



“What About Women?”: The Treatment of Women in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

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Abstract

In this article, I will argue that the treatment of women in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is problematic because (a) polygyny in modern practice is depicted as if it were exclusive to Islam when in fact some Mormons still practice polygyny and (b) some readers could misconstrue the traditional gender role for women as being imposed by Islam when in fact it is imposed by a conservative strand of Sunni Islam. First, this article will define the term *polygyny* - as opposed to *polygamy* - in order to justify my use of the phrase “polygyny in modern practice,” examine the novel’s implication that Mormons no longer practice polygyny, and present a rebuttal through examples of recent court cases involving Mormon polygynists to prove that some Mormons still practice polygyny. By doing this, it will show that polygyny in modern practice is not exclusive to Islam. Next, this article will clarify what I mean by “the traditional gender role for women” and by “a conservative strand of Sunni Islam,” discuss how Ebtehaj fulfills the traditional gender role for women, and highlight an underlying cultural dissimilarity between her and Aunt Khadija in view of the fact that both women are Sunni. By doing this, it will show that the traditional gender role for women is imposed by a conservative strand of Sunni Islam rather than by Islam itself. Finally, this article will recap my argument, clarify my problem with the novel’s depiction of polygyny, and explain how some readers could misconstrue the traditional gender role for women as being imposed by Islam.

Key words: Polygyny; Gender roles; Gender equality; Multiculturalism; Cross-Culturalism; Interfaith dialogue; Islam

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1. POLYGyny IN MODERN PRACTICE

Polygyny is “the state or practice of having more than one wife or female mate at a time.”¹ *Polygamy*, on the other hand, is “marriage in which a spouse of either sex may have more than one mate at the same time.”² This clarity is important because, contrary to common misuse of the term *polygamy* to refer to the practice of polygyny, neither Islam nor Mormonism has historically permitted polygamy (which would, by definition, also allow for *polyandry*, “the state or practice of having more than one husband or male mate at one time”).³ Rather, both have permitted polygyny at one time or another, which justifies my use of the phrase “polygyny in modern practice.”

In its discussion of polygyny in relation to Islam and Mormonism, the novel implies that Mormons no longer practice polygyny. During a conversation between Khadra, Jihad, Brig, Riley, and Garry, Khadra describes how Uncle Abdulla left his job as a Dawah Center officer and took up electrical engineering in order to “support two wives.” (Kahf, 2007, p.416) Hearing this, Riley - one of Jihad’s Mormon friends - exclaims, “You guys really *still* do that? We’re the ones who always take the rap for it!” (Kahf, 2007, p.417) His comment implies that Mormons no longer practice polygyny. Thus, polygyny in modern practice is depicted as if it were exclusive to Islam.

It is unsound, however, for polygyny in modern practice to be depicted as if it were exclusive to Islam. I

¹ Merriam-Webster Online, s.v., “polygyny,” accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polygyny>.

² Ibid, s.v.

³ Ibid, s.v.

am not saying that Islam does not permit polygyny. Islam *does* in fact permit polygyny. This is made clear in the following Qur’anic verse:

If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice. (‘Ali, 1989)

Nor am I saying that the Mormon Church (or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) still officially endorses it. The Church *indeed* ceased to officially endorse it. It did so in Official Declaration 1 of 1890, in which Wilford Woodruff, former president of the Church, declared:

Inasmuch as laws have been enacted by Congress forbidding plural marriages, which laws have been pronounced constitutional by the court of last resort, I hereby declare my intention to submit to those laws, and to use my influence with the members of the Church over which I preside to have them do likewise. There is nothing in my teachings to the Church or in those of my associates...which can be reasonably construed to inculcate or encourage polygamy; and when any Elder of the Church has used language which appeared to convey any such teaching, he has been promptly reproofed.⁴ And I now publicly declare that my advice to the Latter-day Saints is to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land.⁵

