

## Notions of Home for Diasporic Muslim Women Writers

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### Abstract

Literatures on Muslim women writers living in a new land are scarce and rarely discussed. This paper aims to explore the writings by two Muslim women writers who had to leave their countries for various reasons but "returned home" through their creative work, exemplifying the diasporic notion of being ambivalent and critical of their 'homelands' (and possibly also of their 'hostlands'). By scrutinising the works by Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Mohja Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, we will demonstrate an aspect of unsettling women and problematise the notion of 'home' for both writers. Both Nafisi and Kahf have a different way of putting forth issues relating to home but very often, politicising much of the issues raised in their attempts to address matters relating to justice and women's participation in the public domains. By investigating their notions of home, we will be able to draw some conclusions about what memories and political (read: religious) concerns they evoke and how their recollections sketch pictures of the home they no longer call their own.

**Keywords:** Muslim women writers; diaspora; homeland

### 1. Introduction

This paper aims to examine selected writings by two Muslim women writers who both reside in the United States. Both left their homelands by choice albeit pressured by political turmoil that took place in their respective countries. Mohja Kahf refuses to discuss reasons why her family left Syria and because her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a work of fiction, we cannot simply assume the reasons for her exile. Azar Nafisi, however, writes about her self-exile openly and in fact, its reason becomes a central issue in her book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). Although both writers write in different genres, their notions of home are pertinent and raise important questions regarding aspects of unsettling Muslim women writers whose worldviews provide another facet of Asian American literature.

We frame our argument based on two important ideas related to the writers' sense of identity and their perceptions of "home". Being women and Muslim would be their primary notions of who they are. Where 'home' is would be a more difficult question to answer. In addressing the issues of identity and home, we rely on the concepts of "memory" and "diaspora" which are important in understanding the plight of both writers and negating much of the criticism placed upon them for "writing against the grains". Or at least these concepts will shape some light upon where they come

from, writing the way they do, inviting so much debate and criticism from both western and eastern readers. Diasporic writers are those people who no longer reside in their motherlands but many of them still return to their respective homelands in their writings. Azar Nafisi, an exiled Iranian who now lives in the land of the Statue of Liberty, returns to Iran in her creative work, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Mohja Kahf's fiction has several notions of home – home of the protagonist's parents, home of all Muslims, Mecca, and the childhood home that the protagonist returns to in the story. By comparing these different settings of home and how they are remembered in the tropes of the writers' narratives, we hope to bring into focus the question of "home" because it is a place that they have physically left, voluntarily or otherwise, and yet it is also a place they mentally return to in their creative work. This contrast of several "homes" – the real home as remembered, and the physical one which they now inhabit, exhibits notions of the use of memory for the exiled writers. In remembering their respective homelands, the writers seem to view the remembered events from the outside, from the point of view of external observers. By focusing on what they remember of the "home", whether it is real or fictive, we can make obvious some of the cultural struggles these women are challenged with in the course of their writings.

## 2. Texts and Contexts

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi narrates and provides an insight into significant incidents in Iran that took place after the revolution which affected the lives of Iranian women. She was born in Iran of an elitist upbringing. She was the child of Tehran's former mayor, Ahmad Nafisi and Nezhat Nafisi, one of the first women to be elected to the Iranian parliament. At 13, Nafisi went to an English boarding school in Lancaster, England but left for the United States and received her PhD in English and American Literature from the University of Oklahoma. She returned to Tehran and taught at several universities and experienced eighteen years of post-revolutionary Iran before leaving Iran in 1997.

Her memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, published in 2003, narrates the personal and intellectual events of a private literature class Nafisi started in Tehran after leaving her teaching post at the University of Allameh Tabatabaei. The class consists of seven of her best female students, who meet at Azar's house every Thursday morning between 1995-1997, discussing furtively forbidden works of Western literature. During the course of her description of the deliberations that took place, we learn of the memoirist and her family, students as well as the sociopolitical events in Iran.

