

Female Subjectivity in Mohja Kafh's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

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Abstract. The feminist movements have echoed the spirit of gender equality in many aspects, politics, education, economic, social, and culture. However, some restrictions of women's freedom in voicing their thoughts still exist. Women have to struggle in both domestic and public domains. Women have limited access in improving their capacities. This is related to the patriarchal system which put women at a disadvantage. Some deep-rooted patriarchal systems include discrimination against women, marginalization of women and subordination of women. These problems lead to women's effort living under patriarchal system. The spirit in achieving gender equality is expressed through the behaviors, attitudes and ways of thinking which is called as female subjectivity. The issue of how female subjectivity plays an important role in responding to the patriarchal system is depicted in many media including fiction and non-fiction. This article is aimed at scrutinizing the problem of female subjectivity in a literary work, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, a novel written by Mohja Kafh. This novel presents the life of a female character struggling in voicing her thoughts and responses to patriarchal system. The complexity of the main female character's life and experience is analyzed through the lens of feminism and subjectivity as well as the socio-cultural context. The spirit of feminism is exposing the unvoiced women's experience. The thoughts of scholars on patriarchy and feminism are the main theories in analyzing the issue of female subjectivity in the novel. In conducting this research, qualitative method is the main method. There are three steps of this method. The first step is focusing on the quotations from the novel showing the issue of female subjectivity. The second step refers to how the selected data is scrutinized through the lens of related theories. The last one is presenting the result based on the objectives of the research. This study reveals two points. First, patriarchy as the cause of main female character's subjectivity. Patriarchy is imposed by her family (parents and husband). Second, the main female character's responses to patriarchy as the forms of her subjectivity. The main female character maximizes her role in demonstrating her subjectivity. The efforts of the main female character in presenting her subjectivity bring about some consequences. In this case, the consequences are related to the main female character's decisions. This article also demonstrates how the main female character shows her struggle in expressing her subjectivity through two ways, resistance and negotiation within the patriarchal system. The ways result in many forms of responses. The female character experiences support as well as challenges from the people around her. The challenges result from the dominance of patriarchy exerted by the family members. In addition, American situation as the contextual background also influence the ways the main female character shows her subjectivity. In this sense, the complexities of the background affect the main female character's subjectivity. From these points, the study argues that the female character shows the dynamic and unfinished formation of female character's subjectivity where the patriarchal system can be challenged.

Keywords: female subjectivity, negotiation, patriarchal system, resistance,

1 Introduction

The spirit in achieving gender equality is aimed at ensuring that both women and men have equal rights and opportunities. However, the issue of gender inequality still exists as the roles of men and women are influenced by culture. As Oakley discussed by Prabasmoro suggests that gender is a psychological and cultural term that is built by social construction in certain community groups so that it is not stable. Therefore, how a man and a woman should behave cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context that surrounds them (1). For example, Western women have a mindset that is not entirely the same as Eastern women due to cultural differences. Likewise, the mindset of Western men will differ to some extent from Eastern men. Moreover, a society that upholds patriarchal values places women in a subordinate position when compared to men.

The patriarchal values can be challenged in order to achieve gender equality through subjectivity. With regards to female subjectivity, some behaviors, attitudes and ways of thinking embraced by the female are the forms of subjectivity. Weedon as discussed by Tsui-Yan states that in feminist context, subjectivity is “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relations to the world” (2). The issue of how female subjectivity plays an important role in responding patriarchal system is depicted in many media including fiction and non-fiction. This article is aimed at scrutinizing female subjectivity in a literary work, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, a novel written by Mohja Kafh.

This novel presents the life of a female character struggling in voicing her thoughts and responses to patriarchal system. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* written by Mohja Kafh, an academic who is engaged in the humanities as a lecturer in comparative literature at the University of Arkansas. Kafh is also known as a poet and writer. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is one of the literary works written by Kafh in addition to the poem *E-mail from Scheherazad* and the non-fiction book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*. Some of her works cover American Muslim themes, identity, culture and gender. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a literary work that received several awards including from Booksense Reading Group Favorite 2007, One Book, Monroe County Public Library, Bloomington, Indiana, 2008, and Bloomington Arts Council (3).

