

From Separation to Integration: the Journey of Khadra Shamy in “The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf” through Berry’s Conception of Acculturation Modes

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Abstract:

The acculturation process among Arab Muslim Americans has been widely disputed by scholars and writers in recent years. Arabs in the United States are among several ethnic minorities who found it difficult to assimilate the American society due to many factors in which language and religion are worth considering. The protagonist Khadra Shamy in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2007) written by the Arab American writer Mohja Kahf is an allegory to the Arab Muslims in America and in particular to the Arab women who were caught between the identity triangle of American, Arab, and Muslim. The current study analyzes the process of acculturative emancipation of Khadra Shamy adopting the Berry’s model of acculturation strategies (1997).

Key words:

Acculturation, American, Arab, identity, integration, Islam, Separation.

1. Introduction

Khadra Shamy is the protagonist of the famous novel *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf* (2007) written by Mohja Kahf; the prominent feminist writer and poet who immigrated to the United States from Syria in the mid 70’s when she was just four. The story spines around an Arab girl who emigrated from Syria with her family for political reasons; Khadra Shamy was raised in a religious atmosphere where Islamic principles are strictly respected. Khadra wears hijab¹ from an early age, which causes her troubles and makes her suffer bigotry and racism from host citizens. Khadra feels

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herself rejected from Americans and tries to find her identity in being Arab and Muslim. The journey of Khadra to prove her Arab identity failed when she visited the holy Land, or “the Land of the Prophet” as she calls it in the novel. Her sorrowful experience with her relative Afaf when she took her in a Limousine with Saudi men who sexually harassed her, has dislocated her from all what she learnt about Arabs and Islam. After her marriage with Jumua, which was broken later on, she went to Syria where she discovered the real motives behind her parents’ immigration and their religious severity which Ebtihaj justified as “Our biggest fear was losing you”, Ebtihaj said ... “Losing our children to America. Have you not keep Islam one hundred percent.” (Kahf, 2007, pp.383-384). Ebtihaj sought to keep her children more attached to the Syrian traditions while as Khadra she grew up was convinced that being a good Muslim has no relation with being an Arab, and she chose to be in the hyphen. Eventually, she discovered that the end of the story “I guess what I’ve been doing is trying to get to a place where I could reconnect the two, and be a whole person” (Kahf, 2007, p. 395). She discovers that she and her folks are perfect Americans, perfect Hoosiers “Khadra realizes suddenly, as she surveys the crowd: they’re us, and we’re them. Hah! My folks are the perfect Hoosiers²!” (Kahf, 2007, p. 438).

The current study shows how Khadra moves from a separation phase of acculturation to a more integrated phase which suits her better although her parents have had another point of view. The study adopts Berry’s acculturation strategies or modes as Ward and Duba(1999) have put it in their article “Acculturation and Adaptation Revisited” (p.493). Berry’s strategies of acculturation theory dichotomize four distinct levels of acculturation; Assimilation, Integration, Separation, and Marginalization. The current study sheds light on two main issues when two incompatible cultures collide, and which Berry (1997) classified as “cultural maintenance (to what extent cultural identity and characteristics are considered to be important, and their maintenance strived for)” (p. 9). Accordingly, this situation corresponds to the situation that Khadra’ infancy, which inevitably led her to a separation phase of acculturation. The second issue is “contact and participation (to what extent should they become involved in other cultural groups, or remain primarily among themselves)” (Berry, 1997,p. 9). These two major issues of cultural identification of non dominant groups make the core study of Khadra’s transition path to integration.

2. The Acculturation Process in Khadra’s Journey of Cultural Emancipation

Arab Immigrants living in the United States are likely the most affronted with a huge and distinguished culture. Most of Arab Americans are Muslims and try to cohabit with the new culture either by assimilating totally in the immersed culture or by integrating into it but keeping their original culture in their homes or among their communities. However, there are others who prefer to reject the host culture and to maintain their own culture everywhere. These differences in adapting the immerse culture show that the process of acculturation among immigrants is not the same, and it may happen at different levels under different factors, and among

these factors are the type of immigrants includes voluntariness, mobility, and permanence.

