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The Interpellated Subject and the Lure of Hybridity in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

Sahbia Mouaddeb
(University of Sfax)

Abstract

This article relies on Louis Althusser's theory of "interpellation" to critically address the way Homi Bhabha's notion of hybrid identity is predominantly approached as a viable model for appropriation by Arab-American writers. The study specifically examines the viability of hybridity as a mode of self-expression and self-representation for Muslim Arab-Americans. In her novel The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf (2006), the Syrian-American writer Mohja Khaf exposes the danger of responding to the call for "hybridity." In fact, to venture into the "interstitial" space means to expose oneself to the threats of "interpellation" and containment. Althusser's explanation of the workings of ideology through his concepts of "interpellation" and "Ideological State Apparatuses" allows for the critical examination of the process of hybridization. Indeed, the analysis shows that what appears as a celebratory endorsement of an agential "hybridity" could be read as the result of a process of "interpellation" through which Khadra, the protagonist, is encouraged to endorse a specific mode of identification. Alternating between subjectivity and subjection, Khadra experiences "hybridity" as a source of anxiety and loss. In this narrative, the author invalidates "hybridity" as it grants an illusory sense of subjectivity while it promotes subjection and containment.

Keywords: *Muslim Arab-Americans; hybridity; interpellation; subjected subject*

Introduction

Given the growing animosity towards Arabs and Muslims after 9/11, Arab-American writers were in need of an anti-essentialist mode of self-definition, a mode of writing that enables the expression of alterity and precludes classification as fundamentalist, exclusive, and regressive. Therefore, many of these writers attempted self-expression through hybridity, a model of identity that is predominantly celebrated in contemporary post-colonial and diasporic studies as a means of resistance to categorization and binarism. In his introduction to the anthology *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry* (2008), Hayan Charara contends that "the space occupied by many Arab Americans is a "Third Space," one that is here and there, as well as neither here nor there" (xxv). Deeming hybridity as inexorably agential has

prevented the readers and critics of Mohja Kahf's novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) from recognizing the sense of unease and anxiety that this mode of identification creates in the narrative. In fact, most of them conceive of the protagonist's experience as a linear, progressive journey from an identity with essentialist features to a more complex one defined by agency and self-fulfillment. Indeed, critics seem to agree that the debilitating and crippling nature of "essentialism" has activated the main character's quest for a more empowering and self-fulfilling identity that aligns completely with Homi Bhabha's "hybridity" (Borhan and Anushiravani; Hasabelnabi 17). The shifting, complex, and fluid identity is most often depicted as an ultimate aim, a longed-for and uplifting state. This is revealed in the way critics approach Khadra's fluid identity as a resistive and subversive tool against the Western stereotypes and the patriarchal practices (Ouhiba 33; Abdullah 262). These readings, however, do not account for the protagonist's anxiety about her hybridity, an anxiety that culminated in suicidal thoughts.

A number of scenes in the novel, notably the identity crisis scene, seem to interrogate and problematize hybridity rather than celebrate it. Drawing on Louis Althusser's concepts of "interpellation" and "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISAs), this article argues that Khadra's hybridity is achieved through "interpellation", resulting, as such, in a subjected subject that does not meet the expectations of its author for an in-between space devoid of domination and containment. This study's theoretical framework foregrounds the subtle similarities between the workings of ideology in Althusserian terms and the dynamics of self-representation through hybridity. The analytical framework examines how the protagonist is interpellated by media and education to endorse a hybrid identity that reinforces Western cultural values. The analysis also brings to the fore the losses engendered by the process of hybridization as Khadra ends up losing the capacity for self-definition and self-representation. Khadra's journey into the self is not a matter of resisting misrepresentations, as it problematizes the possibility that hybridity could grant Muslim Arab-Americans agency and subjectivity. In a sense, it addresses the question of whether the protagonist is free to choose, endorse, and seek the mode of identity she aspires to.

