“THE MOTHER IS A SCHOOL”: MUSLIM MOTHERS AND THEIR RELIGIO-EDUCATIVE ROLES

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MUSLIM MOTHERS AND THEIR RELIGIO-EDUCATIVE ROLES

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ABSTRACT

Using found poetry extracted from in-depth ethnographic interviews, this study seeks to explore the experiences and imaginations of eleven Muslim mothers of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), particularly focusing on their religio-educative, child-rearing roles. With strikingly spatial language, participants describe themselves in terms of heroines and poets, while also expressing overwhelming feelings of failure to fulfill self-defined “ideal” motherhood. Using poetic inquiry, this research moves beyond apparent paradoxes, offering the concept of *poetic spaces* –in-between spaces that are fluid and transformative, navigating everyday truths in relation to religious Truths- to demonstrate the complexity of mothers’ imaginations. This work is also part of a small yet growing line of inquiry, seeking to explore Muslim imagination from an aesthetic perspective, rather then through a predominantly legal lens. Within this small yet important area of inquiry, this work is the first of its kind to focus exclusively on Muslim mothers.

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DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

I, Sara Hamed, have produced this thesis independently in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. Religious Studies at McMaster University. The words and thoughts of the eleven participants interviewed have been included in this text. Dr. Celia Rothenberg and Dr. Liyakat Takim, both of McMaster University, have facilitated this project, however they have not directly contributed to the findings or production of this research.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Inside or Out?

This research project is very dear to me because it was born out of my own struggles with Islamic education (and epiphanies) throughout my childhood up until the present moment. I was never satisfied with the education I had received, always feeling I struggled to find religious meaning in my everyday experiences. (*What is Islamic education and how does one acquire it?*) Islamic education became an elusive, missing piece of my life that I was determined to acquire, master, and pass on in the most digestible format to my future children. It was a *thing* I had to have; I never questioned for a moment the concept itself, always feeling it was by default “out there,” and I was terribly deficient without it. Later, with a new (and first) life growing inside of me, I naturally began contemplating my quickly approaching motherhood role, and, for me, motherhood and education were naturally and intimately linked in my mind. I felt sure that the best Islamic education must begin in that special relationship between mother and child; that carrying my child for nine months made me perfectly suited to initiate him into the world, and the world to him, in spiritually significant ways.

Going into this thesis project, I was also quite sure that there must be one best way for mothers to educate their children “Islamically.” I hoped that by interviewing Muslim mothers living in very similar conditions to those of my own experience, I could come closer to ascertaining that one best way. Fortunately and, initially shockingly, as I began to reflect on my findings, I experienced such a potent paradigm shift that I am still marveling at its significance and effects as I write these words. I discovered that the methods and experiences of Islamic education are only qualified as “best” retrospectively, which makes “best” an illusory term without much utility if one is really embarking on an educative journey of any kind. This new knowledge has helped me grow as both a researcher and a mother, but also as a spiritual person. Retrospectively, these three aspects of myself, once in tension, are now simply three different, yet complementary opportunities to appreciate the plurality of human experience and perception.

While conducting fieldwork, however, I did not always feel that being a researcher and Muslim mother were complementary aspects of my identity. Just as Sherif explains in her article, “The Ambiguities of Boundaries in the Fieldwork Experience” about her own fieldwork experiences as an Egyptian anthropologist in Cairo, Egypt, during my own fieldwork, there were times when my identity felt fragmented and irreconcilable, especially when my own notions of self diverged radically from those of my participants (2001: 438). Unlike Sherif, these feelings were not caused by inadequately speaking colloquial Arabic (actually, most participants were very comfortable responding to my mostly Arabic speech, supplemented with English words when needed) (2001: 439). These feelings were strongest when I interviewed women older than myself, or women who did not veil in the same way that I did.

My age tended to encourage participants older than myself to talk perhaps more indulgently about their own mothering experiences to provide me with advice as a new mother. This proved both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, some mothers opened up about their own experiences, openly sharing their heart-felt regrets and insecurities with the charitable intention of allowing me to learn from their self-proclaimed mistakes. This was undoubtedly useful and very generous. On the other hand, oftentimes the age difference encouraged participants to inquire about my own mothering practices and lecture me aggressively on what I was doing wrong (which was apparently plenty), providing me with their “correct” approaches. These forms of advising painted ideal pictures of their mothering experiences, perhaps silencing some of their less flattering ones.

My veil also caused my “notions of self to intersect and diverge from participants in shifting ways” (Sherif 2001: 438). At the time of the interviews, I was veiled and had been for the five years preceding my thesis research; I did not don the veil to reap any research benefits. (A couple of months after concluding my fieldwork, for personal reasons, I decided to unveil. While interviewing all of my participants, however, I was veiled, covering my hair, neck, arms to the wrists, and entire body, except the ankles and feet). But the veil did procure research benefits as well as disadvantages. For example, when interviewing Linda, a participant who veils less stringently than perhaps I did at the time, she continuously expressed doubts about her version of Islam being what I wanted to hear and about how her two daughters (who do not veil, as she repeatedly pointed out), were poor examples of what I would expect Muslim children to be like. Although I reassured her that I was interested in her views, she seemed less inclined to share certain stories and opinions with me.

Contrarily, for Bahar, another participant mother, my veiling seemed to correspond to her expectations and personal practices, encouraging her to open up in unexpected ways. For example, at one point in the interview, which took place in her home, she leaned in to indicate that what she was about to share may be considered taboo, and declared that she prefers to only become intimate friends with veiled girls like myself. She then proceeded to explain the importance of the veil in her life, and her own struggles with donning it as a newlywed. At the time of my interview with Bahar, I had no intention of unveiling, but I did wonder if my own veiling had encouraged a discussion that otherwise might not have took place.

Though useful at times, being a Muslim mother myself who belongs to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) community was also at times disadvantageous. The GTA Muslim community, particularly its Egyptian pockets, is very tight-knit. Word of my research project spread quickly among friends, acquaintances and strangers. Several times, participants brushed off reading the Letter of Intent and Consent that must be read and signed before commencing the interview, saying, “You’re Egyptian, you won’t trick me into signing something bad!” or “I don’t need to read the ethics form. I trust you. Doesn’t your father volunteer at the mosque?” Some of my participants recruited other participants for me, but I later discovered that these new recruits were misinformed about my study, despite having access to the Letter of Intent and Consent. Before one interview, one new participant said, “So, I heard you need advice on how to make your son sleep through the night.” Another participant seemed to think that my research was about proving that Muslim mothering techniques are better than the techniques of non-Muslim mothers. I spent considerable time explaining what my research was actually about and the purpose of the interviews to remedy these miscommunications, which ironically occurred because of my “insider” status.

I saw first hand how “factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at times outweigh the cultural identity we [i.e. researchers] associate with insider or outsider status” (Narayan 1993: 672). Knowingly and unknowingly, I undoubtedly repressed and expressed aspects of my identity to correspond to participants’ varied notions of “decorum and deference” (Narayan 1993: 674), Islamic and un-Islamic, moral and immoral. Although the “multiplex” nature of identity is now a common anthropological idea, I found the “regular” and “native” anthropologist dichotomy, which is related to the infamous “researcher” and “other” polarity, difficult to consciously and constantly deconstruct and transcend throughout the research process. Nevertheless, I have tried to keep this objective forefront in my mind and to “acknowledge the hybrid and positioned nature” of my shifting identities (Narayan 1993: 682), while building relationships with the Muslim mothers I interviewed.

Thesis Statement and Research Questions

In this thesis, I argue that the eleven Muslim mothers who participated in my study related inspiring stories of their heroic and poetic religio-educative efforts, and yet overwhelmingly seemed to feel they are failing to provide their children with a truly “Islamic” education. Their oscillating feelings, between success and failure, which they tended to describe using spatial language, correspond to the liminal[[1]](#footnote-0) nature of the *poetic spaces* they occupy –spaces that they imagine to be constantly forming and transforming as they navigate the subjectivities of their (and their children’s) truth experiences in their quest for Truth (i.e. God). I explore these experiences in the chapters that follow.

The old Arabic adage “the mother is a school” is commonly heard today, spoken with religious significance by Muslims of various backgrounds and pointing to the persistent centrality of the mother figure as an educator. This study seeks to draw attention to this scarcely considered line of inquiry by turning away from the very narrow spectrum of issues pertaining to Muslim women usually emphasized in academia to ask the question: How do Muslim mothers of the GTA *imagine* their religio-educative roles? How do they define religiosity and education, and how, if at all, do they incorporate these concepts in the upbringing of their children? In light of the arguably global crisis of Muslim education, what do they feel is the importance of their still enduring mothering roles?

As I did my background reading and interviewed these wonderful women, I was constantly awed that despite the rise and fall of religious institutions and scholarly authorities throughout the history of Muslim civilization, despite the creation and dissolution of Islamic schools and groups and the sprouting of new movements across geographical boundaries, women have maintained positions of religious authority as mothers in family settings across history. The Muslim mothers of this study are very conscious of this historical phenomenon – they assert their authority fully aware that their mothering positions enjoy almost uncontested authenticity across space and time. Their awareness of these historical constants is much more pronounced than that of the broader community. Nevertheless, most religious lectures on women in Islam that I have attended in the past discuss the important place that the Quran and Hadith (i.e. the collection of sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) give to Muslim mothers. Therefore, turning to speak to Muslim mothers of the GTA about their religio-educative thoughts and experiences seemed to be the natural next step.

Methodology

Participants

Participants in my study are self-identified Muslim mothers, 18 years of age or older, living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in Ontario, Canada. I also stipulated that participants must either have children presently attending (or have attended previously) Islamic schools full-time or part-time. Home schooling mothers were also encouraged to participate. I felt that these stipulations were sufficiently restrictive to make the study meaningful to my questions and experiences, and lax enough to provide the study with variation and interest.

Although I sent out e-mails to a board member responsible for a full time Islamic school, and to the administrator of a part time Islamic school, both in the GTA, all of my participants were recruited via word of mouth. I also contacted a GTA Muslim home schooling group via e-mail, but I was unable to secure any responses. I found e-mail to be a very ineffective means for recruitment, perhaps because of the impersonal nature of this form of communication.

Fortunately however, I had the pleasure of interviewing eleven inspiring mothers, whose names (as well as any of their children’s names) have been changed in this work to protect their privacy. Four of these mothers have their children attending Islamic school full-time (Rafif, Fotoun, Sidra, and Nihad), while seven mother’s children attend Islamic school part-time (Layal, Bahar, Samar, Farida, Shokran, Fatin, and Linda). I was only able to interview one mother, Shokran, whose children are home schooled. I did not feel this was enough to feature home schooling more comprehensively in this work. However, Shokran also sends her children to Islamic school part-time, and for this reason I included her important insights in this study. Four mothers are of Indo-Pakistani origin (Rafif, Fotoun, Sidra, and Shokran), and seven mothers are of Egyptian origin (Layal, Nihad, Bahar, Samar, Farida, Fatin, and Linda); all mothers are Canadian citizens. Although ethnicity undoubtedly plays a role in people’s experiences, I did not analyze this aspect in my discussion chapters. My emphases in my analysis, and justification for these emphases, will become clear in the next section.

Interviews, an hour and a half in length, were conducted one-on-one in a location of each participant’s choosing, sometimes in a local mosque, a local university, the mother’s home, or my home. Only one interview was conducted over the phone (Shokran’s) because she was adamant about participating, but we were unable to coordinate a face-to-face meeting. My first interviewee did not want the interview audio recorded, so I took hand written notes. To maintain consistency, I decided to take hand written or typed notes for all subsequent interviews as well.

Data Collection

Although I had interview questions prepared, I rarely had to use them. I encouraged participants to take the interviews in directions *they* felt were most relevant to the subject – namely their religio-educative roles as mothers. Interviews usually began with a discussion of each mother’s own religious upbringing and education, which tended to easily flow into a discussion of their experiences with their children. I did, however, ask two questions in all of my interviews: What is education? What is Islamic education? I usually saved these questions to the end, giving participants time to reflect on the interview as well as their mothering experiences. The unstructured nature of the interviews was wonderful; participants talked freely and easily, silences were reflective, not bored, and interviews, originally expected to last 45 minutes to an hour, tended to last for a couple of hours with participants’ encouragement to prolong our conversations.

Data Analysis: Poetic Inquiry

This work represents what I would call my first attempt at poetic inquiry as an anthropological data analysis methodology. Poetic inquiry is a young branch of arts-based research, beginning in the 1980s, that has quickly grown in the last few decades in many areas of the social sciences, including anthropology, women’s studies, psychology, and sociology –to name a few burgeoning fields. Poetic inquiry –that is inquiry reliant on some form of poetry- is appealing to researchers of qualitative studies because of its *affective* element, potentially communicating findings in uniquely resonating ways –namely through poetry. I chose poetic inquiry as a data analysis and communication methodology because of my own personal relationship to my research questions and the motives behind the study. Poetic inquiry does not shy away from allowing the “researcher’s own affective response” to the data to inform findings (Prendergast 2009: xxiii).

In a very useful literature review, Monica Prendergast identifies three types of poems generated through poetic inquiry: literature-voiced poems, researcher-voiced poems, and participant-voiced poems (2009: xxii). Literature-voiced poems are created from or in response to literature as a form of analysis. Researcher-voiced poems are poems that express the researcher’s retrospections, and may be based off of field notes, capturing the researcher’s voice. The last category is of principal interest here; participant-voiced poems are poems extracted from interview transcripts by the researcher, representing participants’ feelings and perspectives. I chose to relate participant feelings, experiences, and imaginations about mothering through participant-voiced poems throughout my discussion to keep in the forefront of the reader’s mind my very interpretive role as researcher, as well as my creative role in the research process: “creating poetic inquiry is a performative act, revealing researcher/participants as both masked and unmasked, costumed and bared, liars and truth-tellers, actors and audience… in the creation of research” (Prendergast 2009: xxiii). Though often disclosed at the beginnings of articles and dissertations, I tended to forget the centrality of these two researcher roles (interpretation and creation) when reading the works of other scholars. Poetic inquiry was an important reminder for me throughout the research process that objectivity is a façade, and that my findings are not Truth, but rather truth. Although my thesis is about capturing the ways Muslim mothers imagine their religio-educative roles, I am very aware that my imagination had a significant role to play in interpreting the voices of my participants.