In her memoir, she unveils the construction of women's identity and characteristics brought about by the Islamic Republic of Iran. No longer in her homeland and free to be published outside of Iran, Nafisi enjoys the status of being an insider outside. Her book is banned in Iran and a majority of Iranians will probably not read the book in its original English language. The memoir reveals the workings fundamental Islam as practised by what Nafisi perceives as 'dictatorial minds' and the ways in which they shape the lives of men and women in Iran. She demonstrates the lives and condition of Iranian women under the new rule who seem powerless and subjugated. Nafisi's method is to draw on certain events, characters, and images from Western literature and then compare these works to shed light on the characteristics, behaviors, thoughts, and dictatorial beliefs and actions of the ruling party in Iran. Each chapter is named after one Western novel to show the stark contrasts between fiction and fact. In putting the literary figures and characters alongside the real lives of Iranian men and women, Nafisi exhibits the way in which both literary and social constructions defy Iranian women freedom of choice, justice, and equality.

In comparison, this paper will also chart similarities and differences of another diasporic Muslim woman writer who also now lives in the United States. Mohja Kahf was born in Damascus, Syria but moved to the United States as a child with her parents. She teaches comparative literature at the University of Arkansas and has won many writing awards. Her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) is about a young Arab migrant transplanted to the American Midwest in the 1970s. Kahf

addresses the cultural clashes faced by Muslims living in America and writes of not only Muslim-non-Muslim relations but also Muslim-Muslim relations and the conflicts surrounding them. While Nafisi's narration of 'home' is filled with much anger and bitterness, Kahf's notion of 'home' is much more realistic, not favouring any side, for she is more keen on highlighting injustices and prejudices committed by both Arab migrants and Anglo-Americans unto one another. The questions of nationhood, identity and American patriotism are explored unpretentiously by Kahf in her work.

It is important to note a major difference in the works of the two women. While Nafisi's work is a memoir, Kahf's novel is fiction. Nafisi takes the self as the subject matter, and inherent in the practice of self-writing, the writer's presence seems to tear through the fabric of the academic text – revealing glimmers of the lived experience that forms the thrust of her memoir. Central to this remembering is the confession and the personal voice. Autobiographers and memoirists use the mode for many reasons. bell hooks, for example, tells the story of her growing up years which were intimately connected with the longing to kill the self she was without really having to die. By revealing the anguished childhood, hooks liberates herself from her past, "By writing the autobiography, it was not just this Gloria I would be rid of, but the past that had a hold on me, that kept me from the present" (*Feminisms* 1037). She further asserts that in "bringing one's past, one's memories together in a complete narrative would allow one to view them from a different perspective, not as a singular isolated events but as part of a continuum. ... Writing the autobiographical narrative enabled me to look at my past from the different perspective and to use this knowledge as a means of self-growth and change in a practical way" (1039). Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, on the other hand, offers the occasion to consider the complex aspects of cultural fictions that surround the autobiographer who is engaging two sets of stories: those of the dominant culture and those of an ethnic subculture with its own traditions, its own unique stories. Nafisi's project is, of course, different from the two examples above. She speaks of the old Nafisi, the one whose subjectivity as a woman is controlled and dominated by fundamental Islam. While hooks and Kingston change in the process of writing the self, Nafisi shows that she is the same person, but she seeks to tell the world outside Iran what it is like to be a woman in Iran. Similarly, in Kahf's work, we can make some observations of the Muslim woman in America as she tries to fulfil her Islamic principles. The protagonist, Khadra Shamy, experiences the full cycle from childhood to adulthood, from being enclosed with pious Muslims to being in a situation of absolute liberty. The ways in which the people in both works negotiate traditions and patriarchy in their homelands, real or fictive, suggest different trajectories of the Muslim diasporic writers who centre on many similar issues but their approaches to them show disparate worldviews.

### **3. Historical Overview**

In Iran, the 1979 revolution changed the monarchy regime of the last king of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah, into the Islamic Republic led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini's revolution brought an Islamic government which provoked a brand of Islamic culture and Islamized the policies of the country which had been secular for centuries. Iran underwent a drastic transformation which brought a significant impact on the individual and collective identities.