Rather, I am saying that some Mormons still practice polygyny. For example, in *Brown v. Buhman* (2013), after being threatened with prosecution by Utah County for practicing polygyny, the Brown family filed a lawsuit arguing an impingement on the right to privacy (Dalrymple II, 2014). Not only that, but U.S. District Judge Clark Waddoups ruled in the plaintiff’s favor by decriminalizing polygamy.⁶ One might argue that since the novel was released in 2006 and *Brown v. Buhman* occurred in 2013, it would be unreasonable to expect the author to have known while writing the novel that some Mormons still practice polygyny. In that case, I would cite *State of Utah v. Green* (2004), in which the defendant unsuccessfully appealed a 2001 conviction for doing so.⁷ Since the novel was released *after* both Green’s conviction and unsuccessful appeal, we see that such an expectation is actually quite reasonable. But regardless of their respective dates, these examples of recent court cases involving Mormon polygynists prove that some Mormons still practice polygyny. It follows that polygyny in modern practice is not exclusive to Islam.

⁴ Here is an example of misuse of the term polygamy to refer to the practice of polygyny.

⁵ Official Declaration 1, accessed April 3, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/dc-testament/od/1?lang=eng>

⁶ This memorandum decision is another example of misuse of the term polygamy to refer to the practice of polygyny, although Judge Waddoups distinguishes between the terms polygamy, polygyny, and polyandry on p.15 of this ruling’s document.

⁷ *State of Utah v. Thomas A. Green*, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.polygamy.org/legal-2/state-court-cases/state-v-green/>

2. THE TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLE FOR WOMEN

“The traditional gender role for women (referred to as ‘the traditional gender role’ hereinafter)” involves “a woman’s roles and identities [being] restricted to those of child, adolescent, and then dependent wife and mother.” (Kawar, 1997) Although it can be found in different forms in different cultures, this article considers it specifically in its relation to a conservative strand of Sunni Islam. Moreover, it does so in light of its implications for gender equality. By “a conservative strand of Sunni Islam,” I mean traditional Sunni Arab culture. I am not saying that traditional Sunni Arab culture is the *only* strand of conservative Sunni Islam. Rather, I am saying that traditional Sunni Arab culture is the *particular* strand of conservative Sunni Islam that this article deals with.

Taking the novel as a whole, Ebtehaj is depicted as fulfilling the traditional gender role. For example, though as a bachelorette in Syria she receives a college degree under a secular Ba’athist government and dreams of going to medical school, she later gives up that dream in a religious household in Indiana in order to perform her perceived duties as a wife and mother. Indeed, she takes on all housework except for the chores delegated to Khadra and Eyad (Kahf, 2007, p.21). And even after they grow up and leave home, her role doesn’t change. True, she may still have Jihad to take care of, but even he is a college junior by the end of the novel and at that point it isn’t clear whether he still lives at home (Kahf, 2007, p.431).

An underlying cultural dissimilarity between Ebtehaj and Aunt Khadija becomes apparent in view of the fact that both women are Sunni. It becomes even more apparent in light of the traditional gender role’s implications for gender equality. For example, though both women work for the Dawah Center - Aunt Khadija as a secretary (Kahf, 2007, p.23) and Ebtehaj by community organizing and teaching women’s classes (Kahf, 2007, p.99) — only Aunt Khadija gets paid for her work. Recall that Ebtehaj’s “roles and identities [are] restricted to those of child, adolescent, and then *dependent wife* and mother.” (Kawar, 1997, p.21) Accordingly, so long as her work for the Center is unpaid, it doesn’t contradict the traditional gender role. However, were she to get paid for her work, this would *then* contradict the traditional gender role because being employed would mean that she’s not a dependent wife. To speak of a hypothetical situation in which she was employed by the Center is not, however, to distort the novel’s depiction of her as a pious volunteer who simply “[serves] for the sake of the On-High.” (Kahf, 2007, p.40) Rather, it is to illustrate the traditional gender role’s implications for gender equality. In other words, it is to illustrate how she is limited to being a dependent wife. This illustration is especially pertinent in light of my previous assertions that traditional Sunni Arab culture