I rely on the concept of *found poetry*, which, in the case of participant-voiced poetry in anthropological research, refers to the extraction of poetry from interview transcripts, using a variety of methods ranging from very restrictive processes to much more lax approaches. For example, if we imagine a spectrum to illustrate the variety of methods, Abu-Lughod (2000), who relates verbatim the poetic lyrics of her Bedouin participants, would represent the most poetically restrictive method. Anthropologist Gee would be further along the spectrum, using poetic transcription in the 1980s to create poetic stanzas out of his transcripts by dividing them into fourths (Prendergast 2009: xxiii). Other social scientists are more or less restrictive with their transcripts; some limit themselves to words or even phrases used by participants to create their inquiry poems, others use repetition of key themes or words liberally to communicate a participant’s emphasis on an idea. Still others like Glesne may use very lax approaches, creating poems from transcripts based on the essence of what they feel the participants mean, but not necessarily using participants’ particular phrases or terms (Prendergast 2009: xxiii).

Being new to this process, I created poetry from interview transcripts by restricting myself exclusively to phrases actually used by participants. I sorted the data, and organized each interview into recurring themes and ideas. Then, I creatively engaged with these categories to “find the poetry.” I did not necessarily order these phrases chronologically, but I did try to stay true to the meaning I ascertained from the interview. I also used repetition where I felt emphasis would stay true to the voices of the participants, even if they did not necessarily use repetition to establish this emphasis. I did not use any phrases participants did not themselves use. I also used verbatim prose quotations minimally throughout the discussion when I felt poetry would mystify what must be made clear.

When choosing a method of data analysis, poetic inquiry seemed a natural choice for this study because it became clear to me as the interviews progressed that these mothers were communicating *feelings* not doctrines or prescriptions for education. My written notes, which already represented the interpretive process of silencing and enabling, contained the potent and powerful words of women who in many ways, with their struggles to access Truth through truth, really are poets. I took up Neilson’s advice when creating poetic inquiry (i.e. to listen well, to realize that language is always deficient, and to use less to communicate complexity rather than more [Prendergast 2009: xxvi]) to engage with participant’s voices, as well as my own.

Synopsis of What Follows

This thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter, above, includes a discussion of my role as researcher, my thesis statement and research question, as well as the methodology. Chapter two gives important background information on the development of the concept of Islamic education and its many meanings and connotations. I also give a brief history of the Muslim community of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in Ontario, Canada, and demographic information of the community as a whole, eventually narrowing in more specifically on Muslim women. The discussion and analysis of the study’s findings make up chapters three and four. In these two chapters, I present found poetry as well as prose quotations to illuminate key ideas. In chapter three, these ideas include maternal femininity, spirituality, education, private and shared spaces, and “ideal” motherhood. Chapter four assess participants’ feelings of success and failure as mothers, and how these seemingly paradoxical feelings can be conceptualized spatially. Finally, chapter five concludes the thesis, pointing to possibilities for further research.

CHAPTER TWO: ISLAMIC EDUCATION AND CANADIAN MUSLIMS

The Muslim Crisis of Knowledge: Authority and Authenticity

As Cook explains in his introduction to “Classical Foundations of Islamic Thought,” the shift from *ijtihad* or intellectual reasoning to *taqlid* or imitation, coupled with foreign ravaging of the weakened Ottoman Empire led to the decline of the intellectual and cultural prominence of Muslims. Whereas during the Golden Age the *‘alim* or scholar was a qualified *mujtahid* –a creative and innovative thinker trained in the religious sciences, by the thirteenth century “the gate of intellectual reasoning” was largely closed (Schacht 1982: 70) and subsequent *ulama* or scholars became guardians and transmitters of classical wisdom (Cook 2010: xxi), instead of generators of new forms of intellectual reasoning.

Despite the move away from *ijtihad*, classical pedagogies were used to preserve authenticity of content and authority of the *ulama*. An example is the *ijaza*. Teachers traditionally gave the *ijaza* –a form of accreditation- to pupils to verify their mastery of study material and ability to pass it on correctly. Memorizing a scholar’s treatise was not enough to subsequently teach it. Not only did students memorize their teachers’ books, they also attained a level of comprehension through intimacy with the teacher as both a moral character and an academic expert. These two spheres of intimacy are inseparable within this tight system; the relationship between the teacher and student, like a parent and child (al-Qabisi 2010: 50), creates the perfect dynamic to inculcate morals by example. Worthwhile knowledge, taught al-Ghazali and al-Zarnuji, brings the student closer to reaching the ultimate goal of attaining God’s pleasure through actions. Acquired knowledge, no matter how vast, that is not followed by appropriate practice is useless, “Even if you have read in the sciences for a hundred years and summarized a thousand books, you would not have prepared for the mercy of God but through action” (al-Ghazali 2010: 92). Thus, traditionally, teachers enjoyed status second only to the prophets for teaching the truth (with the concern of a parent for a child) and demonstrating the embodiment of true knowledge in their behaviours.

But this educational system has now fallen into decline, and the results are crises of knowledge, authority and education. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire and “the passage of [more and more] Muslims to the West,” “objectification of Islam” became common practice, especially among Muslims (Roy 2004: 151-153). Whereas previously in the heyday of Muslim civilization, Islam was a natural undertone of daily life that rarely came to the forefront of consciousness as a definitive object, now, with Westernization changing the world, defining Islam is most urgent in the hegemonic encounter of what it is not. In North America and Europe, the *de facto* West, the situation seems even more pressing. Muslims must define their religiosity to differentiate their beliefs and practices from, suddenly accessible and proximate, alternative, and dominating, ways of believing and being. Hence, “Islamic” is now a key term to denote those aspects or objects that correspond to the allegedly exclusive domain of Islam. As Roy observes, “Islamic” has been assigned to categories such as fashion, banking, food, and literature, whereas historically Muslims did not use this qualifier (2004: 153 & 161).

“Passage to the West,” argues Roy, changes not the content of Islam as a religion, but people’s religiosity or relationship to the religion (2004: 151). In the past, threatening epistemologies rarely confronted the laity; it was the *ulama* or religious scholars who diffused these ideas within the closed realm of the intelligentsia. But now, with globalization and the Internet bringing people and ideas close –sometimes uncomfortably close, Muslims everywhere are rubbing shoulders with philosophies seemingly at odds with their values: “Public education programs, as well as the development of new communication technologies –telephone, radio, television, and of course the internet- have all contributed to the transformation of religious authority in the Muslim world” (Cesari 2006: 123). “Passage to the West” produces questions that, rather disappointingly, most traditional *ulama* do not address adequately or accessibly. Hence, to this day, the *ulama* are criticized for being too aloof and failing to bridge gaps between traditional knowledge and modern problems. Consequently, institutions such as al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt are much less influential today, seen more as artifacts of a glorious past (Roy 2004: 34).

Moreover, Muslims are increasingly disillusioned with traditional pedagogies, which seem either rigid, largely irrelevant, or inaccessible, and have turned to activism instead. As a result, a new attitude towards knowledge is flourishing, ““Everybody can speak about the truth because they are *experiencing* it” (Roy 2004: 35 –emphasis added); knowledge is no longer the domain of the *ulama*, accessible only through years of rigorous study and training. In this new model, vertical knowledge transmission is replaced with horizontal information sharing. The Internet exemplifies this phenomenon, housing various websites that Cesari divides into two categories: Islam on the Internet, and Islam of the Internet. The former are informational websites, which include academic sites and denominational sites, while the latter refers to an environment created on the Internet with unique discourses and practices (Cesari 2006: 111-115). Islam of the Internet is a space where most forms of religious discourse, regardless of their source, are equalized (2006: 115). Thus, traditional religious experts are “supplanted by the engineer, the student, the businessman, and the autodidact” who are self-trained, and speak with self-given authority to masses of Muslims in a space that de-emphasizes authenticity of sources (Cesari 2006: 123), and emphasizes instead the postmodern preoccupation with subjectivity, relativity, and variation.

Despite what may be an explosion of “Muslims exercising their right to interpret the religious message outside of traditional structures” (Cesari 2006: 123), there is still a strong crisis-of-education sentiment among Muslims around the world. Ironically enough, many Muslims are turning to the past for guidance. For example, the Internet is now full of online education institutions, claiming their curriculums and methodologies are authentically traditional, modeled on the works and methodologies of medieval Muslim scholars. An example is the online Shariah Program:

The Shariah Program is an educational Institute that enables hundreds of students every semester to understand the Qur’an and read classical Islamic texts in the original Arabic. We do this by teaching Classical Arabic through a methodology that combines a [traditional curriculum with an 80/20 focus](http://www.shariahprogram.ca/courses/methodology/) tailored for today’s busy student (Shariah Program 2003-2011).

These programs address a new frustration born out of too much conflicting, source-less information. Now Muslims, particularly youth, are expressing, on hundreds of online forums and blogs, a desire to turn back to tradition, by also engaging with it, despite language and spatial barriers. In response, a new class of *bridge* scholars has emerged to adequately connect Muslim knowledge traditions with the realities and tribulations of modern times. These *ulama* are charismatic speakers who are spiritually oriented, trained in the traditional religious sciences, and trained in Western academic institutions, but also activists on many social and environmental fronts. Although globally recognized, the bridge *ulama* are most popular in North America and Europe, catering their messages primarily to Muslims of the Western experience.

According to Cesari, referencing Anderson and Eickelman, these Muslim authorities have “a new kind of legitimacy,” which competes with the traditional criteria for legitimacy, and stems principally from their charisma and large following (2004: 149). These popular leaders share two tendencies: didacticism and apologism. Didacticism is “a kind of desire to teach Islam that has no equivalent in the Islamic world proper” while apologism is a tendency to defend Islam against Islamophobia and Western allegations (Cesari 2004: 149). However, Cesari misses the crucial connection these leaders have to traditionalism and how this connection furthers their legitimacy. I disagree with Cesari in her claim that most of these new leaders are not trained in the traditional religious sciences (2004: 149). In fact, many of the individuals she lists in her discussion either are traditionally trained or show a heightened respect for traditional training and disclose their limited scope of authority openly where training is lacking. They do not claim to represent a class of replacement *ulama*; contrarily, they often openly praise and acknowledge the traditional *ulama* in their lectures.

Some key names to mention include: Hamza Yusuf Hanson, Sayyed Hosein Nasr, Jamal Badawi, Habib Ali al-Jifri, Abdullah bin Bayyah, Zaid Shakir, and Tariq Ramadan. Although many of these speakers appear on the same stage annually at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit Conference (RIS) in Toronto, Canada, it is simplistic to assume their authority is equalized based on the number of attendees in the audience. Among them, there is a hierarchy of authority, which they acknowledge, and which is directly correlated to level of traditional education. Furthermore, whereas Cesari claims that their authority competes with traditional structures (2004: 149), it seems the contrary is more accurate. These fresh faces often make a point to affiliate with traditional structures and methodologies. I prefer to see this class of scholars as bridges and revivers, and their popularity stems from their ability to synthesize tradition and modernity accessibly and practically.

After conducting a study on the criteria Canadian Muslims look for in religious authorities, Karim concludes the central criteria include: “institutions in which they are trained, their ability to reach out to Muslim audiences, accessibility, experience in Western environments, balanced outlook, practicality, activism, commitment to Islam, and appropriate uses of media” (2008: 88). Karim goes on to discuss new and notable religious institutions mentioned by interviewees, such as Zaytuna College and The Muslim College in London, to argue that such “institutions are deliberately positioning themselves as distinct from traditional religious schools” (2008: 89). But in the “About” section on the Zaytuna College website, the institute seems to be suggesting a desire to come closer to tradition: “Zaytuna College seeks to revive the tradition of sound Islamic teaching institutions,” with its very name taken from the title of a great, historical Muslim school in Tunisia: Jamiah al-Zaytunah (Zaytuna College 2014). Whereas Karim and Cesari see a break away from traditional criteria, I see a marked and deliberate turn back to tradition *in addition to* the criteria that Karim identifies.

Yet, a lingering alienation persists between the laity and even the bridge scholars, despite their Western training. Although they appeal to the general desire to turn back to tradition, most of the information they offer is disseminated through annual community lectures or occasional Youtube appearances. These bridge scholars do not provide continuous and consistent access to traditional knowledge, and those that do such as Hamza Yusuf through schools like Zaytuna Institute reach a fraction of the global Muslim population, leaving millions disenfranchised and alienated. This persistent gap between the bridge *ulama* and the laity creates opportunities for misunderstanding and confusion as in the case of Syed Naquib al-Attas and his Islamization concept.

