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Narrative Inquiry as a Decolonising Methodology

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Background

Orientalism continues to successfully expose monolithic, hegemonic discourses underlying codifications and (mis)representations of the Orient. The first aim of this paper is to use narrative to juxtapose Orientalism's ongoing association with the dehumanization of Arab Muslims with depictions and analyses of the so-called Muslim Orient, and particularly of Muslim women. I argue that this narrative presents a successful attempt to indigenize knowledge. Historical and contemporary representational analyses of Middle Eastern Arab Muslim women are the result of the intersection between sexual, cultural, and political modes of differentiation and "othering." The narratives of Arab Muslim women in this paper could be used to highlight the pitfalls of essentialism and misrepresentation.

Setting the Stage

My doctoral dissertation, in which I explored how Arab Muslim women perceive themselves and how they view their gender roles after living in Canada, provided the starting point for this endeavour. Prior to this, I explored the underlying assumptions of a great deal of current literature on Arab Muslim women's lives. Some of this literature (Bardach, 1993; Lewis, 1997; Mabro, 1991) indicates that women from 'Third World' societies (e.g., Arab Muslim and Middle Eastern societies) will be "emancipated and liberated" through Westernization and experiencing a Canadian education and lifestyle. In my view, Arab Muslim women who have immigrated to live and study in Canada have moved from one form of "patriarchy" to another—only the context differs. Like many feminist scholars (e.g., Gaskell & McLaren, 1991; D. Smith, 1987; L. Smith, 1999), I argue that Western women—Canadian women, in this case are not necessarily "emancipated and liberated" (Cayer, 1996). Indeed, I will explore the extent to which aspects of living and studying in Canada may have led Arab Muslim women participants to think differently about themselves and their lives.

The narratives in this paper debunk various myths surrounding Arab Muslim women's realities. For instance, the Arab Muslim women's narratives presented here highlight the heterogeneity of their perceptions, their abilities to create diverse models of reality, and their competency in decision-making. What is particularly fascinating is the participants' strong faith and their ability to distinguish between Islamic teachings and cultural traditional practices.

These stories create a rich tapestry. While "quilting" these women's colourful narratives, I revisited a few personal and insightful experiences, not as an author or researcher, but as a woman recognizing aspects of herself in these

women—aspects such as a similar religious background and language, as well as similar cultural traditions and life experiences. Although the intersection of Arabic culture with political, historical, social, economic, and patriarchal forces generated a more conflicting platform for women than those presented by Islam, nearly all of the women interviewed were more inclined to challenge and resist rather than to live passively in a ready-made world. Not only have I sought the narratives of Arab Muslim women, but I have also included fragments of my own story. As hooks (1988) argues, sharing one's past and one's memories through a narrative allows others to view these experiences from a different perspective— not as singular isolated events, but as part of a continuum.

This project has been, by far, one of the most enriching of my life, informing me of what it means to "engage with a more open notion of Muslim, [a notion] that is informed not only by religion" (Khan, 2000, p. 130) but also by the experiences of indigenous people. I learned a great deal from these women— women who are subjects of their history. Some aspects of my experience differed from theirs, while some of my long-standing uncertainties were assuaged. Listening to these women gave me a better understanding of issues that even I, an Arab Muslim woman raised in an Arab Muslim society, could not fully appreciate. These women's stories, which I perceive as a platform for empowerment, had a profound impact on my personal perspective.

Narrative as a Decolonising Methodology

The importance of using narrative as a decolonising methodology is twofold. First, it contributes to a better understanding of Arab Muslim women as significant members of Canadian society by exploring their views and perceptions of their lives. Such understanding not only broadens general knowledge about Arab Muslim women's lives, but also provides an impetus for improvement in the way Canadian society views Arab Muslim communities in Canada. Second, after reviewing pertinent literature, I found that, thus far, there have been no other attempts made by an Arab Muslim woman to present a narrative that studies Arab Muslim women's lives in Canada. This paper's aim is to use narrative as a method to deconstruct negative images. In what follows, I highlight these narratives presented by Muslim women—narratives which serve to help decolonise the common misrepresentations of Arab Muslim women. This work will show how these indigenous narratives create images which may be juxtaposed with those perpetrated by Orientalism. I include the narratives of Arab Muslim women I had interviewed for my doctoral research, and I explore how these women were able to create a space in which they contributed to deconstructing stereotypes of Islam as an oppressor of women.

