

THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF SYRIAN-AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMAN IN AMERICA AS REFLECTED IN KAHF'S *THE GIRL IN THE TANGERINE SCARF*: A CULTURAL STUDIES ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The issue of cultural identity in immigrants living in the United States of America which is reflected in Kahf's "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf" is a valuable topic to discuss. The way how Khadra, as the main character, negotiates her identity as a Syrian-American will be analyzed by a multidisciplinary approach based on the process of developing the cultural identity in cultural studies through qualitative and content analysis. The negotiation of identity of Syrian-American has created a sense of double-consciousness in the life of this community. They experience to stand both as a Syrian and as an American. They also feel the dispersion from their original place which makes them to have memories and vision about their homeland. Moreover, the prejudices which come both from their side and the majority of American side have created a sense of not belonging to America. Moreover, through the process of acculturation, the process of negotiating identity is also shaped. This acculturation relies on 1) the loyalty to certain religion, beliefs and practices; 2) Assimilation of culture; 3) Rejection, prejudice, power and relationship between the majority and minority; 4) Gender and social class. Moreover, the process of negotiating identity engages the historical and cultural values in both the old country and the new country. From what she has learned through her life experiences in America, her process of assimilation and her memories about Syria, she comes to a decision to see that her identity as a Syrian is as important as her identity as an American. It is also as central as her identity both as a woman and as a Muslim. In conclusion, these multiple identities that she holds are perfect combination that fit her cultural identity as a Syrian-American Muslim woman. It makes her to exhibit attitudes and behaviors of openness, inclusiveness, and tolerance, such as less prejudice and to be more cooperation toward the other.

Keywords: The Cultural identity, Syrian-American, Muslim, Woman, America, Cultural Studies.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In everyday life, the more literary works deal with social problems, the more it gives obvious pictures how cultural phenomenon has had a specific impact on how literature is perceived and being studied. According to Stuart Hall in his book *The Question of Cultural Identity* (1992; 8) stated that identity becomes a 'moveable feast': formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways people are represented or addressed. For immigrants in America, several questions of identity recount on how they represent themselves, what represent themselves, who they are and some question about how to negotiate their identity in multicultural society.

Statements of Problem

Regarding the issues about the woman and her process of finding her cultural identity, this paper proposes question 'How does the main character in Kahf's "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf" negotiate her identity as a Syrian-American?'

Scope of Study

The analysis of this paper covers the woman, the gender roles and the seeking of identity in Muslim immigrant life in USA as represented through Kahf's "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf".

Objectives of the Study

Since literature has its own role on portraying the world and the society as well as its culture, it is very clear that a cultural study on the issues of identity is worth analyzing. Mostly, it will discuss how the woman in Kahf's "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf" negotiates her identity as a Syrian-American. Moreover, it promotes the way how actually identity is accepted and perceived by the Syrian immigrants living in the USA.

Significance of the Study

Writing this paper will give some significance onto the more comprehensive overview about literature, culture, identity, woman, gender role and Muslim. Kahf's novel is a conscious effort to reflect on Muslim identities of especially Arab immigrants

living in the US. It is very expected that the finding and result of this thesis will increase the knowledge about cultural identity of Muslim Women in USA.

Theoretical Framework

In American studies, McDowell proposes a multidisciplinary approach allowing students to study various discipline such as culture, politics, psychology, etc. Moreover, it argues that past, present, and future are inseparable parts. Here, cultural studies will play an important role in explaining the cultural identity. Most contemporary literary theories and cultural studies relate the process of shaping and creating identity through symbolizing, visualizing, and imaging.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This paper used a qualitative analysis in which according to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), the researcher is able to observe the case study, personal experience, life story, etc. Moreover, this research requires library research as the means of collecting data. The main data are taken from the novel written by Mohja Kahf, "The Girl in the Tangerine

Scarf". Besides the primary data this research also requires content analysis from any other secondary data to strengthen the analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Brief Discussion on Cultural Identity

Discussing about cultural identity, it takes many elements of social life. It consists of many assignments in which the identity of an individual is free to choose or it is socially constructed through ideas like nationality, ethnicity, race and social class. The notion of cultural identity has many contributions to the cultures exist in every part of the world. Nowadays, the issues of identity and its relation to the cultural identity of certain social groups are widely discussed. Yet, there are no exact terms about what cultural identity really means. This is because identity is very contextual both in derivation and expression. It takes many definition and so the interpretation of culture is particularly encompasses with possessions of ideas, values, attitudes, and some normative behavior.