1. Containment through Interpellation and Hybridity:

Louis Althusser's analysis of the mechanism whereby the state ensures the subjection of its citizens would help explain how minority groups in America are constructed as conforming subjects. According to Althusser, the state maintains its power not only violently but also subtly through "Ideological State Apparatuses", which have different forms. They are educational, like schools; communicational, like the press and television; and cultural, like literature and the arts (54-55). Through such mediums, ideology "hails" or "interpellates" "concrete individuals" as free and autonomous subjects (58). It shapes their identities and aspirations according to the mold the State has constructed for its conforming subjects. These "concrete subjects" conceive of themselves as free while they are subjected to the very system/ideology that seems to grant them this "free subjectivity" (60-61). The deceptive nature of ideology is underscored by Peter Barry's definition of "interpellation" as "the 'trick' whereby we are made to feel that we are choosing when really we have no choice" (165).

Althusser's conception of the constructedness of the subject suggests that "interpellation" serves to contain the otherness and specificity of the "concrete individual." In fact, to illustrate his ideas, the Marxist theorist uses the specific example of a police officer shouting "Hey, you there!" (Althusser 118). Those who respond to the call are immediately established as "concrete subjects" (118). This example shows that the individual is lured into occupying the double position of a subjected subject because the police officer's "hail" could be interpreted as a promise of acknowledgement and recognition by the political authority. To respond to the call means to lose the specificity that distinguishes the individual from the conforming subjects. Thus, it seems that the basic difference between the "concrete individual" and the "concrete subject" is that the latter's alterity is contained by an illusory sense of agency and subjectivity, while the individual remains a free agent as long as they do not respond to the call. The mechanism of "interpellation" would enable us to investigate how Khadra's individuality/alterity is contained as she adopts, through education and media, a model of identity more congruent with the expectations of American society.

Because this study examines the validity of "hybridity" as a mode of self-representation for Khadra, it is important to address the appeal of this notion and its pitfalls. Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" is widely recognized and highly praised in post-colonial and subaltern studies. The appeal of the term lies in the way it is established as a means of resistance to domination and binary thought. Bhabha suggests that identity-formation should be the outcome of an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications [which] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). According to him, the process of cultural "interaction" and "negotiation" "prevents identities […] from settling into primordial polarities" (4). This implies that the in-between, "interstitial" space in which hybrid identities are constructed is a decentered/decentering space that prevents the possibility of return to an original core self. In this sense, this anti-essentialist mode of identity provides a counter-discourse to exclusive, binary thought. It promises integration without domination.

Although the "interstitial" space is an alluring space, its deconstruction of the essential self could be disadvantageous to minority groups longing to express and celebrate their alterity and otherness. In fact, this model of identity is more about conflation and compatibility than about difference and specificity. It seems to submerge the markers of alterity by promoting sameness. This is evident in the way Ian Baucom prompts diaspora writers to endorse the model of hybrid identity to produce a "common narrative" and "a set of differentiated reproductions of the common thing" (qtd. in Prahbu 7). Therefore, it is possible to argue that the concept of hybridity can be appropriated by the ideological "ISAs" of the dominant system to prevent alternative self-narratives. In this regard, Ania Loomba's interpretation of Abdul Jan Mohamad's criticism of hybridity is relevant. She notes that "far from allowing the native to interrogate or seize power, hybridity may itself be a colonial strategy for repression" (171). In the narrative, the American educational system interpellates the protagonist to become a hybrid Muslim, and the process of hybridization reinforces the Western paradigms of thought.

Reading the much celebrated concept of "hybridity" through "interpellation" would allow us to reinvestigate and rethink the

mechanisms and the factors that intervene in shaping the protagonist's identity. These theoretical tools would bring to the fore a critical stance debilitated by the readers' valorization of hybridity. In fact, Kahf deploys a number of narrative strategies in a way that urges the reader to distrust the agency and subjectivity assigned to a seemingly willful and outspoken character. The protagonist's transformation from a "concrete individual" to a "concrete subject" points to the fact that her hybridity is the result of "interpellation." This reading of Khadra's journey of self-development in terms of interpellation exposes her self-delusion about her agency and subjectivity.