Table one: Types of acculturation groups

MOBILITY	VOLUNTARINESS OF CONTACT	
	VOLUNTARY	INVOLUNTARY
SEDENTARY	ETHNOCULTURAL GROUPS	INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
MIGRANT permanent temporary	IMMIGRANTS SOJOURNERS	REFUGEES ASYLUM SEEKERS

Source: Acculturation and Adaptation (Berry et.al., 1997, p. 295)

This classification facilitates the study of the process of acculturation of each immigrant group; our interest is on Khadra Shamy’s family who belongs to the voluntary ethnic group of immigrants who have gone to the United States from Arab countries seeking freedom and new opportunities. This study is based on the Berry’s four Acculturation Strategies as a whole and on two acculturation dimensions concerning “(1) the value or importance of maintaining one’s cultural identity and characteristics and (2) the value or importance of relationships with other ethnic groups (Berry et al. 1986; As cited in Hasiao & Wittig, 2008, p. 3). These two fundamental dimensions figure out the acculturation path of Khadra Shamy to achieve integration with the dominant culture. For Khadra, maintaining her values and resisting the host culture was all what she devoted herself to achieve at the first stage of her life. However things went differently when Khadra started to compare her life and how she practiced her religion freely in America, and that’s of her Arab relatives in Saudi Arabia and Syria.

2.1. The Separation Phase

Acculturation is widely defined by anthropologists as the phenomenon of culture change that occurs when people of different backgrounds live together. Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936, as cited in Berry, 1997) define acculturation as follows: “Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (p, 7). According to Gillin and Raimy(1940 as cited in Raymond and Bardin, 1974) acculturation refers to: “Those processes whereby the culture of a society is modified as the result of contact with culture of one or more other societies” (p. 351). These definitions are a sample of many other definitions that analyze acculturation from a vantage point of social groups considering the whole over the individual. However, there are other anthropologists and psychologists that add to the previous concept of acculturation the

importance of the individual in the group as a dynamic member which has to be well considered when dealing with the concept of acculturation. According to Berry (2005), there are double acculturation levels that happen at the same time, an acculturation between groups and a psychological acculturation that happens at the level of individuals:

Acculturation is the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members. At the group level, it involves changes in social structures and institutions and in cultural practices. At the individual level, it involves changes in a person's behavioral repertoire. These cultural and psychological changes come about through a long-term process, sometimes taking years, sometimes generations, and sometimes centuries. (p. 698)

This distinction given by Berry is very important in analyzing Khadra's process of acculturation. Kahf has skillfully created both acculturation levels in the novel, one of the Shamy's family which is allegorical to the whole ethnic group of Arab immigrants that flocked to America from unstable middle-east countries, and the other of Khadra, the girl that represents an individual lost between two incompatible cultures, the origin and the host cultures. Khadra was enjoying the life in America, but as she was too young, she did not recognize so, and she unconsciously tried to deny this truth and followed her family's instructions to show them that she is the best who can preserve Islam and their Syrian traditions. The process of acculturation among groups and individuals is doomed to different factors including the acculturative stress (Berry, 1970; Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987) or culture shock³ (Oberg, 1960), Berry (1997) views that these terms suggest a negative psychological outcome that immigrants endure in their phase of cultural change; almost every character in the Girl in the Tangerine Scarf has suffered from an acculturative stress while trying to keep his/her culture.

Khadra's journey to acculturation starts at a very early age, when she saw her mother run the laundry twice to wash their clothes because she thought that "Americans didn't care about impurities" (Kahf, 2007, p. 4). According to Ibtihaj, her children are not Americans; she often washes her children from impurities and screamed making them know that they are not Americans and they should not be! "Do you think we are Americans? Do you think we have no limits? Do you think we leave our children wandering in the streets? Is that what you think we are?.. "We are not Americans!" ... "We are not Americans" (Kahf, 2007, p. 66-67), from that point Khadra conceives the concept of otherness, they are not Americans; and should never be alike. The parents try to impose the culture of origin on their children who practically are not acquainted with; hence, Khadra lived in an American culture daily, she goes to school and meets people, and at the same time she was obliged to forget about the host culture while embracing what her parents dictated to her on how they should live as Syrian Muslims in a foreign country.