Contacts and communication between people from different cultures forces them to seek ways to accommodate the gap to each other to minimize conflict. Besides the cultural awareness of the proficiency in mastering the language as a mean of communication, acculturation also sometimes include the adaptation to the historical events which have shaped the cultures, understanding and appreciation of artistic and musical forms of culture as well as the way everyone set the standard of behavior

Issues of Identity of Syrian Immigrant in American Community

Moving out from the old world to the new world has taught them a lot of things about being the new person but in the old shape of body, thus, it takes a lot of process of adaptation. The identity, of course, will be shaped through the process of socialization in which each individual has to negotiate with. The cultural transmission of this immigrant will include the socialization inside the family and outside the family. Socialization outside the family occurs in the society at large through imitation

and learning from peers and role models.

Identity is an inseparable factor which deals with the culture. As an immigrant, the Syrian-American brought their home country's culture. They brought their originality which represents their norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices. Identity of the Syrian-American is not only an attribute which this immigrant have, rather, it refers to many event and experiences that takes place in the creation of their relationship as the individual, a group of community to the environment. Therefore, identity is a dynamic process of someone's self identification as the environment also evolves and changes.

“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? Is it?” then she burst into sobs. (Kahf, 2006 ; 66)

Another issue of identity rose in the novel is about the prejudice which come out not only from those who are majority but also come out from the minority.

The first act of the Protector, as they came to be known, was to call Immigration and Naturalization authorities, charging that the Center harbored illegal immigrants... “Did you know that zoning law has often been used as a tool to keep people of other races out?” (Kahf, 2006 ; 43)

The sentence above highlights the idea of ‘people of other races’ do mean the non white person. It includes the Arab immigrant also. The Naturalization authorities itself was implemented in 1790 which allowed an individual to apply for citizenships if they were a free white person, being a good character, and living in the united States for two years. Upon receiving the courts approval they took an oath of allegiance which was recorded.

The Syrian Immigrant Voices in the History of Arab-American Literature

The life of this Syrian American is started by the waves of migration from the Middle East to America or the New World. During that time, it was not only those from Syrian moved to America but also from other Arab countries. Immigrants moved from Middle East to

USA are divided into three stages or wave of immigration. It was about in the year of 1899 and 1919s that they arrived in United States. Most of them lived in the urban areas, and around 1940, for about 70,000 Arabs resided in three states such as New York, Boston, and Detroit. They lived and worked as the labor of industrial factories, textile mills, itinerant salesman, peddling dry goods across America.

The second wave immigrants were different from the first generation. They were Arab-speaking intellectuals and professionals as well as university or college students. They were much more educated and so they could afford their living by working in the new suburbs around the major industrial cities or to rural towns. In the middle 1960s, the third wave of Arab immigration came that continues to the present. The third wave consisted of many professionals, entrepreneurs, and unskilled and semiskilled laborers. In the World, they face the new cultures and societies.

ANALYSIS

The Syrian-American Muslim’s Experiences in Kahf’s “The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf”

For many years the Syrian immigrants have been living in the USA, they have already contributed a lot to the development of America in many fields. They also surpass the America average in both education and economics, and however, they still struggle hard for acceptance of their identities as a Syrian-American. In the novel, the second generation of immigrant named Ebtehaj and Wajdy has achieved a better educational performance compared to those of their family in Syria.

In short, the process of education in the immigrants' life is playing an important role. For example, in the novel, all of the children from the Syrian family go to the ordinary school whether private or public school with the American curriculum which becomes a tool where conflicting views about immigrants regarding identity, linguistic and cultural diversity, assimilation, accommodation and other issues play themselves out. It means that the contact of the immigrants' children to the social world outside their family will shape and reshape their way of seeing and believing. Because of that,

in the process of assimilation, many important factors from the outside and inside of the immigrant's life need to be considerate.