2. Responding to the call for hybridity

The novel introduces the reader to a form of essentialist identity that is also non-exclusive. Indeed, its protagonist was raised in a conservative Muslim community whose members intend "to live by Shariah while being good citizens" (Kahf 235). In this sense, they are practicing Muslims with a desire for integration that does not entail self-loss or assimilation. This meaning is reinforced by revealing most of the characters who belong to this community as tied to the "Dawah Center", which aims to explain the Islamic faith and practice to both Muslims and non-Muslims on the basis of authentic Islamic scholarship. The integrationist but essentialist mindset seems to be also a characteristic of Khadra as revealed in her admiration and advocacy of the way the community members interact with others. For instance, she most often records and emphasizes her father's balanced views about the other, like his "citizenship khutba" in which he says:

> Brothers, do not for a minute think that we will stop protesting against the immoral and unfair policies of America outside, in the Muslim world. […]. But let's face it: here inside America, there are many good qualities. Law and order, cleanliness, […] freedom to work and honestly seek the provision of God. […] These are Islamic qualities. America […] is like Islam without Muslims. And our sick and corrupt Muslim home countries […] are Muslims without Islam. (144)

This shows an objective perception of the other that is not exclusive, denigrating, or self-alienating. However, Khadra would undergo a process of hybridization marked by the loss of this "concrete"

individuality. Indeed, she would ultimately lose the specific otherness that ties her to origin and allows culture and religion to play a significant role in forging her diasporic identity.

Contrary to the common reading of Khadra's progressive journey towards an uplifting state of hybridity and free subjectivity (Borhan and Anushiravani; Hasabelnabi 17), I argue that Khadra's hybridity is the result of a process of "interpellation" throughout which she is "hailed" to "make the gestures and actions of … [her] subjection 'all by … [herself]' " (Althusser 60). Khadra's "concrete" individuality was threatened the moment she felt a sense of affinity with one of the female protagonists in *Charlie's Angels* (1976-1681), a television series in which three attractive women work as private investigators for a detective agency run by an unknown man (Mann 343). The possessive form in the title reveals that these women's agency is, in fact, contained. Hence, the protagonist is drawn into a representational reality in which women are granted both agency and subjection. The narrator tells us that the show was very remote from Khadra's world experience, but its attraction was inescapable:

> Charlie's Angels was not appropriate viewing for Muslims even though Khadra watched it on the sly at Hanifa's. Khadra liked Sabrina best because she never wore bikinis but dressed modestly, and was serious and smart and respected herself. Sabrina was almost the Muslim Charlie's Angel" (Kahf 84).

Here, Khadra "subconsciously connect[s] the characters in the show with her Muslim background" (Hasebelnaby 17). In spite of the fact that the show is incongruent with her religious and cultural precepts, Khadra is able to see or, rather, imagine similarities between the Muslim woman and the American actress. This culminates in creating a parallel reality where Charlie is provided with a Muslim "angel," which is ironic as "the angels" originally serve as "sex symbols" to be displayed for the Western male gaze (Pike 121). Charlie's Muslim Angel is derived from the imagined conflation of the Islamic manners of modesty and decency with Western representations of women. It is an imagined conflation because it is predicated on a subordinating process whereby the Western cultural sign is extended at the expense of the essentialist identity whose otherness is appropriated to provide Charlie with a Muslim angel.

Khadra is lured to inhabit a space where the cultural sign loses its referential capacity and grounding function as it is modified in a way that reinforces the dominant culture. In one of the community's weddings, the protagonist's mother Ebtihaj "seat[s] her [daughter] at her own dresser mirror," and fills the rims of her eyes with "kohl" which "came in a brass vial […] a gift from her mother" (Kahf 79). The focus on such a specific practice seems to imply that the narrative would open a space for the full expression and celebration of cultural heritage, especially that using "kohl" is framed through the context of a mother-daughter bonding, a bonding that enables the diasporic subject to reconnect with the culture of the motherland. Similarly, standing in front of the mirror, Khadra is offered an opportunity for better self-observation. She is allowed to examine her own reflection away from the imported images that may stand between her and her individual subjectivity. Contrary to these expectations, her self-reflection with "kohl" evokes the hostland culture. Indeed, she fancies that her image reflects "a magical creature, something from the stars, a Princess Leia" (79). "Kohl" here loses its grounding function as it refers to the femaleness and femininity underscored by the Western female creation "Princess Leia." It is no longer a sign of Arabness, a practice performed by both men and women. That the protagonist sees a Western creation instead of herself is significant. It means her hybrid consciousness entails self-loss.