Kafh's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* has been analyzed by many researchers. Hampton analyzes this novel from sociology of religion (4). Her research shows Khadra as a progressive Muslim woman. Ameri's study refers to Said's orientalism and identity of the main female character. She concludes that this novel provides a different view on the image of Muslim woman compared to the Western perspective (5). Marques and Goncalves analyze the relation between hijab and diaspora of the main female character (6) Meanwhile, AlQutami shows that the main female character expresses her feminist resistance. This study is based on third world feminis (7). Handayani also explores the issue of the identity if the main female character as a Muslim immigrant in America. She concludes that Khadra has shown a diasporic identity that she is not only a Muslim woman but also a an immigrant in America (8) Another study conducted by Sulaiman et.al depicts that Khadra does not only preserves her Islamic identity but also build her hybrid identity (9). As the last related study is Handayani's analysis (10). She explains the issue of marginalization in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* through narratology and the concept of marginalization. After presenting the related studies, this research intends to reveal an analysis on female subjectivity of the main female character through the lens of patriarchy, feminist theories and the socio-contextual background.

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf presents a story about a main female character, Khadra, who spends her life since childhood in America. (11) Coming from Syria, Khadra experiences many challenges in her life due to her background as a woman and a Muslim in America. The patriarchal values patronize her life. However, she struggles to question the patriarchy by expressing her thoughts and behaviors. Therefore, this study will reveal her subjectivity.

Generally, this study is aimed at enriching feminist analysis of The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf novel. Specifically, this study is aimed to analyze the issue of subjectivity of the novel's main female character. This study is going to elaborate patriarchy as the cause of female subjectivity and how main female character responds to patriarchy by showing her subjectivity. By considering the context, this study will also explore how socio-cultural context influence the issue of patriarchy and the main female character's subjectivity.

2 Methodology

The main method of this research is qualitative method. Babbie states that qualitative research is a scientific method of observation to gather non-numeral data. In addition, a qualitative research focuses on the definitions, the description as well as the characteristics of things. (12) There are three steps in conducting this study: collecting data, analyzing data and presenting the results. The first method is the step by focusing on the quotations from the novel showing the issue of female subjectivity. The second step refers to how the selected data is scrutinized through the lens of related theories. In this case, I present various related thoughts from scholars who have discussed and proposed theory of patriarchy as well as feminism. In presenting the results of the analysis, I classify the analysis based on the issue the objectives of the research. First, I present the forms of patriarchy as the cause of main female character's subjectivity. Then, I present the forms of main female character's subjectivity.

The complexity of the main female character's life and experience is analyzed through the lens of feminism. However, in this subchapter, I will also provide explanations regarding patriarchy and subjectivity. Sylvia Walby argues that patriarchy is "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women (13). Patriarchy is an attempt to perpetuate the power of men and marginalize women. Ironically, Delphy in Stacey states that patriarchy is considered as "common, specific and primary oppression of women" (14). This assumption illustrates the strong dominance of patriarchy in regulating women's space. The power of patriarchy is accepted in society so that women are not aware of the patriarchal values that oppress them. This is in line with what was underlined by Kate Millet that "patriarchal ideology is so ubiquitous, and its power is so great that women often unknowingly consent to their own oppression" (15)

Patriarchy is related to how culture has defined man and woman. In this sense, culture shapes gender identity. Helene Cixous, a French feminist, proposes patriarchal binary thoughts that differ man and woman. The binary oppositions like head/heart, father/mother, and activity/passivity represent a hierarchical position where men is the superior whereas women is the inferior (15). Beasley states that gender results in hierarchies that privilege or devalue one sexed identity (16). When the privilege is embraced by men, women will struggle for their rights. This triggers feminist movement. Beasley moreover states that feminism regards women as the marginalized. In other words, feminist movement highlights gender equality where women have voices too in expressing their thoughts, behaviors and way of thinking. This is called as female subjectivity.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Patriarchy in Family

The *Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* presents Khadra, the main female character raised in a Muslim family. For Khadra's family, her father plays an important role in shaping her attitudes as a Muslim. As a preacher, Khadra's father teaches his family to be a real Muslim. His family has to preserve Islamic teachings where there are borderlines between them and the Americans (11). This way of thinking inevitably internalized in Khadra's life. Khadra has strict religious views on being a Muslim (11).