Double Consciousness in the life of Syrian-American

Bringing up their dreams of happiness and a better freedom, many Syrian immigrants count on America. Just like Frederick Buell (148) states that model immigrant success stories are models precisely because they remind to the people that the author of the stories are "the other", while simultaneously celebrating the supposedly complete transformation of that identity.

The Syrian-American share the experiences of being "the other" because actually, according Du Bois, instead of making an achieved pluralized space and time guaranteeing an equal opportunities within nation-space, this immigrant is sometimes ironically constructed as precisely as divisive and subordinating condition for "belonging". Therefore, it is very important to acknowledge this ambivalent allegiance to or double hesitation about, belonging to the

ancestral home and to the host country. Kahf's "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf" promotes the idea of the Syrian immigrant have to struggle hard to maintain their identity and their culture among the dominant groups in America. It is because the notion of multiculturalism encourage and enable the contribution of the various groups both from the majority and minority to empower themselves in order to strengthen and to achieve their maximum potential.

The Negotiation Of Identity Of Syrian-American In Kahf's *The Girl In The Tangerine Scarf*

The Process of Acculturation in the Life of Syrian-American

In the process of negotiating identity, the process of acculturation from one culture to another plays an important part. According to Pearson (1987) the process of acculturation can be started by the contact and communication and then followed by the process of assimilation. It includes how the immigrants integrate, separate, reject as well as adapt to the new culture they live in. Every Syrian-American has

to pass these one-dimensional cultural changes which may result with multiple outcomes. All of these processes of shaping identity are important in the life of every individual. Hecth explains that identity is something which is held in the public or in the collective memory of group, which, in turn, bonds the group together. In this process, a group identity represents a shared identity of all its members. Moreover identity is located within four different "frames": 1) within individuals, 2) within relationships, 3) within groups, 4) communicated between relational partners and group members (Golden et.al, 2002).

There will be some factors analyzed related to the acculturation of the Syrian-American as reflected in Kahf's "The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf : 1) The loyalty to certain religion, beliefs and practices; 2) Assimilation of culture; 3) Rejection, prejudice, power and relationship between the majority and minority; 4) Gender and Social Class. Thus, below are the discussions.

The loyalty to certain religion, beliefs and practices;

The loyalty to certain religion, beliefs and practices plays an important role whether the process of acculturation brings change to the immigrants or not. In this case, there must be an understanding that the process of acculturation will end in some ways, in which the Syrian Muslim immigrant will find and see themselves as the generation with a very high level of Islamic revival, a very low level of Islamic revival or the average level of Islamic revival.

Assimilation

The behavioral assimilation can be called as cultural assimilation. Cultural assimilation embodies two levels of cultural traits which are extrinsic and intrinsic cultural traits. Extrinsic cultural traits involve dress, manners, patterns of emotional expression, language, diet, recreational patterns, art forms, and economic techniques. Intrinsic cultural traits include religious and beliefs and practices, ethical values, a sense of a common past, and folklore. The fourth stage is identification assimilation which occurs when

members of the minority group develop a sense of peoplehood based exclusively on the host society, acquiring the memories, sentiments and attitudes of the people of the core culture. There are three kinds of “peoplehood” through which people recognize and experience their identity.

The Behavioral Assimilation or the Cultural Assimilation

In Kahf’s “The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf”, it is found that Khadra’s parents teach their children strictly about what to do and not to do according to Islamic values. For examples, the Shamy teaches their children to dress appropriately such as wearing veil. Khadra’s mother, Ebtehaj, explains that covering up the body is not the same like hiding; rather, it is one of the ways to perform the Islamic values.

Regarding with this idea of music, the way to dress and the way to eat according to the Islamic concern have made Khadra to see deeper about Islam and its rules. on one of the other occasion, Khadra who believes that she has to stand in line with what her parents has already taught her for the rest of her life, suddenly has to come up

with an idea that she has to be free. However, through some celebration of music and art performances, the public will see what is actually inside the community. This idea comes when she starts to take an elective class with the German Islamic studies. All the knowledge that she knows about Islam is just something which are seen from the inside. Suddenly, she feels what she has known so far about Islam moves to a different direction. There are two directions; the one under the view of Islam she has grown up with and another one is what she catches glimpses of. Then, what she has always thinks is right appear wrong and what she has always think right appear wrong.