Amongst various policies put in place by the new government was the reformation of women's issues. Iranian women had, for centuries, struggled for equality and freedom and for a long time had enjoyed greater rights of freedom. During the demonstration and activities leading up to the revolution, veiled and unveiled women all participated in the protests against the tyrannies of the previous regime. To show their unity and for the sake of homogeneity and solidarity, these women chose to veil themselves. The new government which took over adopted Islamic principles, considered itself as morally upright, and imposed certain rules as captured in the quotation below:

Women were defined in the 1979 constitution by their family status and duties; the Family Protection Law was annulled, and Islamic law reinstated, including polygamy,

child marriage, child custody to the father and his family, free divorce for men but not for women, and, for a time, a minimum age of nine for brides. ... In the early years of the Islamic Republic women were discouraged from working outside the home, the women's labour-force participation declined in most spheres, with a gradual comeback since the 1990s. (Nikkie R. Keddie, 2007: 113)

Iranian women became the focus of the new regime, and the extent of this cultural ideology became the heart of Nafisi's memoir. The enforcement of a strict dressing code which include veiling, specific gender interactions, and monitoring of moral conduct are targeted mainly at women were clearly documented. She pays particular attention to hejab laws because they became one of the reasons for her refusal to stay on in Iran. While Iranian authorities strive to re-discover Islam or re-invent its own identity as an Islamic country (also in response to distance itself from Western influence), she sees the new construction as making women invisible and homogenous. Through various illustrations, Nafisi shows that she has become a stranger in her homeland because she has lost her identity and sense of self.

Predictably therefore, Nafisi returns to old concerns of Islam and gender in her memoir. Issues on veiling, polygamy, and marriage have been repeatedly debated by a number of feminists - the main trajectory of these debates centre around the notion that Muslim women are oppressed because of the requirements to veil, freedom of Muslim men to marry up to four wives at a time, and marital issues which seem to favour men. Nafisi's memoirs provide a first-hand account of what it feels like to be governed by these Islamic principles. Nafisi reaffirms what many of us already know – that Islamic laws as interpreted by men tyrannise women to a damaging extent. She herself cannot bear to live with such coercive regime and chooses to leave her homeland to tell her side of the story. Rajeev S. Patke (2005: 112) argues that when a person "is obliged to live away from a place that he regards as home, and everything that provides for a sense of affiliation and belonging to the idea of a community," the writing becomes "an elegiac delineation not merely of displacement, but of a loss that merges the personal dimension with the collective". Nafisi leaves Iran rather reluctantly because she cannot compromise her life principles with the Iranian authority. Her exile may be personal to her, but her story of being displaced in her own homeland is symptomatic of other Iranian women who are alienated by the system.

Kahf's novel is a conscious effort to reflect on Muslim identities of especially Arab immigrants living in the US. Kahf is a poet, novelist, critic and academic who teaches Comparative Literature at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. She was born in Damascus, Syria, and emigrated to the United States as a child with her family. She has a doctorate degree in Comparative Literature from Rutgers University and wrote her first book of poetry, *Emails from Scheherazad* in 2003. She won an Arkansas Arts Council Award for her poetry in 2002 and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006; thereafter referred to as *TGTS*) is her first novel. Kahf is working on her second book of poetry, a series of poems about the stories of Hagar, Aisha, and other figures from religious tradition.

In an interview, Kahf points out that she does not write just to make different people comfortable with one another or to correct "misunderstandings" and believes that good literature must have aesthetic value as well as the ability to be dynamic, provocative and shows the courage to speak truth to power (quoted in Majaj 2005: 30). This describes her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* well. Kahf is known for being critical of Muslims who refuse to see any faults with their communities. Very often her criticisms against pretentious Muslims are seen as attacks against Islam itself. Kahf has always fought against any form of marginalization of Muslim women, especially at the mosque. However, Kahf also goes beyond the politicking of the veil. In her novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, she writes about the complexities of Arab Muslim migrants living in the American Midwest in the 1970s.

The history of Muslims in America dated as early as 1312, based on the findings by Harvard linguist Leo Wiener (1920) and scholars like J.A. Rogers, Ivan Van Sertima (1976; 1987) as well as Amir Nashid Ali Muhammad, who wrote a book entitled *Muslims in America: Seven Centuries of*

*History* (1998). Lisa Suhair Majaj in her article, “Arab-Americans and the Meaning of Race” writes that individual Arabs travelled to the United States long before the beginning of the nation. However, Arabic-speaking immigration began in earnest in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (321). Most of the early Arab immigrants were Eastern Christians from Lebanon, then part of Ottoman-controlled “Greater Syria” (present day Syria, Lebanon and Palestine/Israel). Majaj also highlights upon the complexities of giving citizenship rights to Arab immigrants after the Naturalization Act of 1790 was revised in 1899, 1906, 1910 and finally in 1911, in which applications for citizenship by subjects who were neither white nor of African birth and descent were rejected (ibid).