From Islamization to Islamicization

Though perhaps less known in Canada than the speakers who usually attend RIS, Syed Naquib al-Attas is an important bridge scholar based in Malaysia. His idea –the Islamization of knowledge- is globally recognized, though not always attributed to his original and brilliant works. Al-Attas argues that ideas are embedded in language, and languages are particular systems of meaning. For example, Islam and its associated ideas unfold most accurately and clearly in Arabic. And Arabic, a system of meaning with words connected to each other in particular ways, must critically examine foreign ideas that do not have indigenous, Arabic equivalents before absorbing them into its system. Adopting foreign concepts without first ensuring that they can be properly and organically integrated leads to the displacement and corruption of native ideas. For al-Attas, the Muslim crisis of education is a result of the uncritical absorption of foreign ideas into Islam’s systems of meaning, resulting in confusion and corrupted knowledge (Al-Attas 2005:26). To reverse this process, he suggests putting Islam in critical conversation with other dominant and hegemonic philosophies to ascertain which concepts are useful and which cause confusion. This remedy places a great emphasis on tracing ideas to their sources –devoid of sources; ideas lose the intent behind their formulation and the particularity of their scope. If an idea is to be used in a new way, its etymology should be made clear, as should the divergences proposed, to preserve for others its etymology.Doing so empowers others to either critically accept or reject divergences. I should note that al-Attas is not advocating semantic stagnation, closed-mindedness, or even fear of creativity and innovation (al-Attas 2005). He encourages reflection, but believes that every object of knowledge has a proper place, and subsequent movement from that place must be documented so that we may be empowered to accept or reject these changes, instead of herded in directions not of our choosing.

According to al-Attas, Islamization of knowledge is now Islam*ic*ization of knowledge, which has spread contagiously among Muslims everywhere. He claims his original idea was plagiarized with dangerous consequences. (His concern with plagiarism is not the loss of credit as much as the resultant disconnection between an idea and its source, as discussed above). Resultantly, everything is made Islamic: from nail polish to schools, with the often superficial and uncritical addition of the adjective (Islamic), initiating an object, institution, or idea into the *halal* domain, even if its uninitiated counterpart is not *haram* or morally prohibitedfrom a jurisprudence perspective. However, by setting up a white-black division, by implication, anything “un-Islamic” easily falls out of favour as the immoral alternative. For al-Attas, Islamicization –that is the superficial imposition of the adjective “Islamic” to make any object morally sound without engaging with its relevant systems of meaning- is a symptom of the Muslim crisis of knowledge and education.

“Islamic” Education in Canada

Islamicization of everything potentially suspect or at odds with Islam has led to the creation of the concepts of “Islamic education” and “Islamic schools.” Panjwani critiques the use of “Islamic” in Islamic education. Specifically, he interrogates discourses claiming that there is an authentically exclusive, and particular approach to education that is divinely bestowed, and thus “Islamic” (2004: 21). He includes Islamization of knowledge under the banner of problematic discourses (2004: 20). But as I have shown above, Islamization of knowledge as intended by al-Attas is very different than its more popular, widespread manifestations. Reading Panjwani’s critiques, it becomes immediately clear that he takes issue with Islami*c*ization of knowledge (and the polemics it breeds), which is the distorted version of al-Attas’ proposition.

Many proponents of Islamic education tend to begin by faulting conventional, and largely Western systems of education. From there, they attempt to show how Islam provides a remedy, a monolithic approach to education, endorsed by God. But this method is fallacious because it compares Western practice to theoretical ideals attributed to Islam. The problematic issues with Western schools are issues acknowledged by, discussed in, and taken from Western sources. So, it is not a uniquely “Islamic” perspective that finds fault with drug use, violence, and promiscuity in schools (2004: 21). Furthermore, Panjwani shows that the unity of knowledge attributed to the golden age of Islam is unsubstantiated. In fact, many medieval Muslim scholars divided knowledge into various types and subtypes such as *alum al-Sharia* (the sciences of Sharia), *alum al-Aqliya* (the sciences of reason), ulum al-marzula (harmful sciences), and *ulum-mahmooda* (praiseworthy sciences) (2004: 23). These typologies may be different from those used in conventional Western schools, but they are still useful typologies. Yet, Panjwani seems to be equating classifying knowledge with fragmenting knowledge. Unitary knowledge implies interconnectedness that continually points towards God. Islamizers critique Western education for not relating each subset of knowledge back to the oneness of God, not for organizing knowledge into components.

When proponents of Islamic education delve into the nitty gritty of practice, their ideas often lack creativity. Oftentimes, they essentially continue using secular models, to which they make superficial and insubstantial changes to render them “Islamic.” For example, Iqbal’s “Islamic teacher training” relies heavily on “modern teaching methodologies” justified with “over-stretched and anachronistic interpretations of Quranic verses and the hadith” (2004: 24). His novel, purely “Islamic” contribution is a marks system that credits participants with points for performing prayers (2004: 24).

For clarity’s sake, Douglass and Shaikh dissect the phrase “Islamic education” into possible meanings: education of Muslims, education for Muslims, education about Islam, and education in the spirit of Islam (2004: 7-12). The first category refers to “efforts by the Muslim community to educate its own” (2004: 8) through “mosque lectures, after-school programs, and weekend schools” (2004: 8). A more accurate phrase for this type of education would be “Muslim education” (2004: 8), which tends to be centered on Islamic heritage transmission –Quran and Hadith. Education for Muslims includes “full-time Muslim schools,” where education is both secular and religious. Perhaps these institutions are better termed “Muslim schools” (2004: 8). Thirdly, education about Islam is largely undertaken in Western schools and through the media, from a secular perspective that treats Islam as one of many religions to learn about (2004: 9-12). The last category is perhaps the most important for our discussion. Douglass and Shaikh identify key terms, which have been traditionally and contemporarily associated with Islamic education to explain what this category includes. Education in the spirit of Islam refers to education encompassing many factors working in tandem: *aqida* (articles of belief), *ibadat* (forms of worship), *‘ilm* (all types of knowledge), *deen* (a broad, and heavy term connoting much more than just religion), *adab* (related to civilized and ethical behaviour), and *tarbiyyah* (accumulated moral education) (2004: 13-15). Unsurprisingly, education in the spirit of Islam is aligned with Islamic education in al-Attas’ sense. He too explains education as being derived from a network of key terms or ideas, embedded in Arabic, and related to the worldview projected by Islam (al-Attas 2005). Al-Attas laments that Islamic education of this sort is rare, and must be established urgently.

Islamic schools across the GTA seem to be of the Islamicization variety. They all have very similar mandates, which are approached through various perspectives connected to the denominations of founders and organizations (Niyozov & Memon 2011: 22). Their principal concern is to provide some form of Islamic education or education in an Islamic environment. And yet, oftentimes these institutions measure their successes using the standards of secular public schools, boasting about excellent test scores and high numbers of student university admissions. In an article by Razi group[[2]](#footnote-1) titled “Reframing Excellence in Islamic Schooling: Elevating the Discourse,” the author argues that Islamic schools do not consistently (or at all) measure their successes against their mandates as *Islamic* schools. For example, Olive Grove Islamic School in Mississauga, Canada cites its 2013 rank as the top elementary school in Mississauga by Fraser Institute on the school website (Muslim Association of Canada 2012). Fraser Institute is “an independent non-partisan research and educational organization based in Canada” (The Fraser Institute 2010), that publishes peer-reviewed research. Surely, the Fraser Institute does not rank schools based on *Islamic-ness.* Razi group, in collaboration with OISE of the University of Toronto, claims their Islamic Teacher Education Program, is a solution to the central problems facing Islamic schools related to “framing excellence.” These problems include “high teacher turnover, inadequate school facilities, undertrained teachers, and the absence of curriculum standards for the teaching of Islam” (Razi Education 2007-2014). The program’s purpose is

To encourage all Islamic schoolteachers, whether they teach Islamic Studies or any other subject, to define the distinctions of their own teaching practice… [The Program] connects educational thought from the Islamic tradition (classical and contemporary scholarship) with current trends in the field of teacher education in a way that empowers Muslim educators with a deep appreciation for what it means to serve in an Islamic school… [It] aspires to give teachers the tools to embody their school’s vision and encourage high standards of practice across schools (Razi Group 2009-2014).

And yet, is it really fair to establish a single set of criteria by which to measure all Islamic schools if their approaches and curriculums differ? Are there really definite principles of Islamic pedagogy as the program website claims? (This claim inherently assumes that there are aspect of pedagogy that are Islamic and aspects that are un-Islamic.)

The debate surrounding Islamic education continues to unfold. Ramadan, for example, questions the need to rely on Islamic schools at all. He suggests a complementary Islamic education program that unfolds in tandem with public schooling (Ramadan 2004: 132). This suggestion may do away with the struggles Islamic schools have to fund their facilities or might shift these struggles to newer establishments. But the complementary model as Ramadan frames it is entirely theoretical, and he gives little information as to what a program of that sort would look like. How would an after-public-school program establish continuity between secular schooling and religious instruction? In any case, the sentiment that Islamic educational efforts are not delivering their central promises –namely of providing “a true Islamic education ethos and spirit”- is strong among Muslims in the West and around the world, despite the establishment of more and more schools (Niyozov & Memon 2011: 24). Islamicization continues to provide a mere bandage over a deep, gaping wound, resulting in a general sentiment of dissatisfaction with Islamic education among Muslims in the Greater Toronto Area.

The Muslim Community of the Greater Toronto Area: Brief History and Demographics

Interestingly, education was a principal concern for the first Muslim community of Canada just as it continues to be in the present. In the mid-19th century, the first Muslim couple in Canada arrived –James and Agnes Love. The earliest record of Muslims in Canada, which was the Canadian census of 1871, lists 13 male Muslims in the country. After World War II the number increased significantly, and by 1981 there were 98, 160 Muslims. A decade later, the number more than doubled, becoming 253, 260 (McDonough & Alvi 2002: 80). The 2001 census counted 579, 645 Muslims in Canada, and though that constitutes only 2% of the population, the number continues to increase exponentially (Hamdani 2004: iv). By 2011, the number of Muslims in Canada reached 1,053,945 (Statistics Canada 2014).

Al-Rashid mosque in Edmonton, Alberta was the first mosque in Canada, and was officially open to the public in 1938. The Canadian Council of Muslim Communities (CCMC) was ratified in 1973, representing the communities of Cambridge, Edmonton, Hamilton, Montreal, Ottawa and Windsor. Its mandate centered on “educational and recreational programs and facilities for youth” (McDonough & Alvi 2002: 85), among other matters of concern to these early communities. A year after CCMC was established, a women’s committee was put into place –the seed for what would become the Canadian Council of Muslim Women in 1982 (2002: 86). CCMC expanded to include 13 chapters, with centres in Edmonton, Toronto, and Ottawa. In 1988, al-Rashid mosque was moved to Fort Edmonton Heritage Park, where it is now a symbol of Muslim roots in Canada (2002: 82).

Interestingly, Muslim populations in Canada are most concentrated in the country’s metropolitan areas, where the establishment of mosques and schools is quite common. These institutions usually gather Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds, though there are mosques that are known to cater to particular ethnic groups. Most Canadian Muslims live in Ontario (581,950), and Toronto, which is arguably the most cosmopolitan city in the world, is home to the greatest percentage of the Canadian Muslim community (Hussain 2004: 362). Three of the largest organizations represented in this region are the Canadian Council of Muslim Communities (CCMC), the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW), and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Canadian chapter (Hussain 2004: 362). ISNA Canada describes itself as:

…an Islamic organization committed to the mission and movement of Islam: nurturing a way of life in the light of the guidance from the Qur’an and Sunnah for establishing a vibrant presence of Muslims in Canada. ISNA exists as a platform for all Muslims who share its mission and are dedicated to serving the needs of Muslims and Muslim communities (ISNA Canada 2014).

These three organizations have overlapping mandates that represent the diverse Muslim communities of Canada. While the first Muslims in Canada were of European background, today the Canadian Muslim population, though dominated by South Asians and Middle Easterners, includes “French, Dutch, Italian, Swedish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Inuit, Métis” Muslims (Hamdani 2004: v). The literature on Canadian Muslims deals with quite a small range of issues, and is usually supplemented with literature about North American Muslims, particularly Americans. However, Hussain makes a very important argument about the uniqueness of the situation in Canada. Muslims in Canada, unlike their American counterparts, have created a distinctly Canadian presence that is cohesive, and thus Canadian Muslims should not be described as a collection of diasporas (Hussain 2004: 360). So while there are important commonalities across the border, this significant difference needs to be acknowledged.

The demographic information on Muslim women is very limited. The most recent, and broadest statistical study was commissioned by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, published in 2004, and titled, “Muslim Women: Beyond Perceptions” (Hamdani 2004: i). Demographically, the situation of Muslim women in Canada mirrors the broader population in many ways, but diverges in others. In 2011, a little under half of the Muslim population was female. Other than that statistic little else is available about Muslim women in 2011.

The majority of the information to follow is from the CCMW study, which is largely based on information gathered in 2001. The 2001 census indicates that Muslim women, on average, are a decade younger than the total female population in Canada (Hamdani 2004: 2). Moreover, the combined number of Muslim females in Toronto and Montreal is greater than all of the Muslim women in the rest of the country (2004: 3). Interestingly, more Muslim females live in the large city centres than Muslim men. Hamdani suggests that this could be due to the increased opportunities city life provides women (2004: 3). Mirroring the diversity in Canada’s major cities, 13% of Muslim females have multiple ethnic identities, and one in every nine visible minority individuals is a Muslim female (2004: 7). In fact, only 14% of Muslim women are not classified as part of a visible minority.

Family-wise, Muslim women in Canada tend to avoid divorce or common law arrangements more than the average Canadian woman, but the incidence of separation among Muslims has increased, reaching similar levels to those of the Canadian average. However, Muslim women continue to marry at a younger age, with four times as many Muslim women married before 24 years of age, with most Muslim females in Canada falling within the 25-44 years of age cohort (2004: 8). A significant portion of these young women are mothers working outside of the home, and 36% of these working mothers have preschool age children at home.

