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Internal and External Conflicts Related to Khadra as a Mirror of the Clash of Cultures in '*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*' by Moja Khaf

Introduction

Moja Khaf, in the novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, narrates the story of Khadra Shamys, an Arab-American Muslim woman who grew up in Indiana and goes through an elaborate cycle of transformations and self-discovery that takes her to her native Syria, Mecca, and back to the United States. The major underlying theme brought up by the narrator involves the cultural hybridism that entangles Khadra's life and the inevitable cultural clashes that ensue. The current essay is a literary analysis of the novel from the point of view of cultural hybridism as well as the ensuing internal and external conflicts that affect the life of the novel's protagonists. The internal and external conflicts arising from the clash of Western secularism and Islamic lifestyle contributed to Khadra's split ideology as evident from the narrator's choice not to commit to any particular doctrine. Consequently, Khadra develops a complex multicultural identity that can be identified as a moderately religious Muslim-American woman with strong feminist inclinations.

The Clash of Cultures through Internal Conflicts Related to Khadra

The first internal conflict that arises from the cultural hybridism and the ensuing clash involves the split sense of national and religious identity during Khadra's formative and teenage years. According to Berrezoug (25), the novel depicts "Khadra's struggle over how she can be considered American without compromising her Islamic religious values." This conflict becomes apparent early in the novel when she hops onto her male friend's bicycle to get away from the boys who were harassing her and, upon getting closer to her home, her brother, Eyad, quickly told her, "Get off Hakim's bike and get on mine. 'Cause he is a boy and Mama might see you. Hakim used to give her handlebar rides all the time, but she was getting older now, and her mother said she should not ride with boys anymore" (Khaf 5). The cultural clash is evident here in the fact that it would not be unusual for boys and girls to ride together in American culture.

Another instant where the split of her cultural identity becomes apparent is when their green card expired, and they were forced to take on American citizenship. Khadra grew up in a tight-knit and caring family environment, primarily concerned with the well-being of their loved ones and the preservation of their religious beliefs. The narrator paints a picture of a strong connection of the family to their religious background and, according to Marques and Gonçalves (183), a strong sense of Muslim belonging. Therefore, when their green card expired, they were placed between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they could not renew their passports for political reasons (Marques and Gonçalves 183). Kahf (20) narrates that Khadra's father had gone into self-exile following the imprisonment and death of his brother because he thought that "Syria was a mean government and that Shaker had told the truth to its face and that's called standing witness, and that's what a good Muslim should do." Therefore, they were essentially a dissenting family in the

eyes of the government back home.

Nonetheless, the necessity of applying for American citizenship after the expiry of their green card was not well received especially considering the hostile American attitude towards Islam. According to Khaf, they walked into the courthouse for the process “like a family in mourning” (141). For Khadra, taking up American citizenship felt like giving up or giving in after all she’d been through at school, defending her identity against jeering kids who vaunted Americans’ superiority. “Was not she supposed to be an Islamic warrior woman, a Nusayba, a Sumayyah, an Um Salamah in exile, by the waters dark, of Babylon? Was not she supposed to remember always the children in Syria who had to scour toilets on their knees at her age? It was an apple that had gnawed her gut for years. What was all that, a big fat lie? She seethed. The land where my fathers died, hunh” (Kahf 141).

The split cultural identity also manifests itself in the differing elements between the real and ideal ascription of gender roles and different notions of gender equality between the American and Islamic cultures. The novel particularly highlights the notion that in Islamic culture women should be subservient to men in various ways. For example, when Khadra intends to participate in an international competition involving the recital of the Quran, the Imam declines her application. He states, “Well – you see – I never meant to imply – the context, I’m afraid it is not open to women” (Kahf 199). In addition, on a visit to Syria, she erroneously responded to a call to prayer by going to the local mosque and was brought back home by the police. It was at this point that her father revealed to her that, “Well, women are not allowed to pray in the mosque here” (Kahf 167). She could not understand how it was allowed for women to enter mosques in America but not in Syria.

The conflict related to gender roles is also apparent within the marriage context. For example, problems begin to surface in Khadra’s marriage to Juma when her husband begins to impose conditions on her. Marques and Gonçalves (189) note that he begins by prohibiting her from riding her bicycle because he does not consider it appropriate for a Muslim woman but it becomes apparent that she will not be obedient. Interestingly, one of the reasons why Juma considered taking Khadra as his wife was that she had qualities that he admired in a woman, including that “she had not lost her Arabic identity despite being raised entirely in America” (Kahf 201). At the same time, when Zuhura, Khadra’s friend gets married, she begins “to see that her argumentation talents, which they suited her career ambitions (she was a law student), were not the skills needed for becoming Lu’man’s wife” (Kahf 74). Thus, there is an inherent tension between the reality of Islamic assignment of gender roles and the American ideal of gender equality and this conflict contributes to Khadra’s split of cultural identity.