The Scope of Literature on Muslim Women: A Critical Discussion

Over the past three decades, a substantial body of literature has been written about Muslim women. Yet, "in many Western writings, including some scholarly writings, Muslim women have typically been constructed as one of the most oppressed groups of women in the world" (Cayer, 1996, p. 2).

This fixed, pervasive Western misconception of Muslim women appalled me as a young graduate student in Canada. Soon after my arrival in 1998, I began to question my sense of self as a Muslim woman. Although I believe that Islam, through the Holy Quran[1] and the teaching of the Prophet Mohammed, Peace Be Upon Him,[2] forwarded the liberation of women as early as the seventh century, I cannot deny the second-class status of women in most Muslim societies today. Yet, how accurate are the prevalent representations of Muslim culture—and Muslim women in particular—in mainstream Western media and opinion? While scrutinizing Western academic and popular culture[3] stereotypes and their various dynamics, I identified a binary contradiction within the ways Muslim women are portrayed:

> The prevailing images of Arab Muslim women in the occidental world seem to shift between dual paradigms, between either the image of the salient beast of burden, or the capricious princess, the half naked…or the shapeless figure of woman behind the veil. (Mehdid, 1993, p. 21)

Through reading a plethora of books about Islam and the West, such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1997), and *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) and its counterpoint perspective found in Bernard Lewis' *The Middle East* (1997), *Islam and the West* (1994), and *Islam in History: Ideas, People and Events in the Middle East* (2001), I concluded that, historically, the status of Muslim women was used by imperialist and colonialist powers (as in Egypt and Algeria, for instance) to refer mainly to the inferiority of Islam as the dominant faith of the colonised countries.

In Western hegemonic discourse, not only was Muslim women's status used to target Islam, but images of Arabs and Muslims which commonly characterize them as being anti-Western, uncivilized, backward, uneducated, illiterate, violent, and rife with men who subordinate women (Ahmed, 1999; Basarudin, 2002; Cayer, 1996, p. 46; Said, 1978) were also used. Such images of Arabs, Muslims, "and particularly Arab Muslim women are considered Common Knowledge," and are found in approximately 60,000 books on the Arab Orient that were published in the West between 1800 and 1950 (Laura Nader as cited in Hoodfar, 1993, p. 8). In other words, these images were accumulated over periods of historical eras.

Moreover, much of Western feminists' work about Muslim women either oversimplifies cultural practices, mistakenly confuses them with religious doctrine, or refers to a sole interpretation of Islam, maintaining its alleged demonization of women. Leila Ahmed[4] (1992) and John Esposito (1998) concur with Read and Bartkowski (2000) that "caricatures that portray Muslim women as submissive and backward have become more pervasive within recent years" (p. 396). Even when studied in some Western feminist discourses, Arab Muslim women are portrayed as victims of their cultural traditions and/or religion without further investigation into the patriarchal cultural practices that oppress them or the differences between cultural practices and religious teachings (Mohanty, 1991).

In a vigilant account, Eleanor Doumato (1996) asserts that "negative perceptions of Muslim women stemmed from the fact that all of the literature about Muslim women was written by Western women and men who did not understand or did not want to understand Muslim societies" (p. 12). This requires the persistent efforts of Arab Muslim women to oppose the "uncritical" perpetuation of stereotypes in many Western discourses. In saying this, Cayer (1996) argues that through minority discourses (i.e., narratives), the diverse gender issues challenging Muslim women will be revealed. In concurring with Said (1978) that it is the responsibility of indigenous people to provide their narratives to counter the vision of outsiders, the following narratives will allow me to offer Muslim women's various perceptions. The narratives explore how gender issues intersect and profoundly influence Arab Muslim women's social realities as well as their educational experiences in Arab Muslim Middle Eastern societies and within Canada. I argue that the discussions and differences in viewpoints among the women interviewed will provide evidence of the heterogeneity of Muslim women: "The differences among Muslim women are surfacing, thus the imagined homogeneity of the Muslim community is falling apart" (Cayer, 1996, p. 26).