Hamdani argues that Muslim women form a significant portion of Canada’s knowledge capital –a portion that is sadly underused. One in every three Muslim women has a university education. Additionally, their educations tend to be in fields such as engineering, information technology, and the health sciences, which are important fields for the development of a strong economy in the 21st century. And yet, they suffer high unemployment levels, low levels of full-time employment, and also underemployment (Hamdani 2004: 13). In 2000, the average income for a Muslim woman was $16,000, which was 1/3rd less than the average for all women in Canada (2004: 14). As Hamdani concludes, the CCMW study “is the first word on the subject. It has illuminated many issues but, like much research, it has raised more questions” (2004: 17). Some of the questions Hamdani believes the study raises include:

Do mothers with small children enter the labour market out of choice or economic necessity? Why are they driven by economic necessity – is it because the husband cannot provide? What about single mothers? How do working mothers cope with housework and work outside the home – are they supermoms who can deliver both? What support do they get from their families and friends and how many? (2004: 17).

Although Hamdani’s questions are new and point to unexplored areas of inquiry, coming out of a statistical study, they are unsurprisingly number and trend-driven. Questions about Muslim mothers in Canada discussed in the literature are usually similar in type to Hamdani’s questions, or if more qualitatively oriented, revolve around a very narrow spectrum of issues such as hijab (Khan 1995; Shakeri 2000; Arat-Koc 1999), *shariah* (Khan 1993), feminism and resistance (Khan 1998), integration into or adaptation to Western society (Ghosh 1984; Jabbra 1991; Khan 2000), diaspora, immigration, ethnicity (Hayani & Ohan 1993; Kashmiri 1991), violence and oppression (Dua 1992), marriage and divorce (Hogben 1991), empowerment, as well as diet and other health matters such as pregnancy, breastfeeding, and reproduction (Doyle 1987). Studies of Muslim women in Europe, America, and Australia mostly revolve around topics similar to those listed above, or are subsumed under ‘the Muslim family’. For example, in the chapter “The Muslim Family: The Scriptural Framework,” Qureshi presents an overview of the Quranic family by citing popular jurisprudent interpretations of scripture and Hadith, pertaining to inheritance, childrearing, marriage, divorce, and privacy (1991). Again, this work is tightly bound to *shariah* and jurisprudence. These studies tend to gloss over how adherents imagine religion and their roles as religious persons. As Moosa observes, of the Quran’s over 6,000 verses, only 600 outline laws, “the bulk of the verses that… address the aesthetics of the Muslim imagination get neglected” (2003: 121) by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike. Similarly, the literature on Muslim women’s, and even more so on Muslim mothers’, religious imagination is practically nonexistent, following the broader trend.

CHAPTER THREE: THE *RAHM* WITHIN AND WITHOUT

Introduction

For the mothers interviewed, motherhood is intimately but not exclusively related to womanhood. The *rahm* or womb is a markedly maternal space that brings together both biological and social definitions of motherhood in complex ways, and sources important maternal qualities like emphatic listening, which facilitates care and connectedness. Nancy Chodorow explains that these maternal qualities are learned by children and reproduced in subsequent generations of mothers. Building on Chodorow’s work, Carol Gilligan bases women’s moral compass on the care and connectedness they inherit from their mothers.[[3]](#footnote-2) This learned tendency towards care in women’s moral imaginings is an important entryway to spirituality, according to Zahra al-Zeera. Raising children exposes to a mother otherwise hidden aspects of her own self, which empowers her to build a connection with God through self-cultivation. Mothers enter this private territory of self-cultivation when defining “ideal” motherhood, which is a separate space a part from the common space of marriage wherein “ideal woman” and “ideal man” are constantly constructed and reconstructed as separate Divinely-mandated categories. “Ideal” motherhood involves fulfilling the Divine purpose of reminding children of their primordial relationship with God. To fulfill this purpose, mothers take on a heart-building role that complicates conventional notions of self-hood, bringing their children from a state of heedless forgetfulness to a state of heedfulness and *taqwa*, or constant God-awareness. This movement towards *taqwa* is the essence of religious education.

The *Rahm:* A Potent Source of Maternal Femininity

Although academically objectionable for many feminist scholars in particular, the idea that some character traits are related to femininity, and others to masculinity is very much alive in the imaginations of the Muslim mothers I interviewed. Their views, however, are complex, and cannot simply be dismissed as reductionist or essentialist. For Rafif, for example, a woman’s biology is infused with symbolic meanings that attach to and inform her sense of self, particularly as a mother. The *rahm,* or womb, is the source of human mercy and, significantly, is housed in a woman:

What we are starts with the *rahm*…

(Men will never know the *rahm* like we do)

…It’s our space to understand.

*Rahm* comes from the same trilateral root (*r-h-m*) as the term *rahma* (mercy), which is one of God’s attributes – *ar-Rahman* or, the Gracious. As Hinna Upal explains in “A Celebration of Motherhood in the Quran,” graciousness refers to “giving without being asked” (2005: 88). In the Quranic chapter called *Al-Nisaa* or The Women, verse 1, God instructs humankind to be in awe of his Creative role (the ultimate example of Grace), and subsequently of wombs (Upal 2005: 88). This is because “the divine attribute of Grace is embodied in the wombs of our mothers, who possess some of, albeit a tiny fragment, of God’s creative energy” (Upal 2005: 88). In Rafif’s poetic response above, the womb is a “space” to be understood as a home to moral qualities. The womb is the source of a woman’s mercy only if she takes the time to build a sense of self by understanding it. Women have access to the most potent source of graciousness in the created world, but this access does not guarantee that they are more gracious than men, or at all. Spatially, they are home to the womb’s well of grace, and if proximity is coupled with understanding, they come to embody this trait as women, and can even epitomize it. As Rafif suggests, women’s awe of the womb is potentially much deeper than a man’s –who can never truly know it as a woman can.

Upal contests the essentialist biological definition of motherhood using the Quran and Hadith. Her objective is to widen the image of the Quranic mother to show how very real parallels can be drawn between the scripturally-based ideas she proposes and the lived realities of “Muslim mothers in the New World” (2005: 86). The Quranic mother in Upal’s formulation nurtures others with care and compassion and a concern for their wellbeing. Her discussion draws on several Muslim characters, including those who did not biologically bear children such as Asiya, who raised Moses in Pharoah’s dangerous wake, and Aisha, the youngest wife of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), who became known as one of the Mothers of the Believers (Upal 2005). Though she has children of her own, Rafif also considers herself to be not just her niece and nephew’s legal guardian, but also their mother. She offers an interesting definition for motherhood that is dynamic and transformative:

The more I am with them

The more I become their mother

Rafif’s measure of motherhood can be interpreted in several refreshing and exciting ways. In one sense, she is saying that the longer she is physically with them, the more she becomes their mother. But in another very powerful sense, she is giving herself the voice to define her maternal role. She elaborates that presently her niece and nephew do not live with her, which has not affected their relationship. Her presence with them does not have to be of the physical variety; for Rafif, she is always with them, always preoccupied with their wellbeing and affairs despite distance. “Being with them” is a state of imagination for a woman, it can never be imposed on her to mother someone; instead this state is of her own making. “Being with them” is largely a one sided affair sustained by the mother and reminiscent of Upal’s notion of graciousness: giving without being asked. Like Asiya did with Moses, Rafif took on the care of her sister’s children with compassion, and love. These are qualities constructed by Rafif as organic, coming from within: Rafif locates their source first and foremost in the physical space of the *rahm*.

Contrarily, Nihad feels that to properly care for children, a mother must be physically present with them as much as possible. For her three eldest, she was a stay-at-home parent and she felt this helped her nurture a special intimacy with them. She attributes the distance in her relationship with Zina, her youngest, to her work in the local Islamic school, which takes up the bulk of each day, five days a week. Exhausted, Nihad comes home and struggles to establish the same open lines with Zina:

They told me everything –everything

But she doesn’t

I can’t get in

She keeps it in

Nihad’s struggle to “get in” is a source of anxiety for her because she feels her rightful place is “in.” Otherwise, she cannot properly function as Zina’s mother. In an attempt to fix the situation, Nihad enrolled Zina as a student in the Islamic school where she teaches. Although Zina is thriving there with friends and other teachers, their relationship at home has not changed. Proximity alone is not sufficient; Nihad’s time away from home interrupted her previously continuous role as a physically present listener, which preserved her “in” position. Now interrupted, Nihad feels she has lost access to an important space, which facilitates the intimacy that should exist between a mother and her children. Unfortunately for Nihad, the second income her work provides is necessary to maintain their quality of life. Nevertheless, she advises:

A mother should not work

She needs to listen

Like Nihad, the act of listening is essential to Linda’s conception of maternal femininity. If a woman taps into her mothering capacity, which Rafif sources specifically in the *rahm*, she comes to master several important qualities, one of which is listening. In the academic literature, the closest concept to the type of listening my participants describe is “empathic listening.” According to Walker, the empathic listener gifts herself to the speaker by not being judgmental, listening voluntarily, and listening to sustain an intimate relationship with the other (1997: 131). Empathic listening is an “active emotional commitment” that relies on strategies such as invested silence, which is a demonstration on the part of the listener that she is following actively and with intensity. The listener is also perceptive to any incongruence between subtleties in the speaker’s non-verbal actions and speech communication, reacting accordingly with gentleness and concern. Oftentimes, by listening actively, empathic listeners pave a continuous path for the speaker, which “drives the speaker into deeper layers than intended” (Walker 1997: 130). In doing so, the listener is much more than a reservoir for another’s stories. The listener and speaker collapse and expand into a space for the “co-creating of realities” (Walker 1997: 133). Throughout the interaction, the listener’s imagination is actively constructing and experiencing with the speaker (1997: 132). Both parties share stories and sentiments. Linda, who has three working children, each in a different stage of life, feels she continues to listen as intently as ever before:

I see and feel every hurt

I listen, I accept:

“This happened”

And they know I know what that means

By listening to her children, Linda communicates her understanding subtly, in ways that strengthen the bond between them. Even after an interaction, Linda absorbs aspects of the exchange and it becomes a part of her own self-history. For example, Linda’s daughter lived alone in Kuwait for three years where she worked in an elementary school, counseling children and advising their parents. Throughout her stay and because of her Egyptian background, she encountered intense racial discrimination in the workplace. Previously, Linda herself had worked in Kuwait, but had very positive experiences. At the time, her position was well respected by the Kuwaiti community and many of her co-workers were also well-respected, fellow Egyptians. Yet in our interactions, Linda speaks of her daughter’s experiences as if they were her own. By listening empathically, Linda legitimizes her daughter’s experiences and closes the mental space between her daughter and her self (Walker 1997: 131).

At times, empathic listening is a risky practice because it requires the listener to continuously de-centre and re-centre, exposing her own sensibilities to anxiety and disruption. This may lead to charges that women are “more emotional” because of their fluctuating hormones, and less “rational.” However, Farida explains that because women “listen well,” they may live the experiences of others, especially of their children, in potent and dramatic ways that involve shows of emotion. Pointing to her head and then her heart, she says:

This means both are working

Together

By practicing maternal femininity, such as empathic listening, while bringing up their children, these mothers reproduce for their children, understandings of motherhood.

Transmitting Maternal Femininity: Entryways to Spirituality

In the groundbreaking book, “The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender,” Nancy Chodorowargues that analyzing the reproduction of the mothering role is an important element for understanding the social organization of gender. Published in 1978, Chodorow wanted to answer the question: why do women mother? Chodorowtries to understand why women predominantly take on nurturing roles, while men tend not to. A crucial distinction Chodorow makes in the book is between the mothering of daughters and sons. Chodorowcontends that women encourage in their daughters qualities associated with caring for others. They mother them to become mothers themselves and to desire to mother. On the other hand, women mother their sons in ways that place less emphasis on nurturing roles, even repressing them. Mothering is reproduced by gendered differentiations in mothering qualities that help to create the gender patterns of society (Chodorow1978).

For the women I interviewed, the gendered trends identified by Chodorow are highly relevant. To explain her own mothering style to her twin daughters and son, Bahar uses an argument similar to Chodorow’s:

You watch yourself become your mother

She did this

She said this

She thought this way

And they will too

Often, Bahar catches herself behaving the way her mother did towards her children, “I would come home and mother would be there, lively, with all her attention on me. I used to wonder how she never got bored alone in the house all day. Now I know. My kids ask me the same questions now. And I answer the same way she did.” In the last line of the poetic response above “And they will too,” Bahar is referring to how her daughters will reproduce this process. While she does not talk about the different ways she contributes to the gender socialization of her daughters vs. her son, she does highlight the transmission of “psychological capacities” that occurs from a mother to her daughters. For Bahar, awareness that this transmission takes place in natural ways is profoundly important. She keeps this awareness in the forefront of her mind to ensure she passes on the best example of mothering to her daughters, and uses this to motivate her own self to improve perceived shortcomings or character flaws. To inculcate the virtues of patience and perseverance in her children, she demonstrates these in action: “If you ask my kids, they’ll tell you: Mama never gives up. She keeps after us until it is gets done.” Around prayer time, Bahar describes how hard it can be to get the kids together to pray collectively. She will call them down repeatedly from their rooms, and wait however long it takes for each child to complete the ritual ablutions; “I could easily just pray myself, feeling I did my part by reminding them. But it’s not about ticking things off a list. They need to *see* that I care…”

Deeply influenced by Chodorow’s work, Carol Gilligan’s “In a Different Voice” largely concerns ways of framing women’s morality. Her interest grew out of her work with Lawrence Kohlberg, which culminates in his “model for moral development.” Kohlberg’s study involves asking men to judge hypothetical moral situations throughout their lives to determine how their morality changes and develops with time. His findings suggest that there are six identifiable stages: the first two are pre-conventional, the middle two are conventional, and the final two stages are post-conventional. According to Kohlberg, an individual progresses through all stages, potentially to the sixth and final stage of development. According to his theory, not all people progress to the top; but everyone develops in the order he outlines. In the first stage an individual’s principal moral concern is “punishment and obedience.” He moves on to “instrumental relativism”; then to the “good boy, nice girl” stage, where his morality is a vehicle for pleasing others; next are the law and order and social contract orientations; and finally, he develops fully when he frames morality through a universal principles lens (Griffin 1993: 80).

