost invisible in American culture and media (Algahberi 141). The resurgent interest in the 'Arab American' in post-9/11 created certain dichotomies-'good Arab', 'bad Arab', 'us' and 'them'. This paper, based on a post-positivist realist approach, is an attempt to reflect some Muslim women's experiences whose devotion to their religion does not assign them to either category. They are not victims nor escapees of Islam but rather willingly committed to their faith. The texts written in English include *The Translator* by Leila Aboulela, and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Mohja Kahf. Attempting to explain how these fictional texts resist the often monolithic representations of Islam and Muslim women that pervade Western texts, the central argument in the paper is that Muslim women's religious identities and experiences are complex and cannot be reduced to certain fixed stereotypes. Because these novels focused on the lives of Muslim women in the west the main concern of this research article is to depict and explore the contradictions and tensions that shape the Muslim women's identities in the West. It addresses the prejudices and the reductionist image of the Muslim women as depicted in the selected novel.

Muslim Women and Identity Construction

In order to proceed with the analysis of the texts under study that negotiate Muslim women's resistance to stereotypes and prejudices in the western mainstream, a brief review of existing literature on identity construction within diasporic context must be discussed. Identity is a hotly contested issue at virtually every level of our social lives. While identities may be made and unmade, the stakes in the production process are always high and always political. We can look to virtually any corner of the globe and bear witness to the fact that identities are worth fighting for. People are willing to give their lives in order to secure a place on a map that they can call their own.

Conceptions of identity range all the way from the notion of an autochthonous human born with attributes that attach permanently to self—a rooted theory of identity (Asante 22)—to the idea that the very concept of identity is a mythic invention of the modernist movement (Adorno 143) to the notion that identities are routed through experiences of travel, contact, displacement, and relocation (Clifford 721; Gilroy 38; Hall 388; Pratt 28). While there exist multiple approaches to the study of identity across the social sciences and the humanities most of the debates emerge out of two competing theories of identity: rooted and routed theories of identity. On the one hand, proponents of rooted theories of identity have imagined it as a bounded collective held together by common cultural traits and practices such as language, food, religion, ritual, expressive forms, and economic practices, as well as an attachment to the land. Both identity and culture are conceptualized as discrete and fixed.

The ethnic absolutism implicit in such rooted theory assumes that identity, culture, and history are “already accomplished facts” (Hall 110). Rooted theories of identity have a pull in postcolonial national imaginations because a return to one's roots helps ease the pain of being “othered” and erased by dominant modes of western knowledge production. Moreover, the colonial encounter begins with a loss of identity, attracting those who mourn a lost past, cultural forms, and indigenous sensibilities. To a large degree, this theory of identity assumes autochthonous claims by tribal people. The rootedness theory assumes further that in most traditional cultures natives rarely travel outside of their communities, leaving little room for contact with other peoples.

This theoretical approach is problematic on several levels. The essentialism that drives it cannot account for the difference, nor can it contend with contemporary global conditions of diaspora, dispersion, and cross-cultural contact. What is more, there is not necessarily the polarity between tradition and modernity which rooted theory assumes. Rooted theories are also essentialist at the level of national identity. Roots imply that identity is tied to territory, that there is a natural relationship between land and language, blood and soil, and that there exists an immutable link between cultures, identities, and fixed places (Lavie and Swedenburg 158).

On the other hand, routed theories of identity assume that identities are made and unmade through cultural contact and discursive formations. Routes imply that identities are constructed in and through travel and contact, calling into question the multiple layers of mediation that bear on identity, movement, contact, and social space. Routes assume

further that identities are constructed, that identity formation is at base a process of production. Identities, from this perspective, are contingent and fluid. Routed theories of identity also problematize the arbitrariness of territorial boundaries, a move which, in some ways, deterritorializes the production of identity.

Many forces have prompted scholars to rethink identity, and particularly national identities: global scattering and migration (Bartkowski, 1995; Glick-Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Pries, 1999); transnational economic structures and cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996); the fissures of our global political economy (Harvey, 1985); and the breakdown of nation-states (Morely & Robbins, 1994). These conditions and others such as ethnic wars, fundamentalist coups, and desperate economies have led to the emergence of diasporas. Given that diasporic peoples, who come predominantly from former colonies and postcolonial nation-states, are located within the heart of many western metropolises, diasporic identities stand at the intersection of multiple national attachments. As diasporic peoples straddle the boundaries between their former homelands and the nations in which they have relocated, they put pressure on the mechanisms through which nations try to cement national identity. Moreover, as Gilroy has documented so brilliantly, diasporas reveal the ways in which people navigate and negotiate a way of living double-consciousness, a mode of subjectivity that renders identities liminal, while challenging the ideologies driving the melting pot of culture.

