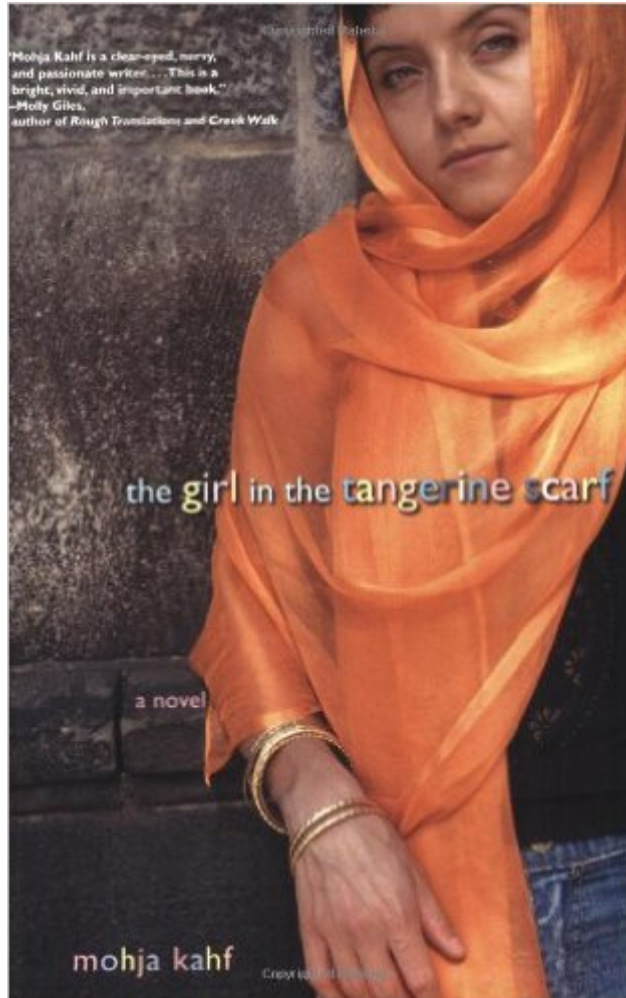


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# The Girl In The Tangerine Scarf: A Novel



## Synopsis

Syrian immigrant Khadra Shamy is growing up in a devout, tightly knit Muslim family in 1970s Indiana, at the crossroads of bad polyester and Islamic dress codes. Along with her brother Eyad and her African-American friends, Hakim and Hanifa, she bikes the Indianapolis streets exploring the fault-lines between Muslim and American. When her picture-perfect marriage goes sour, Khadra flees to Syria and learns how to pray again. On returning to America she works in an eastern state taking care to stay away from Indiana, where the murder of her friend Tayiba's sister by Klan violence years before still haunts her. But when her job sends her to cover a national Islamic conference in Indianapolis, she's back on familiar ground: Attending a concert by her brother's interfaith band The Clash of Civilizations, dodging questions from the aunties and uncles, and running into the recently divorced Hakim everywhere. Beautifully written and featuring an exuberant cast of characters, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* charts the spiritual and social landscape of Muslims in middle America, from five daily prayers to the Indy 500 car race. It is a riveting debut from an important new voice.

## Book Information

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Grade Level: 9 - 12

## Customer Reviews

I am an American Muslim who went through many of the same experiences as the book's protagonist, although I am not the child of immigrants. I found the first half of the book to be a sensitive and generally accurate depiction of American Muslim life, very parallel to my own

experiences in the '90s. My enjoyment dropped off a cliff however once Khadra's divorce (all of which was perfectly reasonable) was finalized and the character of the book changed dramatically. The book becomes preachy, clearly aimed at convincing the reader of the "rightness" of Khadra's denial of "conservative religion". While in Syria, Khadra's angst suddenly becomes apparent even though the book doesn't give any specific reason why she should be angst-y in the first place. Nobody forced her to marry that particular Kuwaiti dude. In fact, there were warning signs that he wasn't a good match for her but she just shrugged her shoulders and figured he was "just as good as anybody else who would ask". Wow. Nobody forced her to take "medical technology" as her major in school. She went to public school and had non-Muslim friends and co-workers throughout her young life and I find it hard to believe that she never had any serious exposure to other belief systems, career paths in life, personality types, etc. Yes, I know many Muslim immigrant families who are poor, science/technology-focused and literature/arts-deaf, there is a lack of appreciation for "beauty" (leaving the definition of that aside), and I know full well the type of Muslims who say you should marry "anyone with a good religion and good character" but none of this really comes to the surface in the beginning of the book.

A book that yields rich insights on several dimensions. The dominant one is what it is like to grow up as a minority within the American culture - and not just any old minority, but as a Muslim, which parts of American society are actively trying to demonize. It was the "flip-side" of my own experience, living as a non-Muslim in the very heartland of Islam, Saudi Arabia, for a quarter century. While I was never forced to deal with issues of assimilation, Ms. Kahf's character, Khadra, must wrestle with the parts of her heritage that are essential, and those that can be jettisoned. How many religious injunctions are merely codified fetishes, illustrated by the refusal to eat any meat from the deli because of the meat-cutter? There are numerous important sub-themes. The timeless subject of male-female relations, with that "Islamic twist" is shown in a realistic light, covering a spectrum of possibilities. Through her characters, Blu and Bitsy, who were Khadra's roommates at various periods, Ms. Kahf is able to illustrate nuances in beliefs that are all too often generalized. Blu is Jewish, and there is much agreement between these "daughters of Abraham," except on that haram subject of Israel and Palestine. Bitsy is Iranian, and leaves notes around the apartment blaming "the Arabs" for all of Iran's problems. Khadra's trip to Saudi Arabia, to complete the Haj, was more uneven. There is no question that cocaine exists in the Kingdom, but I found the particular scene in which it was depicted playing heavily towards that stereotypical view of rich, decadent Saudis. More realistic, and more insightful are her dealings with the mutawaa (the religious police),

and in particular how various Saudi males refuse to confront their arrogance and inappropriate behavior. Ms.

It's been a few weeks since I read this book, but I find that I still have mixed feelings about it. The quality is a mixed bag. I certainly learned from it. Kahf writes about the difficulties of growing up Muslim in America, but more than that she focuses on the diversity in opinions and lifestyles among Muslims; she seems intent on discrediting the idea that there is one monolithic "Muslim community." The protagonist's shifting personal relationship with Islam takes center stage for much of the book, providing an interesting story. The characters seem lifelike (although most have little depth or development), there are some vivid descriptions, and the writing style isn't bad (although at times Kahf seems to be trying too hard, veering from heightened language with literary allusions to heavy colloquialisms so fast I got whiplash). My biggest problem with the book is one several other reviewers have mentioned: too many characters. At the beginning, Kahf introduces seemingly every single member of the community in which her protagonist grows up, by name, whisks them away before we can get to know them, then brings them back later to speak a few lines, evidently expecting us to remember them. It felt a bit like spending a weekend at someone else's huge family reunion: the characters I met were believable, but I can't tell them apart or put names to faces.

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