Gilligan became disillusioned with Kohlberg’s work when she noticed women repeatedly scoring lower moral development scores than men when using his model. They tended to stop at stage 3-- the people pleasing stage. Kohlberg’s work takes the results he collected studying men and generalizes them to men and women. This was deeply problematic for Gilligan, who differentiates an ethic of justice from an ethic of care. Typically, women learn to desire connectedness and foster care for others from an early age (i.e. from their primary caregiver, who tends to be a woman according to Chodrow). Men, on the other hand, tend to learn to seek separation. Hence, psychology must not measure women and men’s moralities in the same ways. Notably, Gilligan is not essentializing gender differences because she argues that the ethic of care represents a different voice, not necessarily just women’s voices (Griffin 1993: 81). “In a Different Voice” is more about exploring morality in broader directions not previously charted by psychologists than it is about essentializing women and men:

I find the question of whether gender differences are biologically determined or socially constructed to be deeply disturbing. This way of posing the question seems to imply that people, women and men alike, are either genetically determined or a product of socialization –that there is no voice- and without voice, there is no possibility for resistance, for creativity, or for a change whose wellsprings are psychological (1982: xix).

Gilligan presents an alternative model with three stages, maintaining the pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional divisions. The pre-conventional stage is the selfish stage, where an individual’s concern is survival and appeasing the ego. Altruism and self-sacrifice make up the second stage, while the third stage –the height of moral development in Gilligan’s model- is the crucial balance between self-care and caring for others. Although not explicit, Gilligan’s model does incorporate justice in subtle ways; however, her focus is explicitly on care.

Gilligan’s work intersects strikingly with the ways participants in my study imagine maternal femininity and spirituality. For these Muslim mothers, their biological makeup is metaphysically meaningful, giving rise to their notions of maternal femininity, and their dispositions are intimately associated with their primary caregivers. Most of the mothers interviewed identify primarily with their own mothers, but Samar and Nihad’s relationships with their fathers are more intimate. Samar feels she inherits her father’s open-mindedness, gentleness, and his tolerance of others’ beliefs. In turn, she feels her children now embody these values above all others. Nihad’s father was a strict disciplinarian, but also her (democratic) interlocutor in all matters religious. Unsurprisingly, Nihad views herself as a strict parent, although she taps into her maternal femininity for balance and moderation. Now that her children are older and more discerning, she discusses religion more freely with them (i.e. mostly the three eldest).

For all of my participants, maternal femininity –a woman’s introspective reach, and subsequent cultivation of patience, compassion, gentleness, mercy, and empathic listening, etc.- is essentially spiritual. Like Gilligan, Zahra al-Zeera proposes her own theory (though on women’s spirituality and education) to provide an alternative to male-dominated discourses on these subjects. Although careful not to belittle men’s work, she maintains that there are differences in women and men’s early development that affect their spiritual courses throughout life (al-Zeera 2001: 10). In a unique gesture, al-Zeera defines spirituality as an intuitive *way of knowing* that is profound, and oftentimes silent. Her analysis is not unlike Rafif’s view of the *rahm*: “Woman, because of the innate qualities that God gave her, is more prepared to admit and accept her intuitive feelings and knowing. That of course does not mean that men do not experience spiritual development…” (al-Zeera 2001: 12). Spiritual development is the domain of women and of men, but women have an exclusive entryway into this space that begins in their bodies. As a way of knowing, spirituality is the becoming conscious of the sacredness of the soul, the heart, and the womb –their metaphysical interconnectedness. On this path, “she becomes more sensitive, more receptive, more loving, and more caring” (al-Zeera 2001: 12). She continues to climb Gilligan’s moral ladder, reaching the top when “she realizes that her soul is moving within her, *asking* her to see the source of the beauty and ecstasy she has been experiencing” (emphasis added, al-Zeera 2001: 12). One reading of Gilligan’s balancing act, achieved in the final stage of moral development through an ethic of care, is recognizing the soul’s movement while still revering altruism and care for leading one to introspection. Perhaps this reading is best exemplified by Samar, whose perspective on religio-educative mothering matures with time:

God gives us vision

–How else could we change?

Children remove our layers as we build up their skins

Everything comes out

–We need to know

Samar’s mothering –her constant concern for her children’s spiritual welfare (especially now that her working daughter might move South of the border, which has led to sleeplessness and anxiety) leads to self-cultivation, which is a Divinely intended maternal trajectory. In other words, child rearing helps her refine character and hone virtues by giving her easier access to spaces of hidden self-knowledge. These hidden spaces are apart from more shared spaces, such as those of marital interactions, which facilitate the construction and reconstruction of gender roles (i.e. ideal womanhood and ideal manhood), but do not define “ideal motherhood.”

Constructing Motherhood: Private and Shared Spaces

…They are (close) as garments to you, as you are to them (Quran 2:187, Oxford Islamic Studies Online, M. A. S. Abdel Haleem Translation)

In Hamdan’s book “Muslim Women Speak: A Tapestry of Lives and Dreams” she interrogates the idea that women and men have separate essences or natures. She presents participants’ ideas as paradoxes; they struggle to reconcile consistent biological differences with the social ideal of gender equality:

It is amazing how she [Fadwa] was thinking out loud –she was trying to analyze her thoughts, which point out contradictions between her reasoning and her emotions. Fadwa wants to think that women and men are equal –a thought that was supported by her grandmother’s woodcutting [manual labour in the village] and by referencing the Quran’s teaching -yet she kept convincing herself that women and men are different (2009: 78).

These paradoxes are not simply emotionally generated thoughts contradicting reasoning. At first, the mothers I interviewed seem to suggest a similar contradiction when discussing the differences between women and men, but their thoughts reflect complexity and are remarkably cohesive.

Fatin, a mother of three children, whose husband travels frequently, uses marriage to explain the concepts of woman and man, which are divinely identified categories. She argues that marriage is unique; women and men become so intimate that their unparalleled closeness allows for thorough juxtaposition. Using the garment Quranic verse mentioned above, she further explains:

I think we need to move away from “men and women compliment each other” because what we really mean is they complete each other. It’s not true. Both are complete humans fully able to know God independently, which is the highest goal. Me and my husband give each other access to new opportunities to reach God… and living life… even pleasing God through sexual intercourse. What about motherhood and fatherhood? I try to think, if it weren’t for my marriage to my husband, my beautiful children –our time together would not be possible. I’m a garment for him and he’s a garment for me. God didn’t say I’m his shoe and he’s my coat. It’s not spelled out as much as we think it is. Maybe for me my garment shows my status, and maybe his garment is a comfort… you know what I mean? Maybe other couples think about their roles differently, they’re each other’s garments in different ways. But we are two separate garments –man and woman- and that is the point.

In her explanation, Fatin does not struggle to reconcile man and woman’s differences with their Quranic equality. She presents a very clear picture. God commands humanity to have the separate categories of woman and man by embracing biological differences and further by *creating* social distinctions. But their equality before God as beings capable of realizing his Oneness and acting accordingly is a Quranic fact that does not change. In marital relations, a woman is a garment and a man is a garment, and this metaphor is not rigid. Marital relationships are dynamic and changing –where both parties are making meaning and defining each other constantly.

To suggest that patriarchy alone defines womanhood is to forget that the spaces of women’s interactions with men generate voices, which in turn create living meaning. Perhaps al-Zeera’s yin and yang analogy, proposed in her work mentioned above, is misleading because it suggests that the yin alone is not whole, and the yang alone is not whole (2001: 19). In Fatin’s understanding, a woman makes a man, not by being his opposite and thus carrying all those qualities he does not possess, but by being his opportunity, a space to explore new avenues to God. And he is the same for her. In addition, she acknowledges cultural tendencies to define a good woman as a good wife, that is, a beautiful wife who cooks, cleans, and obeys her husband constantly. But, she is careful to show the other side as well. Women are also defining men. A good man is a good husband, who provides the best quality of life for his family, complete with all possible emotional and material comforts. This task is also a source of pressure and causes men to feel anxiety and shame when they are not fulfilling this expectation.

Interestingly, unlike the ideal woman, the ideal mother is less defined in spaces where women and men intersect. Fadwa –a participant in Hamdan’s study mentioned above- suggests this in her discussion of the ‘ideal woman’ from the perspective of members of the village where she was raised (Hamdan does not analyze this aspect of her response):

A woman who can take care of her house and let the man know that she’s in charge of the house is a good wife… This is our cultural belief. For me… if I have children, I wanna be at home… if financially possible… and I think that is something our culture overlooks –that being a mother is just being a mother. That’s it… No. I wanna be a good mother to my children… (2009: 131).

In these spaces of intersection, an ideal woman is a good wife, who takes charge of the house, and a mother –just a mother. Fadwa considers good mothering to be an underdeveloped concept among members of the village, as well as among Arabs in Canada. Fatin suggests a similar idea:

“Let’s go together”

He sees blue oceans and white sand

“Impossible”

I see the kids, needing me

“What else do they need?”

“What kind of mother does that?”

Many times, Fatin’s husband will try to convince her to travel with him for long periods of time, and leave the children behind. She does not agree to go because she feels her children still need her. Fatin observes that her husband cannot understand why these needs are connected to her, now that they are biologically independent beings. For him, her motherhood role is mostly biological, and then later is replaceable by a babysitter. Anyone can feed them and pick them up from school. However, Fatin feels leaving them in this manner would make her a terrible mother; her role must be performed *well*. The “well” aspect of her role is difficult for her husband to understand because as a mother, she defines the standards of her maternal role, largely without his input. In this sense, Fadwa and Fatin imagine “ideal” motherhood privately, in conversation with their children, and with their selves.

“Ideal” Motherhood: Pointing to the Divine

For all of the mothers interviewed, part of being an ideal mother is fulfilling a divine purpose. In the beginning Sidra –now a mother of a baby and a toddler- struggled to conceive. In the depths of this trial, she promised God that if He grants her children, she would mother them well, providing the best religious education within her means. Today, her eldest goes to a full-time Islamic school and attends evening Quran classes at a neighbour’s house. Proudly, Sidra feels she is fulfilling her promise:

I give them learning

That’s why they are here

For Sidra, providing religious education to her children is part of a divine covenant. This covenant shapes her mother role and defines its essential aspects.

Fotoun views mothering *well* similarly. In a popular Youtube video lecture by Timothy Winter (also known as Abdul Hakim Murad) a prominent British Muslim academic, religious leader, and writer, titled “The Essence of Islamic Education,” Winter defines Islamic education in terms of the Quranic primordial conversation between the Lord and humankind. God asks humankind, in chapter 7, verse 172 of the Quran, “Am I not your Lord?” And pre-consciously, humanity responds, “Yes, we bear witness” (Murad 2011). Based on this moment, Winter argues that Islamic education is a return to the primordial state of bearing witness –of knowing the Lord. Education should thus be a reminder, operating on the *fitra* or God-given, innate disposition to remember Him. From this perspective, children are born in a state of forgetfulness, which must be interrupted and restored to a state of constant *dhikr* or remembrance of God. This kind of remembrance is not restored the same way other memories are restored once retrieved from the unconscious mind. This remembrance is a delicate and elusive state that must be continuously established and re-established in creative and penetrating ways. If the mind becomes heedless, even for a moment, it falls into forgetfulness and must climb painstakingly back out (Murad 2011).

According to Winter, children must be taught to view all of creation, including themselves, as signposts to the Divine. This will enable them to maintain a state of God-awareness. For Fotoun, being a good mother is being a constant reminder that God, though unseen, is always present. A mother is a signpost in two respects: by being a member of the created world (i.e. creation is a miracle that points to God upon reflection), and by consistently reminding her children of God through her words and actions. With respect to the latter, Fotoun advises:

Beauty is the easiest way:

What they like –God made you this

What they get –God brought you this

Everything good –I always bring it back to Him

Instead of attributing the good things in the lives of her children to their proximate source (e.g. herself and her husband), Fotoun points back to the ultimate source of beauty. By taking this approach, her children begin to form a positive relationship with God, attributing all their pleasant experiences to His presence. Their God-awareness grows as they grow too. After establishing the foundations of God-awareness through beauty, which is a constant project highlighting His role as Creator and Source, Fotoun introduces her children to a more interactive vision of the Lord. She tells her children that anything hidden is visible to God; even if she cannot see or hear their actions, God can because He is always with them. This was her way of communicating God’s omniscience, which manifests in his All-Hearing and All-Seeing attributes.

Emphasizing love instead of fear encourages children to “come back.” When it comes to introducing Allah to her children, Layal is very gentle and takes advantage of life’s opportunities instead of force-feeding her children lessons that seem irrelevant to their experiences. For example, sometimes her two boys go to Friday prayers at the mosque with her husband. But also because they are so young, she does not push prayer on them. Subtlety and gradation are important to Layal. She relays one heartwarming incident to demonstrate her gentle approach: Her eldest son denied something he had done, which she had seen him do. She reminded him that lying is indecent for it upsets Allah and he should ask for God’s forgiveness by saying, “*astaghfirullah*” or “I seek forgiveness from Allah.” In the face of her suggestion, he persisted in his denial. However later on, he crept up to her side and whispered so that only she could hear, “*astaghfirullah*.”