Khadra enters in a culture shock stage where everything “Is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Oberg, 1953, p. 1). This stage of culture shock that for instance, Ibtihaj was living has negatively reflected the life of the small Khadra especially when she observed her mother experience some cultural shock symptoms like excessive wash of their bodies, clothes, and the obsessive hygiene. Khadra suffers from a wide range of stressors which entangle her in a separation phase of acculturation; fearing and doubting everything coming from outside her familial frame. Berry et al. (1970 As cited in Ward & Duba, 1999) have stressed that “the process of acculturation has been largely interpreted within a stress and coping framework” (p. 423). Khadra was put in an awkward situation where she was obliged to live and study with the Kuffar,⁴ and she had to prevent herself from living like them; she was even prevented from eating their food though it is a candy corn because it may contain big! (Kahf, 2007). But later, Khadra discovered that her mother has stressed her for nothing because she was not mature enough for sins to be counted, “... puberty makes your Islamic duties fully incumbent on you,” Ibtihaj said. “Now you are of age. Now sins count.” “They did count before?” Khadra said. “Nobody mention that! So—eating pig candy corn didn’t hurt!” (Kahf, 2007, p. 109).

Unfortunately, Khadra discovered that her parents lied to her; Khadra was kept between two adjustment levels where she was obliged to psychologically cope with the culture of origin in a totally dissimilar cultural background. A parallel complementary research to Berry’s strategies (cultural maintenance, and contact and participation) conducted by the scholars Ward and Kennedy (1994), also suggests two distinct levels of acculturation adjustment in which acculturation of individuals is best measured. The psychological level and the social level are distinct but they are interrelated (Ward & Duba, 1999). the psychological adjustment is measured in terms of the deeper psyche of the individual, and the extent to which he can hold up a different culture, whether he receives any social support or not, in addition to his ability to cope with life changes (Stone & Feinstein & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992, 1993a, 1993b; Ward & Searl, 1991). At that level, Khadra was psychologically oppressed through the old norms of her culture of origin, and she did not find any social support to face off the overwhelming culture; the only supposed social support that Khadra received is her family, but this later stands as a strong barricade between her and the host culture refusing any sort of courtesy from it.

The other side of sociocultural adaptation was not much better than her psychological adaptation, for some scholars (Searle & Ward 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992, 1993a, 1993b as cited in Ward and Duba, 1999) suggest that:

Sociocultural adaptation, measured in relation to the amount of difficulty experienced in the performance of daily tasks, is more dependent

on variables such as length of residence in the new culture, language ability, cultural distance, and the quantity of contact with the host nationals. (p. 424)

Outside the house, Khadra suffered a severe discrimination from American teenagers who called her “raghead”, (a derogative appellation for a person who wears a turban), shouting at Khadra and her friends to return back to their homes. She was also a subject of racism when she was intimidated from the composition teacher Mrs. Tarkington giving her D’s grades because she always writes about how hypocritical America is. She has also been harassed at school by American children who took off her veil to see what hid beneath, one of them commented “ Look, raghead’s got hair under that piece a shit” (Kahf, 2007, p. 124), and when Khadra shouted and screamed “ I hate you”, one of them replied back “ It’s just hair, You psycho!”(p.124). This social malaise and disturbance engendered a set of stressors which made Khadra reluctant to integrate with the host society.

The psychological and sociocultural stressors are a handicap in front of any immigrant willing to integrate with the host culture. In the case of Khadra, she rather prefers to isolate herself from any cultural influence of the American culture, which is dichotomized by Berry in his acculturation strategies as separation; “when individuals place a value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others, then the **Separation** alternative is defined” (Berry, 1997, p. 9).

Many situations in the novel show that Khadra was hostile to everything coming from the American culture, and she grew up measuring and modeling events and situations through her Islamic narrow minded perspective.