Dislocation, therefore, tends to intensify a sense of divergence from the mainstream. Old patterns and beliefs are revised and new ones are created. Schutz explored the concept of consciousness in the everyday world and he observed that "as long as things are running smoothly in accord with recipes, reflective consciousness is relatively unimportant, and actors pay little attention to what is going in their minds or the minds of others" (426). However, when these patterns and "recipes" change, a new sense of self-awareness kicks in, and the individual construction of his new reality is revised accordingly. A dialectical process takes place between the 'Self' and the 'Other.' Accordingly, a heightened sense of distinctiveness can often occur due to being in a visible minority position in relation to the dominant White mainstream cultures. Factors such as accents, skin color, and for some, the wearing of the *hijab* can increase their alienation and "otherness" especially when such images are negatively portrayed in the media. Arab women are especially vulnerable because they are both women and Muslim. They are subject to a double measure of oppression, having to cope with racial and gendered constructs that lead to increased marginalization and exclusion.

The Muslim Woman Writing-Back the Western Canon

The oriental woman has always represented a particularly contested terrain previously in relation to colonialism and currently vis-à-vis the "war on terror", she has been the space upon which many prejudices and preconceptions about the East have been mapped out. This oriental woman has made from the literary writings and performances her arena of reply and resistance to such an orientalist discursive practices to translate her experiences in diaspora. Arab women writers is the west resist attempts to fix their

identities by writing back the hegemonic discourse, to depict a process whereby the individual is constantly processing new experiences and representations in the new homeland and attempting to correlate and understand them in the context of an “other” homeland, creating something similar to what W.E.B Dubois refers to as a double consciousness (4).

According to Leila Al-Maleh, contemporary Arab Anglophone literature is “mostly female” (13) since most of the key literary texts are written by women. This literature was marked during the last decades by the significant contribution of Arab women writers in carving out creative spaces to foster a better understanding of Arab diasporic experience and literature. The growing interest in Arab women’s writing led to the growing body of scholarship on Arab women’s writings, including Arab, Muslim, Woman: *Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature* (2008) by Lindsey Moore, Brinda Mehta’s *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women’s Writing* (2007), Anastasia Valassopoulos’ *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (2007), and Suzanne Gauch’s *Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism and Islam* (2006), provides examples of important critical engagements with Arab women’s literature. In different ways, these works foreground the study of Arab women’s literature within an existing and ongoing tradition of literary criticism. In her introduction to her book, for example, Valassopoulos questions the “reluctance to study and interpret the writing [of Arab women] alongside a tradition of criticism that we seem to be accustomed to performing with other literary traditions” (3). Her study of Arab women writers performs the important task of reading this literature while simultaneously showing “how feminist, queer, postcolonial and cultural theories can all play a part in the negotiation of these texts” (3). This attempt to read Arab women’s literature through relevant theoretical frameworks and critical lenses can yield a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Arab literary production as a whole.

Islamic Feminism

Feminism in the West is largely shaped by gender relations, economy, radical change in objectives and lifestyles, and capitalism, while Muslim feminists are focused on presenting a genre of feminism that does not threaten the social ideology of the faith. As Muslim women seek freedom in Muslim spaces, they are usually sensitive to their roles in the communities as they realize that the goals of feminism, as conceived by Western society, are not necessarily relevant or applicable to Muslim women whose feminism is directly linked to religion and culture. Lois Lamia Faruqi affirmed that “if feminism is to succeed in an Islamic environment, it must be an indigenous form of feminism, rather than one conceived and nurtured in an alien environment with different problems and different solutions and goals” (136)

Yet, Valentine Moghadam discussed Islamic feminism in a critical context of Muslim family, laws, and economy that aimed at marginalizing patriarchal forms of Islam and moving toward norms of justice, peace, and equality. She defined “Islamic feminism” as a “Koran-centred reform movement by Muslim women with the linguistic and

theological knowledge to challenge patriarchal interpretations and offer alternative readings in pursuit of women's advancement and refutation of Western stereotypes and Islamic Orthodoxy" (13) Moghadam's report clarified the Muslim feminists' idea about feminism in Islam; that it is not separate from religion but aims at correcting what has been misinterpreted within religion.