Though perhaps less subtle than Layal’s approach, Fatin too believes in encouraging her children to take gradual steps towards God. Proudly, she describes the system she uses to help her children eventually perform the five obligatory prayers consistently: Between the ages of 3 and 6, she chants short Quranic chapters with them regularly until they have memorized a few of them very well. Their sixth birthday is a momentous occasion where they are initiated into the prayer ritual, which puts the memorized chapters to use. At six, they are only responsible for performing the morning prayer, which is the shortest of the five prayers. For the entire year, she helps them establish the morning prayer, and each subsequent year (with a cake and a party) she initiates them into the next level of prayer commitment by adding another of the five prayers. By ten years of age, her children are praying all five prayers regularly and feeling very proud of their accomplishments. Fatin’s system is practical and protects her children from becoming overburdened with ritual responsibilities all at once. Though systematic, her approach encourages a positive introduction to God and worshipping experiences.

Except for Fatin, all of the mothers I interviewed emphasize using stories to cultivate God-awareness in their children. For example, Fotoun and Sidra regularly purchase religious children’s books from ISNA. Fotoun looks for books that have colourful pictures, and delve into age appropriate issues her children probably wonder about like, “Where is God?” On the other hand, Layal tells her children stories of her own making with important moral lessons. Around the time of Mawlid al-Nabi or the Prophet’s Birthday, Layal tells her children about the birth of a special baby who lights up the whole world. In our interview, she calls over her younger son, Wael, who is six years old, and asks him “Do you remember the baby who lights up the world? What was his name” With an excited smile he responds, “Baby Muhammad!” By using striking imagery, Layal is able to engage Wael, and inculcate the idea that Muhammad (pbuh) is special because of his ability to spread light (i.e. Truth). Even though Wael may not understand the significance of “lighting up the world,” this image can be elaborated in time with more age appropriate ideas and images to complete Wael’s understanding of Muhammad’s Prophethood, and its implications. Another character Layal sometimes employs in her stories is Fadl, a very good Muslim boy who reads Quran and prays regularly.

In “Once Upon a Time: Parenting through Storytelling,” Hoda Beshir advises Muslim parents to use age appropriate ideas to communicate sought after values and lessons. Beshir identifies storytelling as part of the Muslim tradition. God employs parables in the Qur’an and the Prophetic Hadith tradition uses stories to engage people. Since Islam’s inception, stories have been an integral teaching tool, which parents should also learn to incorporate in their children’s home life. Repeatedly, Beshir urges parents to opt for subtlety when morally directing their children. She advises parents not to tell stories of characters with the same names or traits as their children, and who engage in immoral actions and are corrected throughout the tale. Children detect that these correctives are directed towards them and react defensively. Instead, Beshir writes a series of stories featuring very good children who once in a while make typical mistakes (e.g.. get up from the table while eating, throw things, etc.) and are corrected in loving ways. Parents are to use her stories as blueprints and tailor them to fit their children’s own lives and dispositions. Beshir wrote the book to fill a noticeable void. She claims that storytelling for many Muslim parents is a struggle; those who try to employ it struggle to come up with engaging stories with subtle moral directives (Beshir 2005). Interestingly, Fotoun and Sidra express similar ideas. They opt for storybooks because they either do not have the time to think up stories, or find they cannot create their own engaging stories. Farida on the other hand condemns this lack of imagination in parents, and urges them to take up oral storytelling. She connects this problem to a wider Muslim phenomenon:

We Muslims suffer from a lack of context in *everything*... like we take the Quran as a set of rigid rules… we forget it’s a book for *people*, changing, ups and *downs*. We pester others about outward piety, *hijab*… Do you know her experiences? Are you part of her relationship with God? No! So stay out! … We need to build up our imaginations. If you can’t imagine it, you can’t empathize… If you can’t imagine it, you think it’s wrong. That’s the problem…

Farida’s frustrations parallel Moosa’s observations in “The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam.” In this chapter of “Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism,” Moosa laments the Muslim tendency to ignore context and lived experiences:

Literally the word qur’an means a “recitation.” As a revelation it is recited by the human voice and heard by the human ear. In the final instance the message must both be heard and understood by the “heart,” as the Qur’an literally puts it. In all this a fundamental presumption persists: the Qur’an as revelation requires an audience of listeners and speakers. In other words, a community is integral to it being a revelation (Safi 2003: 124).

As a revelation, the Qur’an’s context is always changing. As such, its interpretations can never be fixed in a “God voice.” The moment it is internalized by humans it becomes human interpretation of God’s word, which is subject to change and error. For Farida, this is the beauty and miracle of the Qur’an. Sadly, she feels that this understanding is not the mainstream. She sees the *alastubirrabikum* primordial covenant as a *conversation,* acknowledging humankind’s humanity:

He knows our flux

Forgetting

Remembering

Forgetting

So God gave us *fitra*

A mother’s job is to continuously replicate this conversation for her children, until they can do so themselves, without her prompting. Uniquely positioned, a mother can reach spaces within her children that others cannot reach because she is a part of those spaces.

Mother-Spaces: the Self and the Heart

Using spatial language and terms such as “access,” the mothers I interviewed complicate the idea that each physical body is its own entity at any given moment, with its own independent self and heart. In “You are Your Child’s First Teacher,” Rahima Baldwin Dancy explains Rudolph Steiner’s parenting theories. Steiner argues that after birth, babies do not have a developed sense of self. Mothers are like extensions of their babies’ bodies; there are no conscious boundaries, and there is no sense of self –physical or otherwise. Baby and mother are a continuous space. Around three years of age, toddlers begin to feel independent and desire a level of separation, which often manifests aggressively by challenging authority (“No!”), throwing tantrums in public, or refusing to cooperate in other ways (Dancy 2012: 42-53).

From a slightly different perspective, mothers do not always view their children as completely separate beings. This may sound radical, but this is an important point to make. Relatedly, Muslims believe children are not morally accountable for their sins until they reach puberty. Before puberty, parents are responsible for training their children to become morally accountable individuals. This responsibility may help explain why some of the mothers I interviewed imagine themselves as always and inevitably “in” – traversing, at all times, the intimate spaces of their children’s being. Since the womb is the child’s first seat in the world, both mother and child share the same physical space for nine months. As Rafif explains, this spatial dynamic is revived again and again after birth as children develop and experience difficulties:

Everybody walks away, but Mother can’t

How can you walk away from yourself?

Rafif is not merely saying a nice thing by equating her own self with her children’s. She is referring to a very real understanding of their relationship that complicates conventional notions of selfhood by suggesting that between a mother and child (from the mother’s perspective), lines of differentiation are blurred, fluid, or even nonexistent.

In “The Marvels of the Heart,” which is the 21st book of al-Ghazali’s 40 book series “The Resuscitation of the Sciences of Religion” (or put another way, it is the *heart* of the compendium), he argues that the human heart is like a mirror. He defines intelligence as “the coming of reality into the heart” (2010: 36), so that the true definition and the nature of the “intelligible” become known. Accordingly, the heart fails to grasp reality, just as a mirror fails to reflect an image accurately, for five principal reasons:

…first, a defect in [the mirror’s] formation, as, for example, a piece of crude iron before it is shaped and polished; second, because of its dirt and rust and dullness, even though it is perfect in formation; third, because it is turned away from the direction of the object toward something else, as for example, if the object were behind the mirror; fourth, because of a veil placed between the mirror and the object; and fifth, because of ignorance of the direction of the object desired, so that it is impossible to place it in front of the position and direction of the object (al-Ghazali 2010: 36).

The first reason, which is defective formation, refers to the heart of a child that is not yet mature, and therefore is still unable to grasp the realities of things. Secondly, though perfectly formed, a dirty or dusty heart-mirror is the one tainted by disobedience. If an individual is persistently disobeying God, his heart becomes dull and rusty, distorting reality in proportion to the extent of such dirty accumulation. The third reason refers to one whose heart is directed at trivial matters, neglecting the Lordly Presence, and perhaps obsessing over ritual requirements exclusively. Such a person’s heart fails to see the Reality towards which all details point. Fourthly, the heart is veiled when an individual falls prey to *taqlid* or blind imitation of others (even if in good faith). This heart cannot see beyond these inherited beliefs or “anything contrary to the strict interpretation of the doctrines that [are] blindly accepted” (al-Ghazali 2010: 38). Dogma “hardens the soul” and a hardened soul is not receptive to Divine light (38). The fifth and last reason suggests that a heart that does not even know of the object of knowledge does not know how to direct itself towards understanding it. To come to know of an object of knowledge, one must become exposed to a special combination of related intelligibles to produce the precursor to subsequently sought knowledge. This special combination is like the mating of a male and female horse to produce a mare; other combinations, such as donkey and donkey or horse and human, will not produce the desired product.

Al-Ghazali argues that all hearts are able to know realities because they are “lordly and noble” (2010: 39), but only if these five issues are resolved. A clean and correctly oriented heart enjoys the privilege of Divine guidance, which is the only true and stable source of intelligence. He writes of the heart as a living space, with its abilities to see the Lordly Presence when the veil is lifted, and to *contain* knowledge of Truth like a reservoir (al-Ghazali 2010: 40).

In Hamza Yusuf’s Youtube lecture “The Human Heart” he explains, “The heart is the source of consciousness” not the brain; the heart is the cognitive organ because one comes to know God (the ultimate Truth), who is otherwise hidden, through the heart. In a more biological tone, he further argues that because the heart supplies the brain with glucose and oxygen, it is the true command centre. Unlike the rest of creation, the human condition is unique because humans can reflect, introspect, and come to an understanding of their own heart in relation to God. This moral awareness makes the heart a *self-revising* command centre. The heart is very sensitive to good actions and bad actions. When a human continuously performs bad deeds, the heart becomes increasingly agitated, and the connection between the *nafs* or soul and the heart is made weaker and weaker (Hanson 2013). Severing the connection between heart and soul leads to complete heedlessness in action and a marked disconnection from God (Hanson 2004).

Moreover, Yusuf’s discussion of the heartbeat is related to the above discussion on creation as signpost to the Divine: Scientifically, a heartbeat is a contraction followed by an expansion. Included in the 99 names of God, which Muslims identify via the Quran, are the Contractor and the Expander. Thus, the heartbeat signifies that the heart knows its Creator, but the *nafs* or soul of an individual forgets. Thus, within the same individual are the notions of remembrance and forgetfulness, constantly revolving. The movement between these two states is embodied in the word *qalb* or heart, which comes from the same Arabic trilateral root as *qalaba* or to revolve, turn over (Hanson 2013).

Without reference to al-Ghazali, Bahar discusses the human heart and motherhood using a mirror analogy: “Especially when they’re young, you’re like a mirror. They see everything like you do. What you understand [points to chest], they eventually get it. How does that happen? It’s amazing…you can tell when they explain something… the same things you say, and with their hands…” The mother reflects the realities of the world and hereafter, as she understands them for their children’s subsequent consumption. If her understanding is sound, their understanding is likely to be sound as well. If her understanding is flawed, they will likely inherit these flaws. Bahar agrees with al-Ghazali’s mirror discussion; like a mirror, a mother must constantly purify herself to improve her understanding, and transmit this understanding accurately. Obedience and constant remembrance of God are the best means for purification. Since her children’s hearts are not yet fully formed, as their mother, she functions as their heart, bearing the burden of accountability, helping to construct their own clean and undistorted mirrors, and guiding the process of self-revision –of which she is an intimate player.

Linda shares a similar understanding:

I try to build their hearts

–*Good* hearts

Because I’m in there too

Heart building is an important project, which differentiates between a good heart and a defective heart. Linda’s role is to build “good hearts” with her children so that they can carry on independently in the future. Her role as builder is significant because she’s “in there too”. In other words, she feels physically invested in her children’s heart-spaces. Morality building then, especially in the early years is not a self-cultivation process in the conventional sense. For these mothers, the heart is not a gated and fortified structure corresponding to one individual. The heart is increasingly permeable, and the external-internal division is much more nuanced than it seems.

Conclusion

Education, then, is remembering the sacred primordial covenant or, in terms of the heart, cultivating heedfulness –mindfully and selectively swinging the heart’s gate, while alertly monitoring and critically weighing one’s affective experiences. Children, along with an underdeveloped heart in al-Ghazali’s sense, also lack the consciousness required to guard the heart. This consciousness must be learnt from others; but in the meanwhile, mothers build the heart to maturity, and protect it from mis-education. At times they are triumphant, describing themselves as heroines and poets, but at other times, they feel failure in the daunting face of their self-prescribed “ideal” motherhood.

CHAPTER FOUR: HEROINES

**I**ntroduction

The mothers interviewed often describe themselves in terms of success against the inabilities of their husbands. Like the spiritual heroines Aurelie Athan and Lisa Miller describe in their own research, the mothers I interviewed feel they are equipped with special skills, such as mother-sight, that enable them to provide for their children’s spiritual education in unique ways. Furthermore, like poets, these mothers effectively and seamlessly connect their children’s experiences to core spiritual Truths such as Beauty. On the other hand, though they may describe themselves as successful mothers in terms of heroines and poets, they also describe themselves as ultimately failing as spiritual educators. Feelings of failure regarding their children’s religio-education stem from feeling distant from religious teachings or the Arabic language, feeling unprepared to deal with challenging moral questions, feeling unable to establish routines and schedules, and feeling the essential balance between spirituality and ritualism is impossible to transmit or uphold. Building on Ebrahim Moosa’s theory of the *dihliz* or threshold space, the successes and failures of these mothers can be usefully conceptualized as movements through *poetic spaces*.