Another moment of interpellation occurs when Khadra is attending the German professor's course in Islamic studies. Khadra is invited to occupy the subject position of a Sufi-Muslim, a category that requires her to revise her self-perception through Western paradigms of representation. In fact, the professor deploys the concept of Sufism to promote an understanding of Islam, cryptically based on a Western logic that separates the personal from the public and faith from rituals/performance. She states, "[t]hose who stressed reason produced Islamic theology. Those who stressed Revelation and hadith produced jurisprudence—the great body of Islamic legal scholarship, or fiqh. Those who stressed seeking a direct personal relationship with God were the Sufis" (Kahf 232). Here, a rift is instantly established between the socio-political aspect of Khadra's religious identity and the spiritual/internal experience. In addition, by means of this definition, the Sufis are raised above those who

teach Islamic jurisprudence and theology since the Sufis' teachings are considered to enable a closer connection to God. This separation between the socio-political and the personal, as well as this emphasis on the personal and emotional religious experience, evoke Western secularism, which assigns religion to the private sphere. The individualistic urge in Sufism further highlights its compatibility with Western values. Indeed, it has its own ways of reading the Quran and "hadith," ways that swerve from the interpretations provided by authoritative Muslim scholars (232). It creates "other methods" like mantras, concerts, and ceremonies "to develop personal knowledge of God" (233). Therefore, the class of Islamic studies perpetuates the idea that faith increases through deviation from conventional teachings. This, Khadra can find "bizarre" because it is predicated on the conviction that rules are *binding* and *debilitating* (233), a mental framework that is unfit to approach the sense of fulfilment a practicing Muslim feels when abiding by Islamic rules. Khadra insists that her teacher's configuration of Islamic spiritual fulfilment "is *not* Islam" because "the only way to know God is to obey his law" (232). With the professor's emphasis on such notions as "retreat," "personal insight," and "the self-examining self," Khadra can recognize the individualistic tendency in her teachings (233-232). She interrupts the lesson, saying, "Isn't all this attention to the self selfish? Isn't it just a lot of Western individualism?" (235). At this stage, Khadra can resist a mental framework that is remarkably at odds with what the Muslim community teaches.

It is only when Sufism is made to appear inherent to Islam that Khadra becomes prone to interpellation. The professor uses the metaphorical meaning in certain Quranic verses in a literal way to give credibility to what Khadra deems "ridiculous" Sufi practice (233). For the first time, the protagonist learns that the Sufi dance, which is called "turning", corresponds to the Quranic verse "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (233). At that moment, "what she'd always thought was right appeared wrong, and what she'd always known was bad seemed […] good" (234). The narrator tells us this sudden realization "was terrifying" (234). It is terrifying because it means Khadra starts responding to the call to redefine herself through Western teachings, to reread her religious identity through the Western logic that relegates religion to the private sphere

and severs the tight connection between faith and performance/practice. Indeed, as Khadra accepts Sufism as part of Islam, she comes to develop a very individualistic perception of faith predicated on "personal insight" rather than on fundamental Islamic teachings. Through the Sufi experience of "kashf," which means revelation or the "unveiling of light," as the main character defines it, she can see "veiling and unveiling […] [as] part[s] of the same process, the same cycle" (309). "She embraced them both" because "both are necessary" (312-309). She explains that when her scarf slipped down, she suddenly did not feel the urge to set it back on her head (309). She simply "closed her eyes and let the sun […] warm her body […]. The sunlight on her head was a gift from God. Gratitude filled her" (309). That is to say, unveiling is an expression of "gratitude" and faith. This is a new version of Khadra to whom swerving from the rules of "shariah" is no longer problematic. From this moment on, she will see "cover[ing]" and "uncover[ing]" as two modes expressive of faith (312). Therefore, Khadra's transformation into a Sufi Muslim denotes succumbing to the Western teachings that aim to rework and reform the Islamic identity of the diasporic subject through secularism and individualism.