On the other hand, Kahf does not resist Islamic reforms but adapts accordingly. The book covers of both writers reflect the different approach both have towards Islamic reforms and Islamic identity. In Nafisi’s book, Muslim women are clad in black attire which hints at the imposed ruling on Islamic dress code for Muslim women in Iran. However, there is much excitement on their faces and the impression one might have is their enthusiasm in learning great literature from the West. It is this false impression which is criticized by Dabashi (quoted in DePaul 78). He points out that the original picture was taken from a newspaper which depicted two young students reading results of a major parliamentary election in Iran. He believes the young women are “denied their moral intelligence as well as their participation in the democratic aspirations of their homeland” (ibid). In defense, Nafisi said she had no control over the cover and had done her best to avoid a worse representation of Iranian women. DePaul quotes her as saying that she protested against the publisher’s original idea of portraying a female in a headscarf from the original film *Lolita*, a lollipop resting on her glossy reddened lips (ibid). Whatever it is, Nafisi’s book cover portrays a stereotyped image of Muslim women, always clad in black, eyes cast down.

Kahf subverts this stereotypical projection of Muslim women. Her book is on Muslim and Muslim woman identity. The picture is of a woman (still sad-faced and not smiling) clad in tangerine long scarf. Muslim women are usually denied from wearing clothes with bright colours, in certain conservative Muslim societies. However, the Quran only stresses on dressing modestly and makes no mention of what colour is right or wrong. The Muslim woman on Kahf’s cover also wears a black T-shirt and blue jeans. There is a subtle message of Islam co-existing with modernity. It may not be a happy marriage (as portrayed by the book cover) but the defiant look on the woman tells many stories of subversion, of which we can only speculate.

#### **4. Notions of Home**

Towards the end of her memoir, Nafisi conceives herself as the camera as she stores memories as fresh as the camera would take. Among many things, the memory which becomes the clearest is the veiling of the women. She reveals the tyranny and attempts of the regime in constructing Iranian new identity. It is unfortunate, as argued by Hamid Dabashi (2006) that the female body is used as a “site of political contestation between two modes of ideological fanaticism by Islamists and anti-Islamists alike, one insisting on veiling and the other on unveiling it.” The establishment of the law on compulsory veiling is seen as intruding upon every personal matter of women’s lives, behavior, and appearances. Nafisi attempts to construct the veiling as the mother of all oppressions in Iran. Also all the veiled and unveiled characters show their aversion with its forced nature. Nafisi shows the extent to which the regime is successful in shaping these women’s identity according to the rules coerced by the reigning government:

The government didn’t take long to pass new regulations restricting women’s clothing in public and forcing us to wear either a chador or a long robe and scarf. Experience had proven that the only way these regulations would be heeded was if they were implemented by force. Because of women’s overwhelming objection to the laws, the government enforced the new rule first in the workplaces and later in shops, which were forbidden from transacting with unveiled women. Disobedience was punished by fines,

up to seventy-six lashes and jail terms. Later, the government created the notorious morality squads: four armed men and women in white Toyota patrols, monitoring the streets, ensuring the enforcement of the laws. (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, 167)

While Nafisi apologises that her memory of the sequence of events is disjointed, details of the victimisation of women are coherent and damning. She is preoccupied with the enforcement on veiling that her memoir begins with images of her veiled students. From the beginning of her narrative, the seven women students' presence in the class is explained through portraying their appearance and their personal choice of clothes under the robes. By stressing on the women's ways of dressing, discussions, and opinions about various matters, Nafisi shows that Iranian women cannot be simply imagined as identical. These women may be all similarly garbed in black, yet they have colorful personalities and vibrant outlooks of life.