Many studies conducted by Muslim scholars focus on traditional perceptions of Muslim women within Muslim communities and in Arab Muslim societies, neglecting to consider increasing populations of Muslim immigrants in the West (Camarota, 2002). Only within the past decade have studies by insider Muslim scholars (male and female) directed attention to the experiences of young Arab Muslims in the United States and in Canada (as in Abu-Laban, 1980; Sarroub, 2001, 2005). Because relatively few studies have been conducted about Arab Muslim communities in North America, little has been discovered about individual struggles, achievements, and adaptations to Western life. The disentanglement of cultural traditions and societal norms from religious gender discourse is pointed out in terms of its relevance to Arab Muslim women's experience.

In the following sections I introduce aspects of the Arab Muslim women's narratives that would stand in contrast to the dominant images of Muslim women as passive victims that occur in Western literature and popular culture. The three themes that will be introduced here are segments of a larger study on the experiences of Muslim women in North America, and particularly in Canada. The themes are: Muslim women's identity in Canada, social activism, and autonomy and choice. I choose these three themes to present here because they provide comprehensive examples of Muslim women's lives and experiences.

Being Muslim in Canada

Although living as a Muslim in a non-Muslim society can sometimes be difficult, the women interviewed expressed their appreciation for the space given in the Canadian society to freely practice their faith. Various literature highlights that

> Whether indigenous or foreign-born, Muslims who have built their lives in America are growing appreciative of several factors of the quality of life they enjoy: that many aspects of American life are quite consistent with the Muslim belief system; that interactions among people are becoming increasingly global; that, while Muslim countries may show signs of degeneration in religious, economic and political life, Muslims in the United States and Canada strive to practice their faith in a purer form. (Nimer, 2002, p.19)

Eman,[5] a mother of three children, one of whom has special needs, clearly conveyed that

> Cultural traditions have nothing to do with Islam…I mean, I live Islam here in Canada, and I lived Islam in the United States more than I lived it in Libya…in Libya they live tradition, they live their customs, and their customs are like the social law.

Yet it is not always easy for Arab Muslim women to live their religion in a non-Muslim environment. It can be greatly challenging to reconcile religious values with one's participation in the cultural community of their native Canadian peers (Buitelaar, Ketner, & Bosma, 2004; Shahjahan, 2004). Morooj[6] is a Libyan woman in her 50s who pursued art after she moved to Canada to accompany her children. She observed

> Morooj: This is a free society. It is more open society here.
> Amani: Did it bother you?
> Morooj: No, it does not bother me.
> Amani: What about your daughters?

Morooj: To a large extent, I am religious and it was fine; I encourage my daughters to learn and engage to take the best if they can. There are negative aspects of freedom that we do not follow because they are incompatible with our religion so we avoid them but we respect them…Accepting others as they are is very important.

From these narratives one can appreciate the strength it took for the Arab Muslim women in this study to craft a path in a culture that portrayed them as passive victims of their religion.

Arab Muslim Women's Social Activism

In the interviews I conducted to solicit Arab Muslim experiences in Canada I asked the participants for their perceptions of feminist issues and if they have attended feminists workshops and conferences. Their answers revealed aspects of their views of women's issues. Some studies have indicated that an introduction to feminist ideologies in the West has influenced women from other cultural backgrounds. Moghissi (1999) agrees: "The exposure to feminist ideas and involvement in other new social movements, while influencing women's self-perception, has encouraged more critical thinking among many Iranian women [living in Canada]" (p. 215). Yet, because the word *feminism* has a negative connotation in some Arab Muslim societies, "Muslim women will be unlikely to subscribe to a Western notion of feminism, which would mean abandoning beliefs which they have a commitment to and which provide them with mechanisms to deal with and resist the oppression they face" (Hashim, 1999, p. 12).

When Arab Muslim female writers and academics highlight the position of women in their own societies, they usually become subject to criticism and denunciation from Arab Muslims—both the public and scholars—for attempting to follow Western feminist "nonsense" (Abdo, 2002). Other Muslim women try to "separate themselves from feminism as a movement because they identify [it] as Western and ethnocentric and nonresponsive to their experience as non-European women of color" (Moghissi, 1999, p. 214). Some women argue that labeling themselves as "feminist" is confining and exclusive. Some also add that labeling themselves as "feminist" would disregard other aspects of their identity. Mooney (1998) agrees that some women "fear the negative consequences of being associated with feminism because of family and societal pressure" (p. 95). Moreover, Awan asserted,

In some Muslim societies, European and American models of women's liberation have had a significant impact. In others, women have expressed a desire for a model of liberation that integrates more fully the structures of the traditional extended families and the assignment of role that this implies. At the same time,

however, one can detect in many parts of the Islamic world a growing backlash against women in the women's movement. (as cited in Dangor, 2001, p. 11)

This can also be attributed to Esposito's (1992) focus on the continued backlash between Islam and the West. Esposito claims that the history between Islam and the West is best described as one of conflict and mistrust, stemming from the real and perceived economic, political, and theological threats which Islamic and Western social systems have posed to each other. This tense relationship has continued, and even intensified, in recent years and has had an effect on feminism and women's liberation. Thus, women in Arab Muslim societies who are pro-feminist do not identify with the label.