Another instance of an internal conflict for Khadra was when she discovered that she was pregnant in a troublesome marriage. On the one hand, she was aware that procuring an abortion was against everything that she valued as a Muslim woman. On the other hand, the American culture, as signified by feminist thought, ascribed that a woman ought to have the autonomy to decide what she wants to do with her body. Nonetheless, when she found out about her pregnancy, Khadra asserted, “I can’t have a baby now,” she whispered to the nurse at the student clinic, sitting on the examination table in shock after the doctor had just told her. Her face was sallow, her eyes were puffy. She had never known anything more clearly or more urgently. ‘I can’t.’” (Kahf 244). Therefore, although she asserted her entitlement to have an abortion, it is apparent that no one would support her. Going through with the abortion regardless of the resistance that she undergoes was a self-discovery that made her question her Islamic roots.

Additionally, it is apparent that, despite spending, as Khaf (1) narrates “most of her growing up years in Indianapolis, she did not really have a clear idea of where she could call home”

(Marques and Gonçalves 184). For example, Kahf narrates that while on the plane to Mecca, "Khadra felt funny. The phrase 'leaving home' came into her head. But Indianapolis is not my home, she thought indignantly" (157). According to Marques and Gonçalves (184), it is apparent that Khadra "considers Mecca, a place she has never been before, close to some kind of home than the place where she grew up and lives". This assumption is evidenced by the fact that upon landing, "Khadra thought, someplace where we really belong. It is the land of the prophet. The land of all Muslims" (Kahf 159). However, the reader later finds out that after the Mecca trip turned out to be a disappointment, "Khadra was glad to be going home. 'Home'- she said, without thinking....The lights of Indianapolis...The sweet relief of her own clean bed awaited her there-and only there, of all the earth" (Kahf 179). Marques and Gonçalves (184) assert that Khadra is torn between two worlds and she does not know where she belongs. Thus, this uncertainty over her home is a manifestation of the split cultural identity.

The Clash of Cultures through External Conflicts Related to Khadra

There are also various external conflicts that lead to the clash of cultures in Khadra's consciousness. One that features prominently, as Berrezoug (25) notes, is that Khadra is an 'other' in many respects. As a Muslim woman who is proud of her cultural heritage, she chooses to wear hijab. According to Kahf (112-13), "Hijab was a crown on her head. She went forth lightly and went forth heavily into the world, carrying the weight of anew grace...hijab soon grew to feel as natural to her as a second skin, without which if she ventured into the outside world she felt naked." In contrast, however, Americans regard a woman who wears a hijab as a "debased woman who submits to the patriarchal norms of Muslim societies by her own volition" (Berrezoug 25). For example, the start of the novel makes it apparent that Khadra felt that she had never been welcome in the US when she reacts by saying "Liar" as she encounters a sign that says "The People of Indiana Welcome You" (Kahf 1). This is followed by her flashback to the time when she was harassed by Brian Lott and offended by his vulgar exclamations "Fuck you, raghead!...We're gonna get all you fuckers" (Kahf 1-2). In addition, on their first day in Indianapolis, it was apparent that they were not welcome when boys threw glass bottles at their door step (Kahf 5). Marques and Gonçalves (182-3) assert that, at school, Khadra felt that she not only had to face the prejudice of students, but also contend with the indifference of the teachers. For example, when boys harassed her and tore her headscarf, "Mr. Eggleston came out of his room down the hall. Silhouetted by the daylight streaming from the double doors at the end of the hallway, he shook his head, gave her a look of mild disapproval, and went back inside" (Kahf, 125).

In addition, it is apparent that the differences between Khadra and her friends often resulted in the impairment of their friendship. It is apparent that Khadra was rather judgmental and intolerant of those who held views that contradicted Islam and, therefore, lost many friends (Marques and Gonçalves 184). At one point, Khadra observes "I've never been a real friend, or had one. I have demanded that my friends conform to what I approve and disapprove" (Kahf 249). Therefore, the clash of cultures contributed to the external conflicts between Khadra and her friends.

Conclusion

This essay analyzes the internal and external conflicts involving Khadra, the main protagonist of the novel, that are a consequence of the cultural hybridism that is typical for American immigrant families, especially the members of younger generations that are at a loss which culture to embrace. As the discourse demonstrates, the state of affairs led to the development of a complex and split cultural identity of Khadra. However, she is able to figure herself out through a journey of self-discovery.