3. Authorial dissatisfaction and the disavowal of the hybrid subject

After hybridization comes the test of whether hybridity can really serve as a viable means of self-representation for the Arab diasporic subject. The real test for Khadra is when she gets a proposal from a practicing Muslim who represents a real match to the former version of her as a woman with an identity forged by Islamic teachings. Analyzing the main character's interaction with Jumua is important as it reveals how the seemingly all-inclusive and non-hierarchical position of the hybrid subject is paradoxically predicated on the dilution of Khadra's assertive individuality. The protagonist accepts Jumua's proposal because he is "a good Muslim […] a practicing Muslim […] and an active student in CMC, [Campus Muslim Council] and he's intelligent, and a decent person" (Kahf, 208). She insists that her dowry should be "a long sura of the Quran" memorized by her future husband (207). Jumua's jealousy and protectiveness, revealed in his objection to his wife's act of riding a bike because it is "unIslamic. It displays … [her] body" (228), unexpectedly provokes Khadra to shape-shift into a feminist who

thinks that "seeking knowledge was more important than traditional feminine tasks" like preparing dinner for a hungry husband (241). To his surprise, Jumua discovers that his wife could decisively and unreluctantly initiate divorce and get an abortion. Many critics have sought to justify the protagonist's shocking decision by representing Jumua as a "rigid," "narrow-minded" Muslim patriarch who could not tolerate his wife's hybridity (Hasabelnaby 26), while others consider that the author is endowed with the mission of asserting the possibility of a "Muslim feminist agency" which requires creating "an independent, self-defined Muslim American woman" (Koegler 9). What seems to underlie these readings is the presupposition that Khadra inhabits or heads towards a hybrid space that is devoid of an "assumed or imposed hierarchy" between cultures (Bhabha 1994, 4), which enables her to defy binarism, fixity, and categorization. However, readers do not witness the main character's transition to a space of cultural negotiation, conflation, and equity, for the narrative highlights, instead, her imprisonment within a binary space marked by the resurgence of the host-land culture and the suppression of Khadra's "concrete individuality", underscored by the notions of death, loss, and abortion.

The author skillfully demonstrates how the "interpellated" protagonist entertains an illusory sense of autonomy and subjectivity. On aborting Jumua's child, Khadra thinks she is reborn as an "imagine", that is, "the adult instar--the mature bug" (Kahf, 250). This strange analogy emphasizes the meaning of maturity and the idea of the final stage of development. It seems that the protagonist tries to convince herself that she is on the verge of a positive transformation. Indeed, the abortive act acquires a positive connotation as a necessary stage in self-development since it is enacted against her family and husband's will and, therefore, reflects her autonomy. Khadra's acts seem to emanate from an egotistical vision of the self, which is manifested in her assertion that "[i]t's in how I act, how I move, what I choose, every minute" (312). Such a free subjectivity is questioned and even ridiculed by the author, who relates her female character's obsession with abortion to a state of delirium: "She had this exaggerated idea about abortions, as Khadra must be on morphine or something" (250). Similarly, Khaf discards any possibility of perceiving Khadra as an assertive Muslim woman by making her occupy a Eurocentric subject position in relation to

her practicing Muslim husband. The protagonist persuades him to read Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and most often refers to him as "my man Friday" (223), as her own possession. Taking up the leading role, the protagonist sends her husband to the peripheral position of the acted-upon object. Indeed, she is the one who decides on abortion and initiates divorce.