Making Their Presence Visible: the Veil in Islam

The veil and the *hijab* stand at the core of the polemical discussions pertaining to the status of women in Islamic societies. In other words, it is almost impossible to discuss issues about Islam, feminism, and traditions without presenting the debate about the veil or the *hijab* as a symbol of oppression and subordination. For Muslim women, this way of clothing is also a reminder of conservative religion and cultural identity. The contemporary fixation on the veil as the quintessential sign of Muslim resistance and cultural authenticity and the treatment of women epitomized Islamic inferiority (Ahmed 14). Due to its paramount importance, the issue of the veil and the *hijab* has been debated in various realms, be they literature, history, or sociology, and in a variety of societies ranging from Islamic, to Arabic, to Western.

The veil is to cover the face, while the *hijab* is to cover the body of a Muslim woman in public. Both words, veil and *hijab*, may be used as head-cover and are meant to promote privacy for females and to prohibit the intermingling of sexes. However, the previously constructed image of the veil as the oppressive marker for women has already started to lose its hold, rather the veil and *hijab* today are supposed to ensure modesty, decency, chastity, and, above all, respect and worship. The way the word *veil* is used in English is to conceal the truth, or it can protect truth and prevent it from being discovered (Cambridge Online Dictionary); in Arabic it refers to protecting purity in the sense that woman is a precious creature, that she is to be protected, honored and valued, like a precious stone her beauty should be respected, hidden in security and safety so as not to be abused by unworthy eyes. Thus, the veil becomes a symbol of purity that intends to send a message to the observer about the women in the veil. Evelyn Shakir cites a Muslim woman, Khadija (a pseudonym) who comments on the veil, stating that "when you dress sexy, you feel sexy, and you go out and anything can happen to you. But when you're all covered up [. . .] you're so pure and protected in your mind and other people's minds" (117). This means that the veil displays the idea of chastity and security, it is a distinctive symbol that identifies the women as humble and modest. Wearing the veil ensures everyone that this woman will not be harassed in the streets and at workplace because she is preserving herself by covering her body and hiding her beauty.

The Veil as an Identity

For many Muslim women, the veil is a synonym of identity; to others, it is a symbol of oppression, and to history, it is a reference to status. Fatima Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil* tries to acquaint the reader with the present-day Muslim world and demonstrate

the importance of identity to individuals and society:

Individuals die of physical sickness, but societies die of loss of identity, a disturbance in the guiding system of representations of oneself as fitting into the universe that is specifically ordered to make life meaningful. Why do we need our lives to make sense? Because that's where power is. (ix)

Mernissi demonstrates why fundamentalists in Islam call for the return of the veil as a statement that “has to be looked at in the light of the painful but necessary and prodigious reshuffling of identity that Muslims are going through in their often confusing but always fascinating times” (ix). Jen’nan Read and John Bartkowski’s “To Veil or not to Veil: A Case Study of Identity Negotiation among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas” examined the impact of veiling with a sample of twenty-four Muslim women: twelve of them veiled and twelve did not. The interviews with the participants “highlight how their gender identities reproduce and reformulate existing Muslim gender discourses [. . .] with attention to the subjective disparities and points of congruence between both groups of respondents” (395). Unlike the popular Western notion that the veil is a symbol of oppression to women, the participants think that veiling lies most and foremost on God’s commandment in the holy Quran, “it represents a submission to God [. . .] and is a symbol of worship” (Read and Bartkowski 403). Those women who decided to wear the veil in America consider it as the Muslim woman’s visible marker of a particular religious identity, and by adhering to the practices of such “a broader religious community of other veiled Muslim women” (Read and Bartkowski 403) they reflect the sense of firm connectedness and that interpretation of this experience comes from within.

In this sense, Anouar Majid affirmed that “whether veiled or not, women’s conditions are determined not by the clothes they wear but by the degree to which they manage to forge an identity for themselves outside the discourses of modernity or religious authenticity” (115). Muslim women, then, have the power of using the veil and *hijab* as symbols of identity and social and cultural reality. Veiling becomes, therefore, a tangible resisting act to challenge the opponents’ ignorance and misunderstanding of any actual details about Muslim women’s realities.

Iconography of the Veil in Leila Aboulela’s and Mohja Kahf’s Narratives

The novels under study namely *The Translator* (1999) and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) published in Western countries offer fictional representations of some Muslim women’s realities and their integration or resistance to Western discourses about the veil. Their experiences as being veiled in such a cacophony of views display their struggle for developing identities of devout Muslim women in the West. As realistic novels, their main purpose is deconstructing the image that Western media and some popular representations have produced about them as subjugated. They offer a humanization of Muslim women, demonstrating that the veil is just a cultural marker.