The novel also shows how her mother dominates her life. The patriarchy operates in disadvantaging women. Not only her father but also her mother instills the patriarchal values. Khadra is expected to marry a man chosen by her parents. The narrative describes that the man (his name is Juma) comes from a family background with a good reputation (11). Juma's background as a male of Arab descent is an indication that Shamy's family maintains the tradition of choosing who is worthy of being his daughter's life partner. Thus, racial background is an important aspect in shaping the identity of the Shamy family. Handayani claims that Khadra is positioned as the marginalized as she has no power to resist (10).

Patriarchy is continuously imposed by Khadra's husband. Khadra is forbidden to ride a bike by her husband because she is a woman. Juma is described as exercising restraint on Khadra and saying that his actions are also culturally based because "custom is important" (11) or "culture is important." That is, Juma was educated in a culture that upholds patriarchy. Al-Mutawah states that in Arab society, the role of family and school is very important in teaching values related to women's dependence on men. Therefore, women are educated to be good wives at school.

However, this does not apply to Arab men who are not obliged to learn how to be a good husband (17). Juma is a man of Arab descent who, even though he has settled in America, has perpetuated the culture that developed in the Arab community. As confirmed in the text, "It's always my business what anyone wants from you. You are my wife" (11). Therefore, Juma's position is that Arab men are protectors of Arab women. The dominance of her husband continues when she has to follow his idea to move to Kuwait for pursuing his study. Again, Khadra faces marginalization as she has no opportunities to make her dream come true by continuing her study in America (10).

From the explanations above, some discrimination faced by Khadra happens because she is a woman. The existence of woman in society is considered as an entity that is juxtaposed with men. As stated by Beauvoir that "...man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man" and that "...she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her ; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential". Beauvoir's statement indicates the denial of the existence of women. In other words, women are associated with inferior, subordinate and marginal traits. The attributes attached to women encourage oppression of women by men. Oppression limits the movement of women to get their rights (16).

3.2 Breaking Female Stereotypes: Female Subjectivity through Being Active and Progressive Individual

Patriarchy has created female stereotypes like passive and inferior. The *Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* shows how the main female character challenges the stereotypes. Khadra expresses her way of thinking towards patriarchy through several actions. When she is forbidden to ride a bike by her husband, Khadra responded by saying "Show me where in the quran it says

women can't ride bikes in public." (11). Khadra rejects Juma's views regarding Islamic teachings. This is shown by the attitude of Khadra's character who disobeys Juma even though he has to bear the consequences, namely Juma's anger: "Whenever she biked after that, Juma would get in his black car and roar off. Not tell her he was going." (11). Khadra raises a non-essential identity that is contrary to the essential identity presented through Juma's perspective regarding Muslim women who wear hijabs who are not supposed to be cycling.

Khadra experienced various restraints that pushed her to do things that her family opposed. Khadra had the courage to go against what was taught in her family both through her parents and her husband. In this case, Khadra does not consider patriarchal values as something that is taken for granted. First, Khadra decided to have an abortion because Khadra felt she was not ready to have children in the midst of the conflict between her and Juma. Khadra feels that she has the right to determine her future, including whether she will maintain her pregnancy or not despite facing challenges from her parents (11). Family conflicts put Khadra in a difficult situation. Khadra is described as follows: "I don't think I can stay with Juma without changing who I am. Who I essentially deep-down am." (11)? Khadra is described having an abortion. Her decision reflects that she the authority of her own body. This way is in line with what ...has stated that women have to be autonomous with their own body (18).

Moreover, Khadra then opposes patriarchal domination by refusing to defend her marriage. Khadra is described as daring to take a solemn step, namely filing a divorce suit initiated by his wife. This is considered unusual for her family. Khadra's courage to reject patriarchal domination shows that as a second generation of immigrants, Khadra does not necessarily accept and continue the culture related to the homeland. According to AlQutami, Khadra's attitude indicates a feminist resistance where she dares to break the norms that place Muslim women in an inferior and subordinate position compared to Muslim men (7).

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf also presents an issue of progressivity of the main female character's way of thinking. As discussed earlier, Khadra has been raised in a strict Muslim family. However, the novel voices Khadra's dynamic view of Islam which is correlated with the construction of Khadra's identity as seen from Khadra's meeting with several people. Firstly, when she meets Tayyiba, her friend since her childhood. They talk about their view on being a Muslim:

"Well, why are you Muslim if anything else is just as good."