2.2. The Integration Phase

As ward and colleagues (1999) indicate in the definition of sociocultural adjustment, some variables such as the length of residence in the host country and language ability are for a great importance for any individual to integrate in the host society. What happened to Khadra later on is that she gained a very good English language and she had various relationships with American citizens, though she did not agree with them in many religious and life principles, but the fact that she lived a considerable time in America and she became an American citizen as well has made her acquainted with that culture and somehow befriended it. In a last attempt to prove her belonging to the Arab culture, she went to the pilgrimage with her family. She was yearning for going to an Arab Land especially the Land of the Prophet “... some place where we really belong. It’s the Land of the Prophet. The Land of all Muslims” (Kahf, 2007, p. 159); thinking that Islam which came from those places, should be well preserved there. However, what Khadra had experienced in the land of the prophet blew off the typical image that she has drawn about Islam in Arab countries. What happened in Saudi Arabia had shaken her up and made her revisit the previous knowledge about Islam and Arabs. Khadra was escorted by the police because she went to pray el fajr⁵ in the mosque “... Khadra was back, escorted by two matawwa policemen... We found her trying to get to the mosque” (Kahf, 2007, p. 166), Khadra was so frustrated, and she said that

"I---just---wanted--- to pray---fajr" (Ibid 167), Khadra feels herself stranger in the Land of the Prophet and missed America where going to the mosque is not forbidden. Khadra's experience with Affaf, her relative, was bitter than that of the mosque. They together went out to do some shopping as Affaf told Khadra; when they got in the limousine full of Young Saudis, Affaf introduced Khadra as her "American cousin". The word American gives impression to the young men that she is open-minded, and that she will do whatever they ask since America is the country of liberties. What happened is that Khadra was harassed; she did not believe that it happens to her and Arab Muslim people do things like that in the holy land, and she wished leaving that land immediately. On the plane, Khadra was the most glad of all:

I'm glad we're through with that place"... Khadra was glad to be going home. "Home"--- she said, without thinking. She pressed her nose against the airplane window...The sweet relief of her own clean bed awaited her there--- and only there, of all the earth. (Kahf, 2007, p.179). Khadra was frustrated by Arab people who are supposed to protect Islam, are losing their Islamic values, and deepening the stereotypes drawn on them by the western media.

After returning home, Khadra started rethinking her conception about what Islam is; her maturity and her education in American schools and her long sojourn in America⁶ allow her to redefine all knowledge acquired from her family:

She began doubting everything and at the same time she began reading on Islam to construct her own view of it, far from any paternal pressure; "It was the beginning of neoclassical phase. She thirsted now to study the traditional Islamic heritage. It seemed to the answer lay in there somewhere---not in the newfangled Islamic revivalism of her parents and the Dawah, with its odd mixtures of the modern and the Prophetic. (Kahf, 2007, p. 194)

She even thought of traveling to Al-Azhar University or changing her major to Islamic Studies for the sake of understanding real Islam. She also started to lighten her clothes wearing white scarves with tiny flowers and discarded her dark navy jilbab back in her closet "... Khadra put on a white scarf with tiny flowers like a village meadow in spring, and a pale blue blouse and soft floral skirt. Her broadcloth navy jilbab and plain black scarves she shoved back of her closet" (Kahf, 2007, p.193).

Khadra's turn to integration occurred steadily and was well thought out. She got rid of all stressors and handicaps that delayed her integration; according to Berry et al. (1987 as cited in Ward & Deuba, 1999) "Marginalization and separation are associated with high levels of acculturative stress, integration is associated with a low level of stress" (p. 424).

After her unsuccessful marriage with Jumua al-Tashkenti, she decided to return back to Syria "Back where she came from: Syria. Land where her fathers died" (Kahf, 2007, p. 266). Her decision was an attempt to clear up her mind from all the stressors that she witnessed in her life and started a

new life. Khadra attempted to do it in Haj⁷, she wants to erase all her sins and to start her new life as a new born, but she failed as she was indulged in a flirt affair "... it was hopeless to dream of absolution. So it was all for nothing: she hadn't even finished Haj, and she had already blown it. She would never emerge pure as a new born baby"(Kahf, 2007, p. 179).

In Syria Khadra learnt a lot about her parents' history and how they immigrated to America, she understood the motives behind the immigration of her parents and was proud of them; her knowledge of her parent's history was an important factor to start a new life. By returning to Syria, Khadra was in date with nature and pureness. In the Ghuta,⁸ Khadra's soul found relief; Khadra's veil slipped off her head, and she didn't pull it back, and under the cherry tree, Khadra unveiled herself for the first time:

The scarf was slipping off. She shrugged. The Chiffon fell across her shoulders...She closed her eyes and let the sun shine through the thin skin of her eyelid, and she knew deep in the place of yakin that it was all right, a blessing on her shoulders. Alhamdu, alhamdulillah"...Under the Cherry-tree canopy it had felt fine having her scarf slip off. She was safe; she was among friends. (Kahf, 2007, pp. 309-310)

Kahf has created a special scene for the unveiling of Khadra, for Khadra was not used to stay without a cover and the cherry tree was a symbol of protection for her. Khadra was convinced that there are different ways to worship God, and continued her life fluctuating between veiling and unveiling according to the occasions.