The Identification Assimilation

The next discussion will cover the discussion about the identification assimilation found in Kahf's "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf". In this case, ethnicity is a distinctive shared culture that binds its members together and differentiates them from the "outsiders". Ethnicity provides Syrian immigrants with a common sense of descent. It

shapes the character of the Syrian community in America which lining on its origin, growth, and destiny; and in addition, sometimes these characteristics answer the questions of similarity and belonging.

Rejection, prejudice, power and relationship between the majority and minority.

The shaping of cultural identity concerns with how prejudice, rejection as well as the power and relationship between the majority and minority exist. In Kahf's "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf", there are some prejudices from the immigrant especially the Muslim immigrant toward the American. Some conversation state how the Syrian perceive and see American differently, in which it comes from their understanding and This kind of feelings, later on, will shape the way how the children of the second generation see themselves in their community. For examples are the quotations below:

Who were Americans? The Americans were the white people who surrounded them, a crashing sea of unbelief in which the Dawah Center bobbed, a brave boat. (There were black people who were

Americans, but that was different). You had your nice Americans and your nasty Americans. And then there was the majority of Americans; the best that could be said about them was that they were ignorant. (Kahf, 2006; 67)

There are times this Syrian family immigrant tries to label American with the way how they see them as an outsider. Feeling that they are not wholly accepted by the American, a perception from many differences have created a very distinctive ideas and thoughts about American.

Gender and Social Class

The issues of gender in Islam and among Muslim community have created the feeling of freedom of choices as well as the feeling of risk. The process of education in American style has shaped Khadra's individual's possibilities to create herself identity. The questions of gender, marriage, relationship between the sexes are given specific places that need to be understood by most of the Muslim women. In her very strict Muslim community, she learns that the values about gender in Islam have some clear

concepts of marriage and motherhood. Then, through a long studying, there is an urgency brought by the main character of this novel which says that Muslim woman has her own rights to chose her job, the place and with whom she would stay as long as it does not break the sharia'.

The Cultural Identity of Syrian-American Muslim Woman

Being a Muslim Syrian-American woman has given her the sense of holding a multiple identities but this multiple identities has given her a clear position in America. She can find that through the process of assimilation she can be the new Muslim woman who is not merely working as members of religious communities and not thoughtful, independent individuals. It is also not that kind of message written in many stories about the Muslim woman who is always said to be the subordinate one. Khadra finds the idea that actually the women's subjectivities in Islam is constituted through their performance of social roles. In short, she finds herself to hold more than just one identity, she has her multiple identities as a "Syrian", an "American",

a “Muslim”, and a “Woman”. She, then maintains herself to identify herself as a Syrian-American Muslim Woman.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the Syrian immigrant in America is one of the examples of the diasporic community in the multicultural country. The presence of memories about the homeland with its major Muslim community is a very strong point to maintain their positive perceptions as Muslim in America. The strong loyalty to Islam and its values, for some of the immigrants have increased their membership which this have also developed their sense of belonging as one ethnic group which is Arab community. This ethnicity is shown through the way the Arabs share their common languages, religious beliefs, cultural traditions and customs, values, and even normative orientations. However, the process of assimilation and acculturation in the multicultural society like America is very unavoidable.

In this case, the assimilated Muslim community which are mostly the second and the third generation also develop their sense of new identity which looks

more like the majority of American. The interesting fact found in the analysis of the cultural identity of Syrian-American Muslim women in America is that, the assimilation itself is also influenced by the past and the present condition of the homeland (in this case is Syria). It means that the process of negotiating identity engage the historical and cultural values in both the old country and the new country.

From what she has learned through her life experiences in America and her process of assimilation in America and her memories about Syria, she comes to a decision to see that her identity as a Syrian is as important as her identity as an American. It is also as central as her identity both as a woman and as a Muslim. In conclusion, this multiple identities that she holds are perfect combination that fits her cultural identity as a Syrian-American Muslim woman. It makes her to exhibit attitudes and behaviors of openness, inclusiveness, and tolerance, such as less prejudice and to be more cooperation toward the other.

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