Khadra realizes that her autonomy is unreal. Suffocated by her unfree subjectivity, she laments the loss of the assertive individual she used to be. With astonishment, she realizes that she is not in command of her actions: "It took her by surprise the sudden revulsion she felt for everything. For her whole life up till now. She wanted to abort the Dawah Center and its entire community" (Kahf 261-262). This implies she has a perception of self-development and growth (to be an "imagine") in terms of addition and not deletion; that whatever is added to her personality would complete her and not compete with her individual subjectivity. The regretful retrospection of her life with Jumua asserts the fact that she cannot sustain a life that disconnects her from all reference (264-265). Without her husband and community, she feels "empty," "unmoored, safety net gone, and nothing to anchor" her (265). Hence, to inhabit the in-between by endorsing a fluid, hybrid identity is unsafe and insecure. Hybridity proves being deleterious and suppressive since, in Khadra's case, it results in losing what used to anchor her on a solid ground. For this reason, she voices out her dissatisfaction with her transformation by admitting that she has undergone a "free fall" "by her own wretched choice" (264-265).

The protagonist constantly reminds us that she is impelled to opt for choices which, though expressing assertiveness and defiance, are fraught with frustration and regret. With the hope that his daughter would cherish the life of the unborn child, Wajdy reminds Khadra of his martyred mother who died in childbirth, sacrificing herself to give birth to her son (245). This attempt, however, is met with the defiant assertion: "I don't want to be your mother," for "you raised me to go out and learn" (246). Here is a clear hint at "interpellation" through institutional learning, which is set in opposition to the kind of teaching Khadra has received within the Muslim community. After sacrificing the child for her own rebirth, the dispossessed would-be mother is left with the anguished admission that the baby "was a possibility, one she could not entertain" (247).

The feelings of loss and regret cannot be transcended unless the protagonist proves that her sacrifices are required to reach an uplifting and self-fulfilling state. This task seems to be impossible as the protagonist's hybridity is self-alienating. Her assertive declaration: "It was not vainglorious to have a self" is made invalid by the urgent request: "Hello, self. Can we meet at last?" (248). This reveals that the space Khadra now inhabits makes her feel "empty" and self-less. Mourning the loss of a self and awaiting the rebirth of another, she realizes that she has lost destination and gravity. Indeed, she anxiously asks, "Where do you go when the first part of your life is coming to an end […]? Where do you go when you're in a free fall, unmoored, safety net gone, and nothing nothing to anchor you?" (265). Khadra's speech foregrounds the belief that the rebirth she has aspired to on the border and in-between identifications could possibly offer her anchorage. The same idea is reiterated in James Olney's definition of the self as predicated on unity and reference, a definition that the author uses as an epigraph to one of the novel's early chapters: "But there is a oneness of the self, an integrity or internal harmony that holds together the multiplicity and continual transformations of being" (Kahf 156). Unable to make sense of her contradictions and to recuperate the sense of groundedness, Khadra sinks into depression and thinks of suicide: "She loathed that girl, that Khadra […]. Wanted to cut her--she looked dully at a razor, […]. Wanted her dead" (264).

Conclusion

Khaf's novel investigates and interrogates a model of identity that promises integration without domination but is weaponized to fend off the threat of alterity associated with Muslims. Althusser's concepts of "interpellation" and "ISAs" allow us to investigate the mechanisms that motivate the urge to voice out the alterity of Muslim Arab-Americans through hybridity. The narrative demonstrates how the meanings of cultural conflation and in-betweenness can be appropriated by the dominant system to contain their otherness. Significantly, Khadra's interstitial experience unravels the monocentric drive inherent in hybridity. This experience not only decenters the diasporic self but also erases its difference. Indeed, the protagonist's cultural and religious precepts are reformed by and subsumed into the mainstream values of individualism and secularism. The character's profound

psychological ordeal prompts us to revise the critics' celebration of her journey in the "third space." In fact, this journey highlights Khadra's transformation from a "concrete individual" with a unified, essential subjectivity to a "concrete subject" with a Western individualistic mindset. The narrative of identity is prevented by the rift created between the protagonist and her community and by the predominance of Western individualistic values over communal values and cultural heritage. By means of "hybridity," Khadra is constructed as a subject who ends up losing the specific traits required to articulate her otherness. Thus, navigating the interstitial space is a self-alienating experience that ends in regret and loss. What is specific about this diasporic experience is that it foregrounds the correlation between responding to the call for hybridity and succumbing to a hegemonic discourse that aims to contain the otherness of the diasporic subject.

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