Pro-feminists in Arab Muslim societies are, according to Mooney (1998),

Women who typically are not concerned with ideology but are pragmatists who have carved out lives and careers for themselves and in the context of their profession tend to promote general interests of women… [and] participate in public life through their work and their literary production. They are trying to confront what they see as a menacing regressive environment for women and place their individual work within larger perspectives. Rather than debate feminism they address gender issues and explore new directions. (Badran, 1994, p. 217, as cited in Mooney, 1998, p. 95)

The same can be said about my participants. The social activism mentioned by Mooney (1998) resonates with that of the interviewees. Some of the women I interviewed did not consider themselves to be feminists, did not associate themselves with feminism, and did not want to be labeled as such. The majority of the participants embody feminism and embrace the advancement of women's causes, working toward achieving women's goals. Many of these women, individually and/or collectively, work to change the lives of women in the Muslim local community. Yet, none are self-proclaimed feminists. For example, Wafaa[7] stated:

I never liked feminism. I never liked the way they think. Like I would agree on some things, some things make sense, but other things I wouldn't. They push it too far…they push it to the extreme. And I'm not an extremist… I'm glad that I don't live in medieval times or in the sixteenth or eighteenth century because of the way women were treated. I'm glad I live in such a society that it's not completely perfect, but it is better.

In contrast to Wafaa, I feel comfortable identifying Ruba[8] with the term "feminist." I perceive feminism as the name of a movement that aims to raise women's awareness of their rights. I do not associate "feminism" with the West or the East but as a concept that can be found and applied to any and all cultures. I perceive feminism as not merely about certain choices we make but about having

the freedom to make those choices. Like Sophie Harding (2000), I feel that "[my] definition of feminism does not come from books or a particular movement. It comes from a society; it comes from an ancestry and a bloodline of women who are not children of the Western-feminist movement" (p. 11). My feminism originates from my experiences. I lived within gender-specific boundaries. The way I was raised strengthened my curious and outspoken personality; yet school and the wider cultural experiences in the world in which I have lived have emphasized my being female and thus secondary to men. When I lived in Saudi Arabia, other women's struggles led me to reflect deeply about the roots of inequality and male patriarchy. I did not even know or understand feminism before coming to Canada. Like Lubna Chaudhry (1997), "I did not detract from my realization of the value of the resistance enacted by me…I just needed to figure out a way to talk about the contextual nature of resistance and oppression" (p. 449) which is found in feminism. However, I mainly attribute my feminism to the Quranic messages I have learned since childhood: that God is fair and just. How, then, could God treat women with injustice and unfairness? The teachings of Islam have strongly influenced my perceptions toward my role in this life. I have never viewed my role as having less value than that of a man's. Also, I am indebted to my Canadian education for my exposure to feminist theories.

The women I interviewed for this research are highly assertive and some are peace activists in the Canadian context. Yet some of them acknowledged the difficulties involved in gaining access to leadership positions within their communities or in society at large. They claimed that in Arab Muslim culture, leadership is always a male enterprise; I add, especially in the religious realm. Some of the Arab Muslim women interviewed argued that women are not necessarily suitable for political and religious leadership positions simply because they are women. Their argument is based on the same premise as that of some male and female traditional Muslim scholars:

> It is argued that women undergo menstruation, child-bearing and labor—a fact which may hamper their performance in the council to which they are elected. But this can be refuted by saying that men also may be subject to misjudgment or illness which may impair their performance. (The Muslim Brotherhood, as cited in Mooney, 1998, p. 99)

By advocating that it is not compatible with women's nature to be in leadership positions, they are overlooking many indisputable facts and examples depicting the status of women in early Islamic eras as leaders and active participants in different domains.