Successful Mothering: Heroines and Poets

“Like a piece of ice on a hot stove, the poem must ride on its own melting” –Robert Frost

Unsurprisingly, the mothers I interviewed imagine their roles as intensely spiritual, intimately connected to the heart, or spiritual core. Remarkably, despite their different articulations and experiences, there are resounding shared themes among them. Quite often, they imagine and describe themselves as archetypal heroines who always manage to save their family from some form of discord. Discord commonly threatens to manifest between the father and the children. The mother steps in to facilitate communication between the two parties where communication is severely lacking, and compensate for the father’s inability to mother.

In “Spiritual Awakening Through the Motherhood Journey,” Aurelie Athan and Lisa Miller highlight the “story of the hero myth,” which figures frequently in the stories of participant mothers. Mothering is an exciting journey that women embark on even while knowing of its difficulties and obstacles, which, once overcome, transform mothers by making them richer and more mature. In this way, a mother is a spiritual heroine, leaving “familiar territory so that she may achieve something beyond the normal range of experience and come back to communicate it” (Athan & Miller 2005: 19). Like any heroine, a mother is equipped with special skills that make her best suited for winning the battle or completing the journey, in ways others cannot. These “others who cannot,” against whom a mother’s unique and urgent abilities shine, are typically manifestations of the unperceptive and incapable husband. Unlike most heroic feats, mothering efforts are seldom celebrated, and mothers are rarely decorated for overcoming their tribulations. For this reason, a mother’s heroism is a reluctant secret that is not readily understood when she “comes back to communicate it” if she even tries to share her experiences at all.

For Layal, her heroism is unavoidable because of her husband’s attitude:

He can’t see it

“Nothing for me to do until they’re older”

But, I keep him in

and that’s hard work!

Layal’s husband is convinced that until his two sons reach puberty, he has little to do with them. In this case, the mother is not just the primary pre-puberty caregiver; she is the exclusive caregiver. But, Layal strongly disagrees with this view, believing firmly that her children need an active and persistent father figure in their daily lives. She finds herself forced to strategically and subtly involve her husband in their upbringing, without him realizing that he is involved in what he would consider mothering. For example, when storytelling, she brings her husband into the story, repeatedly restoring his influence to her children’s consciousness. She asserts that if it were not for her efforts, her children’s relationship with their father would be irreversibly distant. In Layal’s case, the “great adventure” is not readily perceivable by anyone except herself, and her heroism is of the hidden variety.

Linda’s experience is similar to Layal’s, except she enjoys appreciation for her heroism. She describes her husband as “empty,” having “nothing to teach” the children about religion or spirituality. Believing that religious education is best casually instilled in children, Linda feels that both parents must work together to create a home atmosphere conducive to children’s spiritual growth. But this is impossible because of her husband’s aversion to anything remotely spiritual. To compensate for his “emptiness,” Linda tries to create this atmosphere for her children by praying with them as much as possible and by helping them to perceive God’s beauty in their lives. For example, dealing with a daughter’s immodest dress, Linda approaches the issue from the perspective of beauty. She explains to her daughter that God loves beauty, and that she should evaluate all of her thoughts, actions, and even her dress with this in mind: “Is this beautiful?” But before her approach can affect any change, her husband interjects: “What will people say if they see you dressed like this?” Linda laments that he often disrupts her attempts to foster spirituality in very unromantic ways. Despite her husband’s spirituality-killing interjections, Linda proudly shares:

My efforts are not wasted

They say, “Whatever good we have, we got from you”

Her children recognize her efforts, and associate the good in their lives with their mother. This acknowledgement is enough to spur her efforts on in the face of her husband’s most unspiritual tendencies.

The heroine is the one who changes the unfortunate status quo when nobody else can or is willing to take a risk. Nihad tells a story of how she steps up to do what her husband is unable to accomplish. Her daughter Zina, who is in a public middle school started to lose interest in religion, saying, “Our Eid is boring” or “I don’t want to pray anymore.” Shortly afterwards, she came home asking, “What is sex?” “Is it true when you get your period, you can get pregnant?” Shocked by her daughter’s concern with such topics, Nihad decided to transfer Zina to the Islamic school where she works. Zina resisted tearfully, not wanting to leave her friends and teachers. Seeing his daughter upset, Nihad’s husband tried to discourage Nihad from the decision, citing Zina’s unhappiness. But Nihad was unmoved, and demanded of her husband: “You want her to come home everyday saying this or that? No you don’t, so let me deal with this.” This effectively ended the discussion, and Zina went to the Islamic school at the first opportunity. Despite Zina’s persistent protests over the next few months, Nihad’s decision was firm.

While relating the story in our interview, Nihad explains that a mother knows what to do:

I’m her mother…

I know what to do, quickly

He…

He is blinded by emotion

At a loss for words, Nihad struggles to explain her husband’s position, and why he is unable to see the issue clearly and make the right decision. Interestingly, she attributes his deficiency to emotion, which at first seems like a counter discourse to the idea that women are inherently emotional, and men are rational. However, she locates his tendency towards emotion in his personality rather than in gender, describing her own personality as comparatively more strict. Importantly, her husband fails to mother because of his emotions, not because he is a father; and yet, Nihad succeeds in knowing what to do because she is Zina’s mother. This suggests a complex dynamic that cannot be reduced to a rivalry between mother and father. Still, motherhood is a significant consideration and source of heroism. Nihad inherits her strictness from her father, and identifies strictness as her most effective mothering characteristic. Now her daughter Zina is happy at Islamic school and comes home reciting Qur’an and traditional supplications; her affiliation with religion is how it should be –strong and unthreatened. She never uses foul language nor does she ask inappropriate questions. For Nihad, this is a clear victory that would not have been possible without her efforts. Though in Nihad’s case the spiritual element may be less pronounced, her decision to transfer her daughter to Islamic school is principally about protecting Zina’s spiritual core, and being the only one who can offer this protection.

Besides associating motherhood with the hero myth, these mothers’ stories point to another archetype: the poet. Like the poet’s deep perceptiveness and ability to draw connections between the simple indications of nature and life’s fundamental truisms, “mother-sight” is the ability to see, understand, and connect with that which others neglect to perceive or appreciate. For example, Shokran is able to recognize the different ways to effectively engage each of her children. Her eldest son (five years old) becomes immediately bored if she tries to formally teach him religion (e.g. using a workbook and worksheets or with rigid routines and lesson plans). Even storytelling is not effective with him; he quickly discerns her religio-educative motives and tries to get away. Instead, she casually discusses religious concepts with him as they play with blocks or take walks in the park, and listens for his cues to gauge the content and scope of these discussions, “It’s a fine art, and it’s the only way I get through to him,” she says laughingly. On the other hand, her daughter, who is three years old, loves story time because she gets tickled by and cuddles with her mother, and does not mind if the stories emphasize moral lessons at the expense of exciting plot lines and unforgettable characters. Politely, Shokran points out that while her husband sets the moral tone in the home, he is unable to see these differences between their children, and is thus unable to cater to them. Oftentimes, he will try to sit both children down, classroom style, and tell them a quick story before dinner, failing to capture her son’s interest, or provide the fun and interactive story time her daughter enjoys. No matter how many times they express boredom or wiggle away, her husband does not change his approach. To be fair, Shokran admits that he has much less time to spend with them because while she stays at home, he works from 9am to 5pm most days of the week. This schedule undoubtedly lessens his opportunities for experimentation, but also wears down his patience. Nonetheless, Shokran explains:

God gave mothers eyes with

Sight *and* insight

Alongside perceptiveness, the archetypal poet is able to connect seemingly mundane life experiences with sacredness of meaning. This aspect of the poet is perhaps most commonly expressed, as “the poet is a liar who always tells the truth.” The archetypal poet has an exaggerated ability to read meaning into experiences, linking the intimacy and particularity of truths with the generality and universalism of Truth. For Farida, this ability to forge authentic connections between truths and Truth is an important part of her mother role; otherwise children grow up with an irresolvable tension between their religious beliefs and life experiences. An admirer of the work of Khaled Abou el Fadl, particularly his work, “The Conference of the Books: the Search for Beauty in Islam,” Farida implements this search for beauty as a mothering strategy. Abou el Fadl argues that modernity is characterized by moral confusion. A way to weed through the chaos is to focus on beauty. This idea comes from the famous hadith, or saying of the Prophet Muhammad, “Allah is beautiful and loves beauty.” Here, beauty is equated to Truth. Farida argues that for humans, identifying beauty is more tangibly accomplished than identifying truth. For this reason, when approaching any morally confusing situation, Farida looks for a beautiful answer. Although her two children are still too young to speak fluently, Farida is anxious that one day they will ask her morally challenging questions which she will be unable to address. She remembers in her own youth feeling spiritually empty and distant from religion every time authorities could not provide her with soul-comforting answers. Her children must not suffer the same disenfranchising experiences:

Now, I have to prepare:

I think of what looks ugly

And how to show its beauty

She gives the example of “the problem of evil and suffering” to illustrate the urgency and seriousness of her practice. Her children will undoubtedly witness or experience suffering and find this at odds with the idea of a Loving, Merciful and Good God. Like the poet, who meditates on such philosophical ideas and communicates these reflections as poetry to others, the mother may pre-meditate, attempting to make connections and produce meanings to save her children suffering through these sorts of ethical dilemmas.

Bahar’s approach to meaning making is equally poetic but less anxiety-laden. Bahar firmly believes that no amount of pre-thinking and predicting will protect her children from the trials –physical, metaphysical or otherwise- that they are destined to experience. However, she does recognize that she can help them in another crucial way: through the power of making *duaa* or supplicating to God. She incorporates this practice in every aspect of her life, infusing everyday chores with potent spiritual meanings. For example, an avid gardener, she supplicates passionately while potting plants, saying, “Oh Allah! Just as you have made these flowers so good and beautiful, instill in my children goodness and beauty.” As a mother who is preoccupied with the affairs of her family, Bahar sees in the project of gardening an opportunity to turn to God for help and guidance. She sees the beauty in the plants (i.e. truth) as pointing to a much greater Beauty (i.e. Truth).

With a wagging finger, she implores me not to underestimate the power of supplication as nothing can bring a person protection and prosperity like a sincere plea to God. For Bahar, a mother can only do so much for her children; much is outside of her circle of influence and control. Instead of worrying obsessively, while constantly doing her part, she can turn constructively to the One whose circle of influence and control is unbounded. Supplicating as a mother is different than supplicating as anybody else:

God will never forsake

the one whose mother remembers [him/ her] in duaa

By supplicating, a mother is able to offer her children a connection to God’s aid and protection that otherwise may be beyond their reach. Bahar explains that when a person’s mother dies, he or she laments the loss for many reasons, including the loss of a special and very powerful genre of mother-for-child supplications.

Unsuccessful Mothering: Feelings of Failure

“Great poetry is always written by somebody straining to go beyond what [s]he can do”

–Stephen Spender

Perhaps the discernable paradox in these mothers’ self-imaginings is that despite heroic and poetic role descriptions, overwhelmingly these mothers feel they are failing their children, in terms of their religious education. For example, self-disappointment engulfs Layal as she repeatedly admits that there is so much she has not thought of concerning her children’s religious upbringing. In our discussions, she often says, “I need to read more on this” or “I need to think about this a lot more” or “I was never able to give my children the routine they need to grow spiritually.” Layal is not alone. Sidra also feels a tremendous burden of guilt, particularly because she made a promise to God about her children’s religious education, while she was trying to get pregnant (see above). Her family’s financial situation basically dictates which Islamic school and after school programs her children can participate in. Retrospectively, Sidra wonders if she should have done more research (“There could be a better school out there!”) or even taken up a part-time or full-time job to increase the available school options. Moreover, Sidra’s struggles to master Arabic have earned her a self-designation of illiteracy, which fuels her conviction that she is ill-equipped to teach her children about religion.

On the other hand, Nihad works full-time to provide a much-needed second income and fund her youngest daughter’s Islamic school experience. Yet, she feels she does this at the expense of her mothering duties. A woman can only mother at home, so by her own definition Nihad is failing as a mother. Similarly, Farida is constantly anxious about the number of books she has not yet read, and her lack of preparedness. Her children are only getting older, and she is not yet prepared to teach them all they need to know. Unlike Farida, Fotoun feels competent. To achieve competence, Fotoun began working as an Islamic schoolteacher and creating community education programs. These experiences helped initiate her into the teaching mindset, which she feels is crucial for success at home. However, now with these teaching commitments taking up the bulk of her time, Fotoun feels she is not giving her own children the attention they need. Under her children’s perceptive gazes, she does not want to abandon her community commitments and her ethic of volunteerism for fear of setting them a poor example.

Linda feels she fails to cultivate in her children a balance between spirituality and rituality. She admits her children are inherently good people with intensely spiritual leanings, yet they consistently fail to perform the required daily prayers and other important rituals. Though she understands that her partner is partly to blame for setting such a poor example, she still bears the bulk of the guilt, “I should have done more… There must’ve been something else I could have done.” Samar’s experience is very similar to Linda’s. Having worked most of her life, her children were often in the company of her in-laws who are not religious at all, especially in what she terms their “formative years.” Samar feels the window of opportunity to cultivate religious interest has long passed; now is much too late. Though thankful for their occasional interest in spirituality, which still provides her with an opportunity of talking to her children about God, Samar feels their heedlessness is mostly her fault. She wonders aloud if her career was worth this outcome.

Feelings of failure are an overwhelming trend among the women I interviewed, despite their stories of strength, heroism, and strategic poetics. I liken their harsh self-evaluations to the feeling of a poet whose rare moment of ecstatic enlightenment is elusive, dissolving into nothingness if it is not quickly recorded on a page. Mothers grasp at truth to unveil, albeit briefly, Truth, not only for their selves, but also for their children. It is a struggle to continuously preserve an awareness of the Divine for anyone, and yet mothers feel they must also *constantly* communicate this awareness to their children. This expectation creates an enormous amount of pressure, which unsurprisingly results in feelings of failure.