This level of self reconciliation was enough for Khadra to return home in America and to start a new life where she melted her American identity with Islam. Khadra returned home fully intending to culturally integrate in the dominant culture; she hence decided not to wear the veil in all occasions. She also decided not to finish her degree because she didn't choose; it was the choice of her family: "Photography, what she wanted from the start, but hadn't even let herself acknowledge she wanted, because it wasn't in the Dawah program, in the Wajdy and Ibtihaj program" (Kahf, p. 315). Khadra refused to return to Indiana where she had grown up; she moved to Philadelphia and started her new job at the morgue. She opened her mind and accepted others as they are, and this was clear by the different friendships that she had made, she was even indulged with a relationship with Shrif, an American guy from Tunisia. Afterwards she returned to Indiana and met her family, they accepted her and respected her choice, they even agreed when she and Hakim, her childhood friend, were in relationship.

3. Conclusion

On the basis of Berry's conception of acculturation (1991 as cited in Berry, 1997,) which states that "Integration can only be "freely" chosen and successfully pursued by non-dominant groups when the dominant society is open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity" (p. 10), it is concluded that Khadra succeeded in her move to reintegration in the American society. She lived in a country where all religions are welcomed;

the civil rights that Khadra was enjoying in America helped her to unhitch herself from the old traditions.

In his article “Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures”, Berry highlights an important strategy that may undoubtedly enhance the Acculturation process of immigrants. Berry believes that “Acculturation and adaptation are now reasonably well understood; I believe that we are in position to pursue the development of policies and programs to promote successful outcomes for all parties involved in the contact situation” (Berry, 2005, p. 700). According to Berry, it is necessary to develop strategies and policies to help immigrants integrate in the host culture, and as well as for nationals to understand and accommodate cultural differences. Noted that the United States was founded as a nation of immigrants who were part of the national economy. John F. Kennedy (1958) states that “Every American who has ever lived, with the exception of one group, was either an immigrant himself or a descendant of immigrant”(NCSL).

The United States of America advocates the role of immigrants in the development of the whole nation: in fact, they are an integral part of the American population landscape. For any immigrant who wants to succeed in America, s/he has to understand the American culture first and to try to adapt himself/herself gradually in that culture without losing his/her identity; and that what integration is. What happens to a large extent of Arab Muslims living in America is that they want to keep their culture of origin melted with Islamic principles, and this what Khadra denied at the end of the story. She finds out that Islam is a religion dedicated to all humanity, so why relate it to Arabic culture? One can be American and Muslim at the same time, needless to adopt a culture which represents for her a past, and could cause her problems in the American society which she chose to belong to.

Khadra’s process of acculturation was marked by different events that have influenced her acculturation process from the phase of separation to the phase of integration. Noting that these events remain the same, nothing changes from her childhood to her adulthood, what really changed is her way of thinking, her willingness to accept differences, her tolerance for religions, and her faith in great merciful God.

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- 1 *Hijab*: the traditional covering for the hair and neck that is worn by Muslim women <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hijab>
- 2 Hoosiers: a native inhabitant of the state of Indiana, US. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/hoosier>
- 3 Culture shock: a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>
- 4 *Kuffar*: Disbelief. A significant concept in Islamic thought, the word *kufir* or one of its derivatives appears in the *Quran* 482 times. Also means "ingratitude," the willful refusal to appreciate the benefits that God has bestowed. <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/>
- 5 *Elfajr*: (dawn) is the first of the five daily prayers performed daily by practicing Muslims.
- 6 As cited in Ward and Duba (1999), factors like the length of residency in the host culture, language ability and the degree of contact with host nationals are highly considered in the acculturation process of any immigrant.
- 7 *El Haj* (Islam) the pilgrimage to Mecca that every Muslim is required to make at least once in his life, provided he has enough money and health to do so. <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/>
- 8 Is a countryside and suburban area in southwestern Syria.