Only a few of the women interviewed are demanding and re-establishing women's rights in the Muslim community as well as in general Canadian society. However, Nora[9] is engaging in a form of gender activism by being the first

Muslim woman to be nominated to the Islamic Mosque Board to further the rights of women within the Muslim community. In her own way, she advocates for women's right to work and participate in politics. I argue that the feminism of these women "is understood better as the achievement of a space for themselves, for autonomy, and a career in a culture that inconsistently forbids and permits professional autonomy and women's caring role" (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004, p. 265).

I also agree with Hill (2003) that

Feminism begins from the lives of women, and the lives of women are highly varied and highly contradictory. These variations and contradictions should be expected, given the diffuse modes of gender power and their equally diverse and fluid impact upon women. (p. 62)

Ruba, unlike the majority of the women who perceived the urgency to support women's goals, is opposed to feminism and does not perceive that there are "women's issues." She also held a different view which rejects the binaries of male/female and sex/gender. She implies that this way of thinking may lead to competition between the sexes, something she perceives as unhealthy and unnecessary, reflecting the notion that women and men are essentially different and suited for different activities and professions (Bjorklund & Olsson, 2005, para. 2). According to Hessini (1994), some Muslim women in Middle Eastern societies feel that equality between the sexes destabilizes and dehumanizes women and undermines the collaborative relations between men and women. The opponents of complete equality between the sexes usually advocate the complementarity between the sexes.

When Yasmine[10] recalled her first work experience with the women in the small Yemeni village where she had her first clinical practice, she sighed and expressed her concerns for the women there:

The treatment of women in Yemen is pathetic. This was 14 years ago….I was unable to pronounce my disagreement with such treatment…I believe that they needed more than my help; they need a big lift. It is a human rights issue. …The discrimination of women...was overwhelming…The mistreatment was unbearable and unimaginable…There was a sexist saying in Yemen that "only two things can carry heavy loads without giving the farmer a problem: a donkey and a woman."

Yasmine is aware that a major part of the issue was illiteracy. "Women's education makes a big difference," she said. This made her decide to help as much as she could. At the local level, Yasmine and a group of other Muslim women started an organization to help women in the local community. It is a "social collaborative group, an association to provide support for single-parent families,

organize for holy days celebrations, and facilitate an annual evening of multi-faith discussions."

Nora's excitement and hopes for progress crossed the Canadian borders. She hoped that the positive aspects of life she has enjoyed in Canada will one day become a reality in Egypt. She is amazed at even the smallest gestures when

> A woman or a man is respected as a human being not by the degree s/he holds. In Egypt, we cannot use the first name for our Profs. But here…you could call him/her by their first name. My previous supervisor is well-known in the field and I was shocked to hear some students calling him by his first name…. This is what I will do when I go back to Egypt.

Moreover, Nora hoped that someday soon, people in Egypt will value all educational fields, especially kinesiology[11] and physical education. These fields are neglected not only in Egypt but in other Arab Muslim societies. There is no emphasis on the value of health science fields, although, ironically, chronic illnesses such as high blood pressure and diabetes are widespread in Arab Muslim societies. Physical exercise designed by professionals greatly helps: "Until recently, kinesiology and physical education were not taken seriously in Egypt and no one wanted his/her children to pursue them as a field of study... I will try my best to change this perception."

On a personal level, Nora's outstanding talent led her to be nominated to sit on the local Muslim organization board: "The board is 40 years old and this is the first time a woman is a part of it… Now my dreams are kind of funny. I am dreaming of being part of parliament."

Sahra,[12] who is also from Egypt, foresaw a great deal of opportunity for women there. She said, "There are lots of opportunities for women to do anything they want. The fact that there are not enough women having higher positions is not because of the society; probably because women don't want to or they have different priorities." Sahra is optimistic about women's status and contends that women are progressing, considering the responsibilities they have to handle. She gave the example of her supervisor: "[My] supervisor is taking a year off…she is having a baby and is very excited…You can imagine what this year can give her in her career; she can do more than just have a child…but she chooses that over career success."

Eman's dreams were collective. She hopes that Arab Muslim societies will eventually encourage women to be aware of their rights and responsibilities. Also Eman is keen on women's desires to explore and "accomplish what they want to accomplish." On a personal level, Eman hoped to offer the best education for her daughters. She asserted, "It opens many doors for women," and continued, "Having my children grow up as Muslims…strong-willed and loving and considerate…is my greatest hope."