Navigating Success and Failure: Poetic Spaces

Oscillating feelings of success and failure are attributable to the liminality of the spaces mothers occupy. Their spatial descriptions of their roles encourage a look at spatial conceptualizations of spirituality, religious practice, and education in the literature. Three ideas emerge as principally relevant. In feminist literature, Shahnaz Khan explores how women “do and act *m*uslim” in spheres largely regulated by Orientalism and Islamism –both discourses define women’s identities as purely religious while denying them any nuanced voice, transcending this category. Khan uses the “third space” as a space apart from the violence of domineering discourses, yet still affected by them. Though politically instructive and concerned with women’s negotiations of agency, the “third space” connotes resistance against hegemonic ideals and descriptors, which is not the concern of this thesis (Khan 1998).

Perhaps a little more in line with the subject of this work is Zahra al-Zeera’s notion of the *barzakh* or interworld. Literally, the *barzakh* is the Arabic term for the interworld between temporary worldly existence and the eternal afterlife. Muslim tradition identifies the *barzakh* as the grave; essentially the waiting place of the conscious soul of the deceased person, pending the Day of Judgment. Al-Zeera uses this term to discuss the importance of dialectical thinking –or thinking that transcends dichotomies by exploring their productive tensions, resulting in wholistic education. By criticizing positivist and constructionist educational perspectives, al-Zeera offers dialectical thinking as the Islamic alternative (2001). On the surface, her work captures many of the themes recurring in this thesis: spirituality, education, and womanhood. Furthermore, her emphasis on dialectics as reconciling opposites in constructive ways is undoubtedly relevant. However, the connections she draws between her personal ideas of femininity and spirituality are rooted in her particular experiences, and do not relate clearly to her reliance on dialectical thinking. Moreover, her insistence that there is an “Islamic” perspective of education is suspect, especially since its “Islamic-ness” is contingent on her own ideas of what it means to be Muslim. Though interesting, al-Zeera’s work is ultimately not helpful for understanding the ways in which mothers imagine their religio-educative roles.

Another important work that highlights relationships between the *barzakh*, imagination, and poetry is “Dreams that Matter” by Amira Mittermaier (2011). In this book, Mittermaier explores these concepts through the poetry and experiences of her interlocutors in Cairo, Egypt –namely poet Shaykhs and their followers. She accesses imagination by focusing on participants’ explicit poetry and how this poetry (often inspired by dreams and visions) is connected to notions of prophecy. Undoubtedly, Mittermaier’s work is inspiring for any research that seeks to inquire after Muslim imagination through conceptions of space.

However, for the purposes of this thesis, the most useful spatial articulation that leaves room for the exploration of spirituality, education, and motherhood is Ebrahim Moosa’s concept of the *dihliz* or threshold. In the brilliant book, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, Moosa borrows Ghazali’s own metaphor of the *dihliz* to not only describe Ghazali’s contribution to Muslim tradition, but also describe a space that, for the benefit of the modern Muslim community (and all of humanity), must urgently be imagined and re-imagined in a myriad of contemporary contexts. Moosa (2005) plays with this concept in many artistic ways, but his main use of the term describes Ghazali’s ability to move easily between poetics and ethics, mysticism and ritualism, the creative and the practical, aesthetics and law.

Ghazali is an important mid-eleventh century Muslim thinker, who wrote the monumental *Resuscitation of the Religious Sciences* to re-infuse rituals with spiritual meaning without resorting to obscure and esoteric rhetoric, which would effectively alienate the masses. The story goes that Ghazali was a prominent academic, who enjoyed much glory and prestige for his knowledge of Islam. However, he left his important post to travel and rediscover the spirituality he felt was missing from dry academic renditions of Islam, and the politics of academia itself. His journey led him back to academia with a renewed vision of religion, which he spent the rest of his life writing about and teaching to others (Moosa 2005: 93). Not only did Ghazali resuscitate religion for himself, he also empowered others to practice intellectual and spiritual *bricolage[[4]](#footnote-3)*, and not strictly engage with only “Islamic” sources. In this transformative and deconstructionist sense, he occupies the *dihliz*ian position –a position of constant flux and reimagining. Moosa argues that modern Muslims should look to his methodology to imagine new and creative ways of critically engaging with Islam (2005: 40).

The *dihliz* is a useful metaphor for considering the ways through which mothers interviewed imagine their religio-educative roles. They oscillate between success and failure much like a poet moves from truths to Truth, making sacred meaning out of everyday encounters, and communicating these meanings to others at the deepest human level. When Layal encourages her son to seek forgiveness for lying, her efforts are not immediately rewarded and they certainly are not long lasting. But they represent the sort of ambivalence that characterizes her imagined religio-educative role; she is responsible for orienting his heart towards God-consciousness.

Again, mothers are like poets using religious education to move their children from unconsciousness to conscious understanding, from the trappings of forgetfulness back to primordial Lord-remembrance, from heedlessness to God-awareness. And very much like the poet’s grasping for Truth, mothers describe their own enlightenment, upon which their children’s spiritual health is contingent, as frustratingly elusive. The all-important balance between ritualism and spirituality that must be maintained, which gives constant meaning to otherwise uneventful ritual actions, is a primary concern. Samar and Linda lament instilling spirituality in their children at the expense of ritual, while Fatin and Nihad (for three of her four children) believe they strike the important balance using strategic planning and strictness, respectively.

Mothers may look skeptically upon their own dispositions and understanding, even as they celebrate their heroism and unparalleled abilities. Sidra and Farida communicate this lack of confidence openly, yet they assert their motherhood as a fact: one grows and develops into it in premeditative and casual ways. Therefore, mother-poems are not spatially confined; they are everywhere and nowhere, betraying their liminality between what Moosa calls the semiotic and the somatic, seeking interchangeability where rigid polarity seems most insistent. Rafif’s metaphysical understanding of the womb or *rahm* straddles the semiotic and somatic division in remarkably reconciliatory ways.

Moosa attributes depth in religious understanding to an appreciation and interaction with mysticism, acquired through emotive listening. Likewise, empathic listening and mother-sight are instructively comparable to the poet’s perception, an almost esoteric quality, but not confined to exclusive spaces, rampantly existent in the most ordinary places and experiences. Bahar’s supplications while gardening, her ability to see parallels between the beauty in the flowers and the beauty she wishes for her children is undeniably poetic. Similarly, Shokran describes detection of her children’s different learning styles, especially when against her husband’s inability to detect these differences, as insights attributable to special perceptiveness.

Like Ghazali, mothers recognize the importance of self-cultivation and reconciliation that must occur for child-rearing to be effective. They constantly work to move from *ghafla* or heedlessness to heedfulness, struggling to keep the Truth clearly in view, to pass it on to their children in appropriately incremental doses. They use a variety of strategies to affect their children, from collective ritual (formal methods) to story telling (casual methods), constantly deconstructing myriad influences and selectively constructing their constitutive parts into new meanings for their children’s consumption. This process is not straightforward and does not always yield ideal results. For example, Layal describes her children’s excitement around Christmas time and their desire to setup a Christmas tree at home. Her son relates to her a conversation with his public school teacher, who tells him he can have a Christmas tree at home if his parents purchase one. Surprised by her son’s request, and unsure how to respond in an age appropriate fashion without discussing complex religious ideas, Layal weakly explains to her son that since his teacher only speaks English and cannot speak Arabic, she has a Christmas tree. But people who speak both English and Arabic are different and do not set up Christmas trees in their homes. Retrospectively, she knows her answer means little to her son and that the issue will come up again. She also feels guilty for not giving him the real religious reasons behind the matter; but in the moment she put together the best answer she could come up with.

Conclusion

Ultimately, these Muslim mothers imagine they facilitate their children’s relationships with God throughout their children’s lives in varying ways. Eventually, their children must be weaned into independently spiritual beings, but the emphasis is not on the weaning, which is supposedly a naturally occurring process that takes care of itself. Like Gilligan and Chodorowdescribe in their moral theories, these mothers think in terms of connectedness, not in terms of severing ties. Conceptualizing motherhood as a poetic space discursively captures the movements and transformations that mothers imagine are necessary to build and maintain connections with their children, with great spiritual implications.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

As Moosa (2003) laments, the aesthetics of the Muslim imagination is a neglected area of inquiry that needs to be urgently explored. Academic preoccupations seem to center on “Islamic” rules and how Muslims cope with these rules, bend these rules, or escape them altogether. Both the Muslim scholarly community and laity seem to be similarly preoccupied. This trend is especially apparent in the literature on Muslim women (as well as in the media), which tends to redundantly circle around issues of veiling, oppression, the public-private domains, clashes with Western values, and several other topics that hardly leave any room for discussions on the *affective* elements of Muslim experience, and how Muslims give these elements meaning. Perhaps this area is too often relegated exclusively to the arts; but this is only to the detriment of the social sciences, which have realized this deficiency, and have begun to absorb arts-based approaches of inquiry rather hungrily.

This study is my pilot attempt to tap into a relatively untapped subject area (i.e. Muslim women’s imaginations), using a very young, but refreshing method of inquiry. Specifically, I ask: how do Muslim mothers of the GTA imagine their religio-educative roles in the midst of a global crisis of Muslim knowledge, authority, and education? My question assumes that Muslim mothers identify a persistent link between mothering and educating, and this assumption principally springs from my own intuition as a Muslim mother, and what may also be written off as hearsay –that is a verse from an old Egyptian poem claiming, “The mother is a school,” which circulates with the authority of a proverb backed by popularly accepted notions of religious doctrine.

Over the course of several months, I interviewed eleven Muslim mothers across the GTA. Our interviews were largely unstructured, averaging an hour and a half, and mostly led by the participants themselves, with my occasional probing. Wishing to stay aesthetically oriented, I decided to analyze my interview transcripts using “poetic inquiry.” Poetic inquiry is a loose term for various inquiry methods that rely on some form of poetry in their presentation, analysis or both. I constructed found poems with the transcripts, restricting myself to the use of words and phrases used originally by participants in the interviews, and organizing the transcripts into recurrent themes. Creating poetic inquiry allowed me to embrace my interpretive role as researcher, keeping it forefront in my mind throughout the research process. The found poems also offered an opportunity to highlight the *affective* quality of participants’ experiences in powerfully resonating ways. I also used several prose quotations when I felt they provided much-needed clarity. The resultant poems and my analysis represent a complex mixture of my interpretations restricted by the words and phrases of my participants.

I found two striking trends across my interview transcripts: the tendency to describe maternal femininity and mothering experiences spatially (for example, empathic listening becomes a process of “getting in or staying in” rather than just a way to listen) and the mother’s poetic role of translating everyday experiences into signposts pointing to Truth. Mothers also expressed stories of resounding success as religio-educators (in very particular senses) and intense feelings of overwhelming failure. Considering these two expressions to be a paradox did not seem to capture the affective quality of the imaginations of my participants. Instead, I preferred to imagine that these trends be conceptualized as poetic spaces –transformative, in-between spaces, operating much like Moosa’s *dihliz*, both consciously and unconsciously created and uncreated by these women in very private and personal processes of their own imagination.

With such a vast topic of interest, touching an array of issues such as motherhood, spirituality, and education, I worried that hour long or two hour long interviews would not be sufficient to explore the topic thoroughly. Retrospectively, although I would have loved to have more time with each of the mothers, and would have undoubtedly learned a great deal more, I recognize that our conversations were long and significant enough to say something thoughtful about the topic. Poetic spaces are just one possible way to look at the experiences of these women, and there are undeniably countless others. Looking forward, I feel there are endless directions to launch into from this point. Perhaps a future project could look at aspiring mothers and how they imagine their mothering roles before a relationship with their children begins at all (in the strict sense). I had a small taste of this perspective with Farida, who felt she was still at the outset of her mothering journey and was frantically preparing for when she would be more in the thick of her maternal role. I also feel it would be worthwhile to try to approach the home schooling community again, hopefully with more successful results, and gather insight from those mothers –mothers like Shokran who spend the bulk of their time with their children each and everyday. In the Greater Toronto Area, a significant segment of Islamic schoolteachers are mothers with responsibilities both at school and at home. Nihad is one such mother, who struggles to “get in” with her daughter Zina, who now attends the same Islamic school where she works. Studying these women (i.e. mothers who are also Islamic schoolteachers) as a group would definitely point to new and unprecedented insights.

The eleven mothers I interviewed taught me that motherhood is first and foremost a process of imagination that changes at times turbulently; sometimes corresponding to social expectations, but at most other times corresponding to the private feelings of women searching for God. Ideal motherhood is then an infinite concept that each mother creates for herself, and is just as changing as the poetic spaces themselves. Ideal motherhood corresponds to the mother’s personal notions of religion and spirituality, her own struggles to achieve God-awareness and the ways she works to help her children build a relationship with God. She does this through heart building, through searching for Beauty and answers to morally challenging questions. She does this by improvising, by not knowing and discovering, and through reflection and self-cultivation. She also does this heroically, when others cannot fathom what needs to be done, and poetically with her unique brand of mother-sight.

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1. The notion of liminality I wish to capture here draws on Victor Turner’s concept. Mothers may imagine that they are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (1969: 95). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Razi group “specializes in developing Islamic and culturally oriented educational solutions for institutions in government, education, and the private sector. Our solutions integrate the unique religious, cultural, and social landscape that our clients operate in. Based in Toronto, Canada and Dubai, United Arab Emirates, we offer solutions to clients in North America, Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East” (Razi Education 2007-2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Although the work of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan is considered archaic by some scholars, here their contributions to feminist thought are quite relevant, and converse easily with the imaginations of the mothers I interviewed. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Here I use the term bricolage in the same way Moosa does, but also to echo Claude Lévi-Strauss’ sense of the term as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)