Aboulela's *The Translator*: veiled but not oppressed

In Aboulela's works, the devout Muslim women are given leading roles to play. They are the characters who show an ever-present awareness of their religious identity. In other words, being aware of themselves as Muslims is reflected throughout their whole life, whether in privately or publicly. In an interview Aboulela herself refers to this idea, stating "I am interested in writing about Islam, not as an identity but going deeper and showing the state of mind and feelings of a Muslim who has faith" (Eissa, 2005). This interest is reflected in her depiction of characters bold and independent.

The Translator writes back to the canon by tackling various images of Islamic symbols. An important part of what can be called a self-conscious counter-representation is the paratextⁱ of the novel, which, we argue, disrupts the familiar stereotypes of Muslim women. On the front cover of *The Translator* (Heinemann edition), there is an illustration by Hassan Aliyu, a British-Nigerian artist. The painting shows a black African woman in a white veil and clothes, standing in what looks like a Western marketplace. Surrounding her are buildings that look like churches with crosses on them. On the horizon are mosques with minarets and crescents on top of the domes. Ideas about light and hope are implicitly translated on this background of Muslim mosques through the use of brighter colors. The back cover of the novel includes a smiling photograph of Aboulela in a white scarf, a description of the novel, and some appreciative comments by some reviewers. Beyond that and for a further challenge, Aboulela's photo with *hijab* on the back cover tends to strengthen the function of the counter-discourse and resistance to the dominant Western views that reject any form of sympathy to *hijab*.

Aboulela's strategies in challenging negative representations of Islam are explicitly apparent in the paratext of her works as well as in her use of different aspects of the narratives for this purpose. The overwhelming examples in the novel stand for the protagonist's negotiating her way of a practicing Muslim woman in the broader Western society which is deeply opponent of the veil and *hijab*. The creation of female characters that do not correspond to Western stereotypes of Muslim women stands indeed for an example, amongst many, of the reversal of Orientalist discourse in *The Translator*. While they are portrayed as oppressed persons in the hegemonic Western register, because their religious identity is an imposed one, Aboulela's conception is to make their devotion to Islam central. The Islam-goodness view that embodies the whole story shifts the reader's attention from the fact of being veiled to the agency a character like Sammar has over the non-Muslim, like Rae. The representation of *hijab* in dominant Western discourses as something dark, ugly symbolizing oppression and servitude is deconstructed in this case and represented as something beautiful and elegant:

She covered her hair with Italian silk, her arms with tropical colors. She wanted to look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerizing as the Afghan princess she had seen on TV wearing hijab the daughter of an exiled leader of the mujahedin. (Aboulela 14)

The characterization of Sammar, the main character, significantly, provides a challenge to Orientalist discourses. Sammar is an educated working woman. She is also the one who accepts Rae's courting for marriage after he will convert to Islam so that they can marry. Ferial Ghazoul in this regard argues that "Sammar is by no means a stock character, and she is not a model widow devoted to her only son, and she admits the need to remarry" (Ghazoul, 2001). But most of all Sammar is a much-sophisticated image of the Muslim woman whose devotion to her religion is translated through her spiritual commitment. For the sake of challenging the previous stereotypes of subordination and masculine authority Sammar always gives priority to the rules of her religious faith despite being in love and in need of connecting her life with someone else's and settling down.ⁱⁱ That setting is a testimony that a satisfying life in the veil is very possible and that the idea of being silenced, or voiceless and oppressed because veiled is no more convincing.

The Translator skilfully portrays how Sammar's life is firmly grounded in the religious practices of Islam so that her daily living is deeply affected. Though some religious practices would seem peculiar to some readers, the novelist inserts them in the story as innate parts of a Muslim woman's life. Joanne McEwan demonstrates this idea when citing how Sammar stays praising God after prayer, thanking Him and asking for His forgiveness, or how she avoided putting on perfume that Rae offered to her in public. She argued that Aboulela "merely touched upon these peculiarities without explanation or reference to their significance in Islamic doctrines, indirectly elucidating a lifestyle naturally ingrained in the hero" (McEwan, 2000). Other examples are those moments in the novel when Sammar was unable to sleep at night and she starts reciting Allah's Names: "Ya Allah, Ya Arhaman El-Rahim" [Oh God, the Compassionate, the Merciful] (23) until she falls asleep, or during her driving lesson when she turns away her steering wheel as she suddenly saw a car approaching and unconsciously recites the *Shahadah*ⁱⁱⁱ (Aboulela 70). In short, the Quran is strikingly present in the novel as a guide for Sammar throughout her life. These sayings and recitations usually bring her comfort and consolation especially when no person in her surrounding would assist her.

Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*: Resisting Stereotypes

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* Mohja Kahf reflects on the Arab-American experience and culture, and through veiling or not veiling she discusses the ambivalence of the Muslim woman's identity as performing liberty and tolerance. Through situating the practice of veiling within cultural, social, religious, and geopolitical contexts Kahf attempts to counter the hegemonic discourses and distorts narratives of Arab-Americans and the Middle East. She unravels the politics of hybrid identities and makes clear that Arab-American identity is not static and is constantly in development and (re)negotiation.

Khadra's long journey and search for identity are more complex than Sammar's quest. She critically settles for the exploration of the Muslim experience and identity calling into question all the Islamic teachings of her family. The importance and the meaning of her process lie in her exposure to those antagonistic images of empowerment and oppression of the Muslim woman in America, that are partly driven from the national

and gender heritages, for they help her consider her choices to decide appropriately regarding her commitments and the identity she wishes to display. Muslim Americans who take on certain visible signs that show their connection to the Islamic religion, such as men growing their beards or women wearing the veil, are under great pressure in the West. These visible markers, as Samaa Abdurraqib suggests, have dual implications. They both “stabilize their identity as Muslim while simultaneously destabilizing their identity by constantly calling into question the degree to which they have become ‘American’” (Abdurraqib 58). Under such pressure they are forced to take a stance with regards to the kind of identity they wish to display, and more importantly bear the consequences of their decision, for some identities are more accepted than others in today’s world.

In Syria, Khadra seems to have thought seriously about all those options available to her as a Muslim woman and as an American one at the same time. Khadra’s inside struggle about the veil came to an end during that trip. She decided to take off her scarf and practice her religion differently. She attempts to come to terms with herself and her views on Islam. While making that decision, Khadra was free from other’s beliefs and opinions of her, and decides to find her own way to connect with God and religion. She is no longer lost between these different worlds to which she belongs, a strict Muslim world and a secular Western world. She remains in that in-between space where Islam exists and allows her to be in peace and harmony with herself, the narrator describes her new experience:

The covered and the uncovered, each mode of being had its moment. She embraced them both. Going out without hijab meant she would have to manifest the quality of modesty in her behavior, she realized one day, with a jolt. It’s in how I act, how I move, what I choose, every minute. She had to do it on her own, now, without the jump-start that a jilbab [long garb] offered. This was a rigorous challenge. Some days she just wanted her old friend hijab standing sentry by her side. (Kahf 312)

Khadra seems to be unable to hold up the consequences of being a veiled woman in the U.S. since the veil caused her a lot of problems and misunderstandings. She is no longer able to accept more marginalization because of it. She would rather shed it and be more accepted by mainstream society. Perhaps if the veil was not stereotyped as being a sign of “oppression”, it would not have been an issue and Khadra may have continued to wear it and the Muslim women would not have to prove their liberty.

By taking off her veil, Khadra seems to liberate herself from being judged using a piece of cloth. Others will think that shedding the veil definitely will improve her chance to be more American and less Muslim. Even though *hijab* was part of her identity, the image it reflects does not describe who she is. Khadra’s internal struggle can be summed up through Abdurraqib’s articulate statement about women’s narratives that focus on religion:

Islam becomes the religion of the “other” and the culture from which women need to be liberated. In these narratives, women are held accountable for both religious and cultural traditions of the old country [...] But when Islam is conflated with cultural practices and is seen as oppressive, the female protagonists must consider compromising both religion and culture to incorporate themselves into American society. (Kahf 56)

Khadra has had a conflicted identity, she attempts throughout the narrative to reconcile the different puzzles of her selves: her Americanness, Islamness, and Arabness. She also tries to find a connection between these multiple identities and their handling of the Muslim veil. During her trip to Syria, Khadra has a decisive choice to make, she has to choose between religion and culture but she finally decides not to make such a concession. She does not want to give up either one but chooses a way that allows her to demonstrate and understand the different facets of her identity. At the beginning of her journey, she thought that the fact of becoming American requires a rejection of her Arab and Muslim identity and that would turn her into another person. By getting American citizenship, Khadra was forced to deal with her new identity. The narrator exposes the conflicted emotions she feels as she gets her American citizenship:

To her, taking citizenship felt like giving up, giving in. After all she'd been through at school, defending her identity against the jeering kids who vaunted America's superiority as the clincher put down to everything she said, everything she was. Wasn't she supposed to be an Islamic warrior woman, a Nusayba, a Sumaya, an Um Salamah in exile, by the waters dark, of Babylon? (kahf 141)

These images of empowered Muslim women occupy Khadra's mind, she looks up to these female figures and “warriors” and thinks if she becomes American, she can no longer follow in their footsteps. At this stage of her life, she is not mature enough to choose her role in society or explore her options to make an informed decision about the type of identity she wishes to take on and defend. Khadra initially equates Islam with foreignness; she is unable to comprehend the mixture that makes Muslim Americanness.

Khadra's journey ends with a provisional reconciliation of her multiple identities, as an Arab, an American, and a Muslim. Her ambivalence towards the veil does not seem to come to a total end. Khadra's travels and many experiences revolving around the veil and the practice of Muslim principles end in the redefinition of her relationship with religion and the Muslim veil, and the decision not to commit herself to the practice of veiling. She continues to practice Islam and show modesty through her conduct rather than the practice of veiling. Ahmed explains that:

The veil came to symbolize in the resistance narrative, not the inferiority of the culture and the need to cast aside its customs in favor of those of

the West, but, on the contrary, the dignity and validity of all native customs, and in particular those customs coming under fiercest colonial attack—the customs relating to women—and the need to tenaciously affirm them as a means of resistance to Western domination. (164).

In Kahf's resistance narrative, Khadra is not ashamed of the veil nor does she give up on it in favor of Western fashion but chooses to wear it occasionally. She does not believe that the veil is a sign of the inferiority of her native culture; on the contrary, she wears it to show pride in her culture and its customs and her strong connection to this rich heritage and Islamic civilization. Through this character, Kahf delivers a counter-narrative to the stereotypes and negative images of Muslim women.

Conclusion

To write back to the Western canon which still portrays the Muslim woman as a miserable victim, both writers employed counter-narrative strategies to project an insider perspective of hijab in a western country. The paratext is a common ground where the pictures on the covers usually reflect young and beautiful women whose faces are very bright and shining, wearing headscarves with bright colors and looking directly to the viewer, as opposed to the paratext produced by the West, where it is usually about black and grey pictures of veiled women looking miserable and even wretched.

Indeed, the texts under study in this paper provide challenging and reversing images of the Western stereotypes about veiled Muslim women. Leila Aboulela's novel, *The Translator*, suggests that being a devout Muslim also affords women a sense of well-being. Likewise, Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* depicts the complementarity of feeling affection for one's Muslim identity and being self-reflexive about one's religious identity and one's way of life. Each novel presents Muslim women's identities and experiences as complex rather than monolithic, in the sense that each tackles aspects of Muslim women's identities not usually emphasized in dominant Western representations. Nonetheless, the individual novels' exploration of Muslim women's identities and experiences is differently approached. For instance, some readers might feel that 'writing back' in a novel such as *The Translator* verges on the idealization of the Muslim world and a skewed, even bigoted depiction of the West and Western people, while a novel such as *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* offers a more nuanced depiction of Muslim people and the West. Still, similar contexts can draw different responses from different people; other authors interested in this issue might feel that in the present condition of the prevalence of negative representations of Islam, the priority is with inverting the stereotypes about Islam and Muslims.

Notes

¹ *Paratext* refers to the concept in literary interpretation which determines all the added written material included in a book such as: prefaces, reviews, authorial commentary, illustrations...etc. which are part of the book yet not part of the text itself but can influence deeply the reader's understanding and interpretation of the main narrative.

² Sammar, as a Muslim woman, is not characterized stereotypically; however, she is not represented as a confident and independent woman, one of the ideals of feminism. Sammar is shy, introverted and in love with domestic life. In other words, in characterization, the attempt to shatter the stereotype of the Muslim woman has not, in this case, led to a reactive position on the part of the writer to create a character quite opposite to the Western stereotype of Muslim women.

³ Al Shahaddah refers to the Islamic proclamation of faith, also recited by Muslims when they feel that this is the moment of their death. While saying Al Shahaddah Muslims recite: "I bear witness there is no god but Allah, and I bear witness that Mohammad is the Prophet of God and his Messenger".

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