Wafaa's plan is to take her love of writing seriously. She wishes to be a writer of fiction and poetry. This was not something she had expected of herself. She said,

> I never thought that I could write, but I wrote a poem, and I copied it onto a paper and I started editing… and I have been writing poems since then, and that's when I decided to be an English teacher. And I always dreamed of…writing my own book, especially children's books.

Fadwa,[13] with an eye on more education—possibly a PhD—as well as starting a family, said with satisfaction, "I could always pursue a PhD hopefully at home or somewhere else, so I can perhaps be a professor there if I want to be, or influence more change." Furthermore, Fadwa said,

> I see myself being a little more useful to society there than I am here…there is a huge, huge need…There's poverty, there are a lot of problems that we have socially and politically, financially and economically…I just want to make a difference.

Morooj, with an artist's view of the world, dreamed of having her own art exhibit and she is trying to locate funding for that purpose: "I would like to do some exhibitions for the Libyan community, Arab Muslim community, and for Canadian society in general, especially to show photos from Libya for children who grew up in Canada and who do not know about the nature, historical sites, and beautiful scenes in Libya." Morooj was saddened by the many stories she dealt with as a social worker in Libya and wishes that she could do something to help Libyan women: "When I go back to Libya, I want to encourage women my age who have hobbies like knitting and embroidery to teach the younger generation of women who are interested in making small projects in wool."

Ruba's look at the future directs her to the youth: "My passion is the younger people, in general—males and females—they are the ones in need of help and guidance." Nahlaa,[14] the youngest participant, knows that she wants to plan her courses carefully so that she has more opportunities in her postgraduate plans.

Yasmine, who is an activist in the local Canadian Muslim community, told me that "the way a woman and a man can contribute to society is by finding her/his inner strength." She explained,

> A person needs to find his/her strength and work with it.…Individually, we can construct a better society.…Each of us can create better communities. Islam has influenced me a lot in thinking about my role in society. I do that in every step along the way to improve my work, to help my children succeed, and to help my community. This role is for both men and women to help in building their community and the larger Canadian society as much as they can.…A woman or a man needs to start from the family because it is the small part in the

society.…The woman should be looking after her home first, but if she has more time and energy to do other things outside, then she should.

Nora's involvement in society started when she organized gymnastics classes in the Muslim community for women, something in which she took great pride. She was proud of helping people and believed that taking the initiative to fill a need is building a coherent society. For instance, when Nora took a course in nutrition in her faculty, she made notes and distributed them to people in the community.

Morooj emphasises, "Education is first and foremost." Like Yasmine and Nora, Morooj feels that societal contribution begins with educating oneself and one's family. She asserts that bringing up good citizens starts at home. She highly values volunteering:

I have to give to my society…one has to take the initiative without waiting for a give-back (material profit to one's self).…If one instils in children the love of giving to their society, then we are raising a generation of good citizens…Not necessarily ideals, but important things that we sometimes ignore or overlook the importance of.

Ruba, like Morooj, feels that societal contribution begins with contributing to oneself and one's family. Importantly, she adds,

The youth need a positive influence to grow up stronger…these days, in general, whether Western or Middle Eastern because I think the boundaries are melting so much…that it's so open; the problems they [youth] are facing, they are so much like the problems we are facing here, maybe not to the same extent, but they are facing a lot of the same problems.…Encourage them to be strong and outspoken.…As Arabs…we try to raise our children…not speaking out against anything…"Mama, be quiet, it's not your problem, don't worry about it." You speak out, you get into trouble.…This is our generation. It's very sad that we grew up this way... to be very silent.…In our native society…if you speak out against something, there's a lot at stake…. But here it is not the same society.…I see second generation people who are born in this country and have Arabic parents…they are brought up to have the silent attitude which muzzles people, silences them…It's very sad.…This is not a positive contribution to society, not at all.

Ruba rightly recognizes and names a real concern for the younger generation. An outspoken personality is invaluable for social contribution. Youth—men and women—can be instruments for positive change in their societies, especially with respect to gender issues, if they speak up and fully participate in society. Fadwa agreed with Morooj, Ruba, and Yasmine's perceptions. Besides being good parents, Fadwa advocates the best ways for women and men to contribute to society:

> The Prophet says that the best of people are the most useful to other people. I think this is something that refers to men and/or women—it's just a matter of how they go about doing it…Women as social activists, I really believe in the importance of that. Men have dominated the political arena for a long time…social activism is [needed]…and women can really be excellent at it.