Khadra thinks for a minute. "Love," she says slowly. "love and attachment.

"But you think someone else can pray another way and find a path to God?" Tayyiba counters. "Absolutely."

"Well, why do you feel like you're a Muslim when everyone else is just as good as a Muslim? Khadra thought for a moment. "Love," she said quietly. "love and closeness.

"But do you think one can worship in another way and find his way to God?" Tayyiba insisted.

"Of course."

Khadra's openness to the disparity of views about being a Muslim shows progressivity. The change in Khadra's perspective on Muslims and non-Muslims that she displayed when she meets Tayyiba indicates Khadra as a second generation of American Muslims who did not necessarily accept the dominant culture but also did not perceive the Muslim community as a better group. Khadra went through the process of being and becoming alternately in the formation of her identity so that she became an American Muslim immigrant (8). As the following text illustrates: "She looks around at the white people, too-the Americans-no wait, she's American now-the other Americans."(11) " Khadra no longer sees herself as separate from America because she is part of the other Americans. In other words, there is no difference

between herself as a Muslim immigrant from Syria and America as the country where she lives because "they're us, and we're them" (11). Therefore, Khadra who grew up in a pluralistic country experiences dynamic perspective about herself, religion, and culture related to her homeland (5), (8), (9).

Another progressive view is shown in terms of the change of Khadra's response towards her friend's view on relationship with followers of other religions. Her friend, Seemi, states that her family is "totally open-minded about people from other religions" (11). Initially, Khadra shows her objection. However, Khadra changes her the way she views on her friend's opinion after she meets some people who changes her thoughts on being a Muslim. She chooses to remain friends with Seemi even after Khadra finds out that Seemi practices sex outside of marriage. Khadra has her own opinion on Seemi's behavior.

However, the assessment is not judgmental of Seemi as someone who behaves negatively. Although Khadra was educated by her parents to keep her distance from men, Khadra does not judge Seemi's actions in black and white as seen from her view: "I just don't believe in it for me. I don't presume to know you and the path you are on and where this act falls in your relationship with God and the universe." In other words, Khadra places herself as a person who is open to someone's perspective on things that are different from her.

The explanation above presents Khadra as a representation of American Muslims who instead of being confined to a narrow view, Khadra is transformed into what Hampton states as a progressive (4). The transformation of Khadra's mindset about Islam emphasizes that a person's identity is unstable because it is always a process. As the text shows Khadra as a Muslim figure who experiences the dynamics of the perspective of Muslims who view differences and progressivity.

3.3 Expressing Subjectivity: Hijab, Travel, and Identity

Another issue that also presents in the narrative is how journey regarded as an important part of expressing subjectivity and identity. Khadra's decision to divorce triggered Khadra's desire to travel to Syria. In Syria, Khadra met an anonymous poet (The Poet) who also helped change Khadra's perspective on the essence of individual religion. The poet brought change in Khadra. The poet was surprised by Khadra's attitude by questioning everything with religion. "Why do you spend so much time worrying about what God thinks of you?" It's the other way around, you know. God is what you think of God, you know." "You still think of God as some Big Parent in the Sky, don't you?, he demanded. "But then what? Without that, I'm lost. "Your veil is very revealing, you know." "Oh, but veiling is important, definitely" "You woman-body is loved by God, good and pure. Veiled or not veiled," he said (11).

Both Poet and Khadra convey their views on belief in God as well as hijab. Khadra experienced an identity crisis. Khadra began to think about the meaning of religion and hijab for her. Khadra is then described as experiencing an incident where she accidentally allowed herself to no longer wear the hijab. At that time, Khadra realized that veiling and unveiling are part of the same process." (11). However, Khadra finally realizes that the hijab was an important part of her life (11). Especially when she learns from her aunt how her mother struggles to wear the hijab because it was banned by the Syrian government. Therefore, Khadra decides to continue wearing her hijab.