is not the *only* strand of conservative Sunni Islam and that the traditional gender role can be found in different forms in different cultures. To be more specific, the novel presents no evidence that Aunt Khadija, on the other hand - being black American with roots in the Nation of Islam - is influenced by *any* strand of conservative Sunni Islam or by *any* form of the traditional gender role even though she, like Ebtehaj, is Sunni (Kahf, 2007, p.24). Thus we see a cultural dissimilarity between the two. Aunt Khadija, then, is exempt from whatever such a form's implications for gender equality might be, which could be one of the reasons why she is employed. Not limited to be a dependent wife, there's no traditional gender role for her employment to contradict. This explanation becomes more probable in light of the evidence that we find in the novel that black American Sunni culture strongly advocates gender equality. For example, in Sunday school, a discussion about racial and gender equality takes place during which Uncle Taher asks a question about why "God don't look at [our] skin color." (Kahf, 2007, p.35) Hakim responds by saying, "Because it's only one God created everyone, so all men are equal." (Kahf, 2007, p.35) In understanding Hakim as using the word "everyone" to signify only men, Tayiba becomes unsettled and asks Uncle Taher, "What about women?" (Kahf, 2007, p.35) Uncle Taher responds by saying,

Man' include women... It's just the way we talk... God don't care whether you a man or woman, anymore than He look at black or white... The Quran says, "God don't suffer the reward of *anyone's* deeds to be lost, male or female." None of that matters with God. (Kahf, 2007, p.35)

This is good evidence that black American Sunni culture strongly advocates gender equality. In supplementing the previous illustration of how the traditional gender role limits Ebtehaj to be a dependent wife, it contributes in delineating the cultural dissimilarity between her and Aunt Khadija that has now been highlighted. Moreover, with traditional Sunni Arab culture having been juxtaposed with black American Sunni culture, the traditional gender role has been effectively grounded in a conservative strand of Sunni Islam. It is further grounded therein by the fact that Uncle Taher cites the Quran rather than, say, *a liberal strand of Sunni Islam* (which, in this case, would mean black American Sunni culture) in advocating gender equality. It follows that the traditional gender role is imposed by a conservative strand of Sunni Islam rather than by Islam itself.

CONCLUSION

To recap my argument, the novel's treatment of women is problematic because polygyny is inaccurately depicted and some readers could misconstrue the traditional gender role as being imposed by Islam. Recall that, in countering the implication that Mormons no longer practice polygyny, I neither denied that Islam permits polygyny nor accused

the Church of still officially endorsing it. Actually, I even provided evidence that Islam *does* permit polygyny and that the Church *indeed* ceased to officially endorse it. But by proving that some Mormons still practice polygyny, I also showed that polygyny in modern practice is not exclusive to Islam. My problem with this depiction, then, is that it is blatantly misleading. If it were to be taken at face value by some readers, it could perpetuate the attitude that "Islam is oppressive towards women."⁸ This is especially likely given that "Western publics, by lopsided margins, do not think of Muslims as 'respectful of women.'"⁹ And in light of these Western attitudes towards Islam, I will now explain how some readers could misconstrue the traditional gender role as being imposed by Islam. I will do this, furthermore, by explaining why I consider the cultural dissimilarity between Ebtehaj and Aunt Khadija to be "underlying." One might argue that in depicting these two characters as coming from different strands of Sunni Islam, the novel does a good job of illustrating the intricate history of Islam in America. I would argue, however, that the cultural dissimilarity between them is readily seen only by readers well-versed in that history, which makes it underlying. Without such background knowledge, some readers could misconstrue the traditional gender role—along with its implications for gender equality—as being imposed by Islam. In that case, rather than gain new insights into the intricacies of Islam in America, they would view Aunt Khadija as an exception to the rule.

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⁸ What are some typical misperceptions and stereotypes Westerners hold about Islam and the Middle East, and vice versa?, accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/questions/types/index.html?pagewanted=all>

⁹ The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2006/06/22/the-great-divide-how-westerners-and-muslims-view-each-other/>