Also, Fadwa acknowledges that her endeavour in pursing a master's degree is mainly to please her parents, but also to contribute to her society.

These narratives reflect these women's positive outlook on women's societal contributions. They are all contributing to society or planning to be socially active. Having a powerful sense of Islam's support of women and obtaining higher education are helping women to become catalysts for change and progress in any society. These women's perceptions of the meaning and means of social activism are inspiring.

Fadwa, Nora, Morooj, Yasmine, Wafaa, Eman, and Sahra were all enthusiastic to find ways to help others. All the experiences of these nine Arab Muslim women, and the ways in which their gender is counteracted, are presented through their own voices. The majority of the women spoke of combining multiple commitments to children, partners, work, study, and/or active participation in the community. All these commitments are subject to conflict, overlap, and disruptions (Bateson, 1990). Likewise, Bateson (1990), in *Composing a Life,* asserts that a common thread between her stories and those of her friends is that of having to deal with multiple commitments. She also says that "each of us had to search in ambiguity for her own kind of integrity, learning to adapt and improvise in a culture in which we could only partly be at home" (p. 13). As Arab Muslim women, we improvise in both cultures: Middle Eastern and Canadian. Our native culture teaches us early on in our lives that we should favorably stay at home, and our hosting culture views us through the Orientalist perception of Muslim women.

Autonomy and Choice

Many of the critical choices the participants made in their lives demonstrated their personal agency, which is a crucial component of gendered identity construction. Manion (2003) argues that

> Girls are socialized from a very early age to define themselves less in terms of autonomy and independence but rather primarily in terms of their relationships with and dependence upon others, and second, this defining sense of interdependence makes girls especially vulnerable to social pressures, especially those urging them to conform to traditional conceptions of femininity. (p. 24)

Is Manion's argument compatible with the perception expressed by Fadwa and other women interviewed, and where do they fit in the spectrum? These women asserted their capability in making choices and their choices are reflecting their agency and personal autonomy.

Sahra, for instance, acknowledged her choices: choosing to be an engineer, choosing her spouse, and choosing to live in Canada—all are reflective of her personality. She said that being an engineer did not change the way she perceives herself as a woman, her abilities, or the world around her, but instead, "my point of view is what affected my choices…including engineering."

Eman chose to be a special needs teacher. Currently, she is taking courses to be able to achieve that goal: "I always wanted to be a teacher…my father was a teacher and my mother is a teacher…and after having a son with special needs…I planned on becoming a teacher of special needs."

Fadwa—whose narrative was exceptional—was challenged by her parents and extended family when she traded her plans to be a doctor for the profession of teaching, and yet was determined to pursue her dream:

> It took me about two to three years to convince my parents that teaching is really for me. It wasn't something that I thought of before… but when I looked at all the things I volunteered in and all the jobs that I had, they were all teacher-related, so it only made sense, and it was a very natural step for me.

Her parents objected to her plans, yet for Fadwa what was an even greater challenge was talking to the people in her village:

> And the big problem wasn't even my parents…it was trying to break the news to the people in the village….They were all under the impression that I was gonna be a doctor…I was still called "doctor."…They said, "but we thought you were going into medicine." I had to explain to them that the process in Canada is different. If I was in [country of origin] I would've graduated high school at age 16. I would have done five years of university at the end of which, by age 21, I would have been a doctor…I explained that it is different in Canada since I need a degree in science prior to medical school….And as soon as I put it to them in that kind of context, the concept of [women's] social role and gender role kicks in…and I know that's their reality and that's how they reason things out… and they said "it's better that you chose the path that you did because this way you can come back and get married."

Fadwa made her decision more palatable using her extended family's reasoning. She made plans for her future based on autonomous choices. Her choices were not compatible with the cultural values of people in the village. Yet Fadwa is self-assured that her goal is compatible with her faith.

Conclusion

The narratives of these women challenge long-standing Western assumptions about the status of women in Islam; they show that Muslim women are not passive victims and are in fact agents of progress in their communities. Although the women hinted to some abusive situations, such as Yasmine's examples of her experience in Yemen, these cannot be viewed as the norm as women are subject to difficult experiences everywhere.