Another event showing Khadra's subjectivity is described through negotiation. When Khadra returned to America after traveling to Syria, she continues to wear the hijab. However, Khadra decides to wear an orange or tangerine hijab. This is different from the situation in Indiana where Khadra always wears a dark hijab. Khadra's dark hijab is the symbol of her resistance toward American government's policy regarding the Middle East crisis. Khadra

decides to choose orange or tangerine as a new look of herself. In other words, the bright tangerine color symbolizes the 'new' figure of Khadra. In addition, Khadra with the "new self" is not only represented by the change in the color of her hijab but also through the trip to Syria that she did. This is in accordance with what was articulated by Pearce and Stacey as discussed by Priyatna that travel is a symbol of the transformation of the old self into a new self. Khadra's mindset is dynamic (19). Khadra with the "old self" is Khadra with a narrow view of the meaning of religion and hijab in her life which is only a ritual. Meanwhile, Khadra with the "new self" is Khadra who has the perception that worship including the use of the hijab must be based on personal awareness and without coercion. The process of discovering the "new self" continues when Khadra decides to return to America.

Khadra decides to choose Philadelphia as her destination. The reason why she chooses this city as she regards Philadelphia as "a big city where she knew no one. There, she'd make it on her own, carve out a life that would manifest gratitude and modesty and love" (11). Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own* states that women need a place to design their lives beyond patriarchal atmosphere (2). For Khadra, Philadelphia is a 'room' where she is free from her family's intervention as what she experienced in Indiana. She starts making friends from different religious backgrounds and respect their perspective on Muslim woman. In other words, Khadra constructs her subjectivity.

Khadra's subjectivity continues when she refuses to take off her hijab when she is in a crowd. This forces her friend Seemi to remind her to take off her hijab because of the Middle East crisis that fueled American hatred to Muslims. Political events that occur in America have an impact on the lives of American Muslims, including the conflict in the Middle East region. However, Khadra has a different view regarding the use of her hijab. For Khadra's character, the hijab is something valuable, not just clothes: "It's my connector. It makes me feel connected to the people in my family, my mosque, where I come from. My heritage." (11). Bullock explains that there are several reasons related to the use of the hijab, namely as a form of revolutionary protest, as a political protest, for religious reasons, as access to the public sphere, as a personal identity, part of culture, and as a government regulation. The use of hijab as part of government regulations means that the government requires female citizens to wear the hijab (20).

This statement is in line with Rahayu's research on hijab and the certain context. She elaborates her views on hijab in the Indonesian context. According to Rahayu, wearing the hijab in Indonesia has gone through various changes over time. In the 1980s, the Indonesian government banned the wearing of headscarves for students. However, over time, the use of the hijab became commonplace in almost all corners of Indonesia. This makes the hijab as part of popular culture that forms a hybrid identity for the wearer because it negotiates with the local culture (21). Thus, it can be concluded that the hijab issue cannot be separated from the social context.

Bullock moreover explains that the use of the hijab as a form of revolutionary protest can be seen from the protests against the government forbidding the use of the hijab. Hijab as a protest is political, meaning a protest against Western discourse that prohibits the hijab. The use of hijab as a religious teaching is an effort to obey the teachings of Islam. Meanwhile, the hijab can be used as an access that makes it easier for someone to take part in various arenas, including getting a job. Hijab as a personal and cultural identity means that the use of the hijab is on its own initiative and the hijab is a hereditary heritage so it must be preserved (20).

The *Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* shows Khadra's dynamic identity in relation to hijab. Her decision to maintain her hijab shows that the hijab represents historical value for her as the hijab is associated with her heritage. She insists not to take off her hijab as she preserves her identity

as a Muslim woman although the political situation in America is not safe for her. As Marques and Gonzalves states that *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a narrative about the subjectivity of the main character Khadra as an American diaspora Muslim woman who feels proud of her religious symbol (in this case, hijab) as her identity (6) . In other words, Khadra's subjectivity is associated with her own fashion style.

4 Conclusion

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf is a novel that voices how female character can be a feminist agent through her subjectivity. Khadra, as the main female character, demonstrates a feminist spirit in responding to patriarchal culture. The efforts can be seen from her resistance and negotiations in questioning patriarchy. She creates her own 'room' and has the authority of her own life and her own body. Her ways of thinking, behaviors and thoughts are her forms of subjectivity that always be in an unfinished process due to her identity. Khadra is not only a woman but she is also a Muslim woman living in a diverse atmosphere.

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