Nafisi introduces her students to us in a vivid manner, describing each one as having individual differences in terms of religious and ideological beliefs. By paying attention to the clothes her students wear and cosmetics they have at their disposal: Mahshid, veiled and clad in black; Yassi, her scarf knotted loosely under her throat; Azin, robed in kimono-like garment with her pink lipstick, Nafisi shows the heterogeneity of the women. All of the girls have to be covered up modestly but this imposed veiling cannot intrude in their individual beliefs, personalities and characteristics. Although they might all be dressed to make them as blend in with their surroundings, to be unnoticeable, yet they show personal idiosyncracies.

For Nafisi herself, veiling brings back ominous memories. She does not feel at home in the clothes she is forced to wear. She feels as though she is living in fiction, playing games with the authorities. She says that:

My constant obsession with the veil had made me buy a very wide black robe that covered me down to my ankles, with kimono-like sleeves, wide and long. I had gotten into the habit of withdrawing my hands into the sleeves and pretending that I had no hands. Gradually, I pretended that when I wore the robe, my whole body disappeared: my arms, breasts, stomach and legs melted and disappeared and what was left was a piece of cloth the shape of my body that moved here and there, guided by some invisible force. (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, 169)

Clothes are supposed to make one comfortable, but in this case, Nafisi feels alienated by the garments on her body. Words like “withdrawing”, “disappeared”, and “invisible” illuminate instances of annihilating her identity and making irrelevant her existence. Uncannily enough, Nafisi relates the issue of veiling to the feelings of being “unhomed”:

This was when I went around repeating to myself, and to anyone who cared to listen, that people like myself had become irrelevant. This pathological disorder was not limited to me; many others felt they had lost their place in the world. I wrote, rather dramatically, to an American friend: “You ask me what it means to be irrelevant? The feeling is akin to visiting your old house as a wandering ghost with unfinished business. Imagine going back: the structure is familiar, but the door is now metal instead of wood, the walls have been painted a garish pink, the easy chair you loved so much is gone. ...This is your house, and it is not. And you are no longer relevant to this house, to its walls and doors and floors; you are not seen. (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, 169)

Just as her clothes no longer defines who Nafisi is, her home also has been sullied. Traditionally a home is conceptualised as a stable, physical centre of a person's private space, a place where one feels belonged and loved. Yet, both the garment that keeps the body private and the home that keeps one safe no longer protect the individual. It is this loss that Nafisi deeply remembers and laments in her memoir.

Nafisi refers to her grandmother's wearing of the veil as a special pious act which defined her personal relationship with God and which was not political in nature (103). In fact, she says if veiling in the past for its believers was a source of pride, today it has lost its piety and value. If in the past, it

was regarded as the emblem of the believers' value, today it is the metaphor of oppression. Nafisi jeopardises her own career because she refuses to be subjugated. Her expulsion shows the extent of her victimisation. When asked "why were you making such a fuss over a piece of cloth?" Nafisi replies:

...it was not that piece of cloth that I rejected, it was the transformation being imposed upon me that made me look in the mirror and hate the stranger I had become. (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, 165)

Women's lives are filled with tension, fear, and hatred. Nafisi describes the shared tension of women through their surprisingly shared nightmare:

Several months into the class, my girls and I discovered that almost every one of us had had at least one nightmare in some form or another in which we either had forgotten to wear our veil or had not worn it, and always in these dreams the dreamer was running, running away. (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, 46)

The shared nightmares of the characters suggest their daily involvement with the tension of tolerating imposed veils in the society and its rejection inside the house and in the private domain. By evoking these memories, Nafisi is exorcising the ghosts of the past. It is evident that Nafisi's notion of 'home' as she remembers Tehran is focused on her lack of sense of belonging in the "new" Iran and the feelings of other Iranian women in her group. By exploring Western texts, transgressions within the four walls of her home, Nafisi provides an opportunity for her female students to liberate themselves and to allow other perspectives to colour their lives. Her choice of texts, however, has been seen as an attempt to pander to the West, as argued by Hamid Dabashi who accuses her of playing to the Western gallery through her 'selective memory' narrative writing. Dabashi claims that, "The treachery of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is not in just cleansing the Anglo-American history of criminal involvements in Iran and in much of the rest of the colonized world, but to place an innocent and innocuous story as the functional equivalent of that history."