These narratives will assist Muslim and Western scholars interested in studying Arab Muslim women by providing a necessary alternative to the stereotypical images of Arab Muslim women as shadowy figures in exotic *harems*.[15] Through providing an alternative perception of Muslim women, these narratives will be particularly empowering to young Muslim women in the Diaspora. As Zine (2003) indicates, Muslim female youth "need to have more empowering narratives available to them" (p. 448).

Educators can also draw from this work to learn more about Arab Muslim women's lives through hearing individual voices and perspectives. While care must be taken not to make generalizations of all Arabs, all Muslims, or all Arab Muslims from this study, the stories these women share of their experiences in their native societies and in Canada may be applicable to other contexts, such as in planning strategies to assist immigrant students.

In short, this work will help provide a balance in the way Muslim women are presented in Western scholarly literature: "We need to hear the life stories from those who are underrepresented [or misrepresented] to help establish a balance in the literature and expand the options for us all on the cultural level" (Atkinson, 1998, p. 19). My venture to "re-write these scripts in more positive and empowering ways involves re-mapping the discursive boundaries through which Muslim women's identities are circumscribed and defined" (Zine, 2003, p. 448).

Notes

[1] The Quran is the Muslim holy book.

[2] For a Muslim, the phrase "Peace Be Upon Him" should be said and written after the mention of the Prophet Mohammed Peace Be Upon Him.

[3] It is interesting to note that even Western scholarly literature that studies Muslim women of Arabic origin often wrongly accepts that all Arabs are Muslims, or that all Muslims are of Arabic origin. This generalization is based on two false assumptions. One assumption is that the majority of Muslims live in Arab countries when, in fact, the majority live in Indonesia and Pakistan, both of which have the highest Muslim population. The second assumption is that all Arab-speaking countries are followers of Islam. In fact, there are Christians and Jews among Arab-speaking populations. Muslims are diverse in their language, culture, ethnicity, and their approach to faith (*Sunni*, *Shii*, *Sufi*, and *Ismaili*. For a

detailed discussion on *Sunni* and *Shii*, see Esposito, 1988). These oversights may have come about as a result of White domination (i.e. colonial discourses) in the fields of anthropology and colonial studies, and of their narrow perceptions of the Arab Muslim world (Esposito, 1988). In fact, Arabness represents a set of values and traditions that are common to people in the Arab world and that have been passed down through generations. It also signifies a particular worldview marked by attachment to family, for instance (Nagel, 2002, p. 271). An Arab entity is like a Muslim entity in that both should not be seen as fixed categories.

[4] Leila Ahmed is among the first Arab Muslim feminist scholars to analyse the ignorance of Western feminists regarding Arab Muslim women's struggles (Ahmed, 1989, 1992, 1999).

[5] This is a pseudonym. Born in 1971, Eman is a Libyan Canadian who has lived in Canada since 1996. She is a mother of three who earned her BA and at the time of the interview was proceeding toward a BEd to become a teacher of special needs students.

[6] This is a pseudonym. Born in 1956, Morooj is a Libyan Canadian who moved to Canada in 1999. She was a social worker in her home country and decided to become a photographer when she moved to Canada. Morooj has five children.

[7] Wafaa is a Lebanese Canadian woman who moved to Canada in 1998. She has a BA and is engaged to be married.

[8] Ruba is a Palestinian Canadian who moved to Canada in 1994. She holds a degree in computer engineering.

[9] Nora is an Egyptian Canadian who moved to Canada in 1999. Born in 1968, Nora is a mother of two who is pursuing her PhD in physical therapy.

[10] Yasmine is a Syrian Canadian who was born in 1961. She and her husband moved to Canada in 1984 as young physicians. Yasmine is a family physician raising seven children.

[11] Kinesiology is the study of human movement, and its goal is to discover strategies for enhancing human health and performance. The work of kinesiologists benefits all those who move, including high-performance athletes, people suffering from chronic injury or disease, and those wanting to improve their overall physical health.

[12] Sahra is an Egyptian Canadian who moved to Canada in 1999. She was expecting her second child and pursuing an MSc in computer engineering at the time of the interview.

[13] Fadwa moved to Canada with her family in 1999. She is a teacher and was pursuing an MA at the time of the interview.

[14] Nahlaa is another Palestinian and the youngest of the participants. She moved to Canada in 2003. She entered university and is pursuing a degree in engineering.

[15] White male scholars who are referred to by Edward Said as "Orientalists" contributed to the concept of *harem* and the exotic images of Arab Muslim women.

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