Dabashi openly accuses Nafisi of being a native informer or comprador intellectual to serve the political interests of the United States. He points at her close association with neoconservatives like Bernard Lewis, Eleana Benador and Paul Wolfowitz and it is obvious that Dabashi's real concern is with how knowledge production is weaved in and for the US Empire to validate US imperialism and military expansion as well as justify US domestic and foreign policies. In defense of Nafisi, Amy DePaul in her article "Re-Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran*" (2008) debunks Dabashi's attack on Nafisi by saying that Nafisi's critics have missed much of the points made by Nafisi which all point to giving one woman's story during a troubled period in Iran, providing "a valuable record of the perils of revolutionary zeal and the importance of literature in surviving them." (90). It is after all her story, her perspective. DePaul is not convinced that Nafisi's book is all about her infatuation with western values and civilization and that she does distinguish between "her admiration for democratic ideals expressed by western fiction and mindless worship of western wealth and power." (89)

Dabashi's counter-argument to this is by asking, "Why only Nafisi's narrative is celebrated as a masterpiece but writings by other Iranian women political activists who had suffered and survived heroically under both the Pahlavis and the Islamic Republic remain obscure?" Dabashi mentions women writers like Vida Hajebi Tabrizi, Fariba Marzban, Nazrin Parvaz and Ashraf Dehghan. Why have they been conveniently left out in Nafisi's memoir?

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* will remain controversial but through writing, Nafisi finds comfort in defining what she sees as her home or what is no longer home to her. It is a one woman's account and that space ought to be respected no matter what political inclinations we might have. By writing her story and the stories of other women in Iran, she uses the advantage of her being outside her home state to gain leverage for women who cannot leave their homeland for various reasons. The fact that the slightest sound of a song, or the sight of the trees remind her of land of birth shows the extent to which she cannot completely erase Iran from her subjectivity.

Kahf's novel, to a certain extent, echoes the struggle of early Arab-American immigrants who contested racial categories and fought for inclusion as Americans. Her notion of 'home' is problematised as early as the first sentence on page one of her novel:

"Liar," she says to the highway sign that claims "The People of Indiana Welcome You." (TGTS 1)

Khadra Shamy's early memory of her 'home' in Indiana was the unwelcoming experience shown to her and her family by her white neighbours whose children would throw beer bottles at their door after some street bullying episodes. When Khadra's father went to speak to the children's parents across the street, he would be screamed at with:

" --- ACCUSING MY CHILDREN – OFF MY PORCH – BACK WHERE YOU PEOPLE CAME FROM!" (TGTS 6-7)

And yet, home for the young Khadra also means having another set of kindly neighbours, not afraid to offer the new immigrants miso soup. Ironically, the distrust came from the Shamys because the young couple were both had long hair and both wore lots of necklaces. They could not tell which of them was the woman and which the man (TGTS 7). The complexities of such a cross-cultural encounter are described vividly by Kahf:

"Miso soup for our new neighbours!" one of them said at the door, holding a bowl of something with a potholder under it. If male, he had very cleanshaven soft skin. If female, she had big knuckles and a very flat chest. This unnerved Khadra's mother. If she could be sure it was the woman, she'd invite her in, but if it was the man, she'd stay behind the screen door and be careful not to touch his hand when she took the bowl. What was she supposed to do? In the end, she smile politely and thanked him or her, wondering what on earth was in the soup (TGTS 7)

What is evident from the passage above is the fact that racial prejudice and distrust is not a one-sided affair. If in an earlier episode, it was the Anglo-Americans who are depicted as being prejudiced and distrustful; in this scene, it is the new Arab immigrants who are portrayed feeling the same of the 'other'. This is where Kahf's sense of 'home' differs from Nafisi's. Kahf does not see perfection in any individual or race or class or civilization. She seems to be concerned with trying to understand where and how culture of hate comes from. In the first show of prejudice and hatred against someone different, it seems to stem from inherited belief of white supremacy (passed from parents to children). In the second show of prejudice, the racial barrier seems to stem from a system of belief and in this case, the religious convictions of the Shamys who happen to be Muslims (obviously points raised were Muslim women must not touch men not their husbands, as well as they must only eat 'halal' food). Kahf does not moralise or judge any of the responses to cross-cultural encounters highlighted above but she problematises the concept of multiculturalism. Kahf seems to portray the rich presence of diverse ethnicities in the US as something superficial. People of different race and colour do exist but they exist separately. Kahf's 'home' in the US is one full of complexities and clashes of cultures. As argued by Werner Sollors (1989: xiv), "Assimilation is the foe of ethnicity," which seems to be Kahf's concern. She hints at the tension between the two cultures of the white American culture and the Arab Muslim's, sometimes overtly sympathetic of the 'marginalised' groups (Arab-Muslims in the US in the case of TGTS). This is particularly evident when writing of the death of Zuhura who was found raped and murdered after she went missing for days. Zuhura was the daughter of an Anglo-American devoutly Muslim father and an equally devout Muslim Kenyan-American mother. Zuhura's murder went unsolved. The Muslim community speculated her murder was related to her vocal espousal of Muslim causes on campus (TGTS 95). Writing about this tension is important for Kahf to define or at least understand, the concept of 'home' for people like the Shamys, especially for young Khadra, and Muslims like those affected by Zuhura's murder:

Clearly it was religious bigotry, the Muslims said. Salam Mosque and Dawah people agreed...The *Indianapolis Freeman* – Uncle Jamal brought over a copy – said it was about race, said how could it not be, in light of the Skokie affair and recent are



rumblings from the Klan? It called Zuhura “a young black woman” and didn’t mention that she was Muslim at all. On the other hand, the *Indianapolis Star* pretended like race wasn’t there at all, calling Zuhura a “foreign woman” an “an IU international student,” as if her family didn’t live right there in town. The Indianapolis News article treated it like just some random crime, giving it one tiny paragraph in the back pages. The front-page news was about a march. A photo that showed a group of white women yelling, “Take Back the Night!” (TGTS 95).

The projection of inter-racial tensions in Kahf work is real and would appeal to non-Muslim audience in their zest to understand Muslim culture, Muslim voice, post Sept-11. Sudha Rai (1972), citing Terry Engleton, points out that any work that contains “tensions” (“remembered” and “real”, “integration” and “dispossession”) makes for “great art” (quoted in Rai 2). Kahf’s novel has this ingredient. The question we would like to raise is, if Kahf is not also guilty of exoticising her Muslim culture which seems to be over-exposed everywhere in this book? The book sometimes reads like a handbook on “Understanding Your Muslim Neighbours”. At every nook and corner, there would be a Muslim story - Muslims in Mecca, Muslims in the mosque, and Muslims in the neighbourhood. The book is consciously a book on Muslims in the US. If in the past, Arab-American authors distanced themselves from elements of Arab culture viewed as foreign and less readily assimilable, in order to gain acceptance by white Americans (Majaj 328), Kahf celebrates this foreignness, this non-assimilative culture. However, it is this culture which makes Khadra feel at home, any where, any time. On leaving her home in Indianapolis for the haj trip in Mecca, the tension between leaving something ‘familiar’ and yet ‘not familiar’, for something ‘not familiar’ yet ‘familiar’ is felt in the following passage:

Khadra pasted her face to the airplane window. There was Indianapolis, laid out like patchwork. That splotch to the south had to be Simmonsville, and beyond it the squarish outlines of farms and then – gone, under the clouds. Khadra felt funny. The phrase “leaving home” came into her head. But Indianapolis is not my home, she thought indignantly. Catchphrases from Islamic revival nasheeds flashed in her head – how a true Muslim feels at home wherever the call to prayer is sung, how a true Muslim feels at home wherever the call to prayer is sung, how a true Muslim feels no attachment to one nation or tribe over another. I don’t even care if I never see the Fallen Timbers Complex again, Khadra thought. Over the lump in her throat. (TGTS 157)

Kahf’s portrayal of Khadra’s sense of belonging is there in the last sentence. She does feel sad leaving behind her US home although it is for a temporary period (while the haj season lasts). Khadra is seen to be leaving and returning home on her own terms, asserting her multiplicities as a person and as pointed out by Majaj writing of other Arab-American writers such as Lebanese-American writer Lawrence Joseph, Jordanian-American novelist Diana Abu-Jaber and Egyptian-American writer Pauline Kaldas, Kahf seems to echo their efforts to grapple more “directly with the racialization and politicization of Arab-American experience and to assert their Arab-American identity without apology.” (Majaj 330). If earlier Arab-American writers underwent Fanon’s “three stages’ of colonial writing and its encounter with the colonizers, Kahf by-passes the two stages and explores as well as adapts the third stage:

The first stage is a stage of assimilation when the colonized bewitched by the colonisers’ claim to culture superiority, imitate their literature and grovel for acceptance as cultural equals.

The second stage is a stage when disenchanted with integration into the culture of their contemptuous colonizers, they return to their old cultural roots.

In the third stage, they fashion a new and genuinely national culture, shaped by loyalty to their rediscovered national identity. (Fanon quoted in Rai, 7)

Although Kahf is writing not as an exile, a colonial subject or even a post-colonial subject, her projection of the Shamys, especially Khadra, as living in alienation and in between two conflicting

worlds, echoes those writing of colonial, exile and post-colonial experiences in which some kind of liberation is desired. While in tandem with Rushdie's belief that it is wrong to exclude Western culture altogether in one's attempt to liberate oneself (quoted in Rai 8), Kahf does not agree with tilting to a Western value-system altogether. What she tries to argue for is that Muslims in the West can have a normal life and not only retain their Muslim identity and Islamic belief but also enriches it. This is shown in the last chapter of the book in which Hanifa, a Muslim woman and mother of a thirteen year old daughter, is racing at what is considered by Khadra "a white man's lair" (*TGTS* 438). The question about 'home' and 'identity' is raised again in this scene:

She looks around at the white people, too – the Americans – no, wait, she's American now – the other Americans. Hanifa has a white mechanic in her crew, blond and earnest and solid. Midwesterners – Hoosiers – set in their ways, hardworking, steady, valuing God and family. Suspicious of change. In a funny way, Khadra realizes suddenly, as she surveys the crowd: they're us, and we're them. Hah! My folks are the perfect Hoosiers! (*TGTS* 438)

Kahf in her narratives of Muslims in the US are moving away from projecting Islam as a religion which is patriarchal and oppressive. She sets to show that Islam can be other than what is commonly portrayed or lived by many in other parts of the world. Islam is one but Muslim societies are many. One sees signs of religious struggle for a better world, one which is just and filled with compassion. While some Western feminists call for women to reject world religions and their "processions" since they legitimize patriarchy, Kahf seems to advocate that religion, especially Islam, is compatible with modernity and modern living. A Muslim youth could still marry another based on love match instead of being match-made by the elderly (*TGTS* 430-1). An Imam can still be a graduate of Harvard (or vice versa) and be corrected by an opinionated Muslim woman, who he has no problem marrying and will not try change her personality (*TGTS* 439-41). Hence, Kahf shows that even in a place where Islam is not home, the believers can adapt without compromising the tenets of the religion.

## **5. Conclusion**

The two texts being analysed here speak different circumstances of Muslim women. Nafisi describes the condition of women in Iran while Kahf traverses the globe from America to the Middle East to show the Muslim ummah in various situations which finally show the enlightenment of the female protagonist as she reconciles her own faith amidst the prejudices and distrusts of those around her. Nafisi articulates of the home she has left while Kahf projects her protagonist's misadventures and hopes of the home she now inhabits.

Mohja Kahf portrays a realistic world in her novel. While acknowledging it is not easy for first and second generation migrants to fit in a new place, she is also saying it is not impossible to adapt and integrate without sacrificing one's belief and custom. *TGTS* is a positive book on transnationalism and integration. The US does not need to be a melting pot. A new American is a new hybrid and helps enrich the nation. Nafisi, on the other hand, is adamant that she tells her story and that the world especially a Muslim world, is not homogeneous. She insists that her worldview is respected or at least understood both by her supportive readers and her unforgiving critics. By remembering her home in Iran, Nafisi describes the extent of her loss. Her vivid memory shows that she still feels keenly for her former homeland, that she remains unsettled as she negotiates her presence in her new motherland.

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Abstract Literatures on Muslim women writers living in a new land are scarce and rarely discussed. This paper aims to explore the writings by two Muslim women writers who had to leave their countries for various reasons but "returned home" through their creative work, exemplifying the diasporic notion of being ambivalent and critical of their 'homelands' (and possibly also of their 'hostlands'). By scrutinising the works by Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Mohja Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, we will demonstrate an aspect of unsettling women and p