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Muslim women speak their mind

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MUSLIM WOMEN SPEAK THEIR MIND

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Social Science

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Alexandra Maria da Silva Rubens

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ABSTRACT

MUSLIM WOMEN SPEAK THEIR MIND

by Alexandra Maria da Silva Rubens

This study investigated the lives of a community of Muslim women living in California's Silicon Valley. Its focus was listening to Muslim women speaking their mind, telling their stories of the experience of how they maintain a Muslim identity and practice Islam in the United States.

The women's stories reveal that in their personal and professional lives, they have agency, making decisions regarding the control of their bodies, their lives, and their futures. Their life experiences contrast sharply with common Western stereotypes of them as passive, submissive, oppressed victims of their men and their religion.

Muslim women maintain their identity while living in the United States by creating community, continuing relationships back home, and practicing what they see as a purer form of Islam. The women's stories document a pattern of adaptation in their behavior that exists elsewhere in the Western world.

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PART ONE

MUSLIM WOMEN – A COMPLEX RESEARCH TOPIC

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WHY RESEARCH MUSLIM WOMEN?

Much has been written about Muslim women, the veil, Orientalism, and the colonialist contribution to the unveiling and reveiling of Muslim women. Historically, in the eyes of Western societies, the veil has symbolized the ignorance and oppression of Muslim women and the inferiority of Muslim cultures as a whole. Edward Said (1979), in Orientalism, defines Orientalism as having less to do with the Orient, as that area of the world was known in earlier times, but rather more to do with the West's viewpoint of it. Malek Alloula (1986), in The Colonial Harem, states that women have long been at the center of the conflict between East and West. Marnia Lazreg (1994), in The Eloquence of Silence, argues that there are two extreme interpretations of Muslim women, either as embodiments of Islam or as helpless victims forced to live by its tenets.

The purpose of my research was to listen to Muslim women speak their mind, to tell their own stories of how they maintain a Muslim identity while living in the United States. My goal is to give Muslim women a voice, to give them the opportunity to counter the negative images the West has of them. I will present in my writings a group of women's stories, hopefully providing a clarification of their place and role within Muslim society, on how they maintain Muslim identity, and live the life of practicing Muslim women in American society.

The women who participated in this research are members of a multicultural mosque in California's Silicon Valley. However, it is not the mosque, nor even Islam, that is the subject of this research. The focus of this research is on Muslim women, their lives, their thoughts, their hopes, and their dreams. By sharing the women's stories, as

well as my own participant observation experiences, I hope to juxtapose the reality of the women's lives, how they see themselves within their Muslim community, to their stereotypical images in the West as oppressed victims of their men and their religion.

In this research, I show how the women maintain a Muslim identity while living in North America by creating community, continuing relationships with family "back home," and practicing a purer form of Islam. The data within the stories illustrate that women have agency, making decisions regarding the control of their bodies, their lives, and their futures. The women's lived experience contrasts sharply with their common Western images or stereotypes, assumptions, misconceptions, perceptions about Muslim women as passive, submissive, oppressed victims of their men and their religion.

I became interested in the study of Muslim women and their images in the West during my first semester of graduate studies when I was exposed to Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, and to global feminism. Although I immigrated to the United States from Madeira Island, Portugal, as a young girl, I have never been integrated into being an American. This confuses Americans since they think of me as one of them rather than that "other" we so often discuss in conversation or study in academia. This is both a blessing and a curse for me. It is a blessing because I am privileged to conversations that those "others" are not. It is a curse because having been privileged to such conversations, I hear things, often unpleasant, said about those "others" of whom I am one.

This was the situation during that transformative semester as I studied the images the West has of the East or, more specifically, the Middle East. Reading the assigned literature through the lenses of an immigrant woman, I realized that I was reading about

Muslim women but I was not reading of Muslim women. Also, as I searched for a thesis subject, I learned that not much had been written about female spaces, the private spaces occupied by women only. This appealed to me. I liked being around women; I liked female energy. I was uncomfortable with the intense preoccupation by the West with the images of veiled female bodies and with the lack of knowledge regarding Muslim women's place and role in their respective societies. For these reasons, I decided to make the focus of this research listening to Muslim women speaking their mind, telling their stories of the experience of living in North America.

Leila Ahmed (1992), in Women and Gender in Islam, stresses that the investigation of women in Islamic societies entails studying the societies in which they are rooted and, in particular, the way in which gender is articulated socially, institutionally, and verbally. She argues that some charting of the terrain of women's history and the socioeconomic and historical conditions in which the discourses are grounded is a necessary first step towards such investigation. Agreeing with Ahmed, I prepared for this research by reading about the Middle East, Islam, colonialism, and, women. Specifically, I researched in depth the subject of Muslim women's public image in the West, both past and present. Although most of the literature is not specifically about Muslim women in the United States, this is not a significant issue since their negative stereotypical images appear to be global in scope.

Although I do not refer to them directly, I gained significant knowledge from reading Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel's Western Women and Imperialism focusing on women the "Orientalist as insider"; Valentine M. Moghadam's Identity, Politics and Women; M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talade Mohanty's Feminist

Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures; Margot Badran and Miriam Cook's Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminism Writing; Lila Abu-Lughod's Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East; and Fatma Müge Göcek and Shiva Balaghi's Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power. All these works focus on a comparative examination of the complex meaning of feminism and had a significant effect on how I conducted myself and framed my research questions.

In Arab Women in the Field (Altorki & El-Solh, Eds., 1988, p. 91), the contributors argue that the type of relationship the researchers establish with those they study will almost inevitably have an impact on their access to relevant data, and that the researcher's involvement with the informants is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives. Lila Abu-Lughod, in Writing Women's Words (1993, p. 27), states that the degree to which people in communities anthropologists study appear as "other" is in part a function of how they write about them; that by insistently focusing on individuals and the particularities of their lives, we may be better able to perceive similarities in all of our lives.

When I first started talking with my informants, hereafter referred to as the women, they appeared to be comfortable with me. I believed that my many hours of research had paid off. Since I seemed to have some knowledge of them, their history and their religion, the women appeared comfortable talking about themselves. I thought perhaps they did not feel they were actually divulging very much as they shared their experience with me. I had prepared and I was knowledgeable, but the relationships that developed between me and the women were more complex than simply that I was a

prepared researcher. As we became more familiar, I realized that the woman who I am also facilitated the interviewing process.

As I stated earlier, I am an immigrant woman from Madeira Island, Portugal. Although I arrived in the United States when I was young, I have never forgotten who I am and where I am from. This may account for the ease we all felt in my initial interactions with the women. As we talked, I realized we had similar attitudes toward life and society and that, other than the fact I have a glass of wine with my dinner and do not cover my hair, we had much in common. I began to notice that the women would often refer to me in inclusive terms. In discussing this openly with them, both mothers and daughters stated that they saw me as one of them. One of the young women said, "Well, yes, you are like us."

As the research progressed, this trusting relationship or bond became priceless for me. When some academics challenged my credibility as the researcher from the West speaking for these women, rather than thinking of how I could defend my position, I simply shared my dilemma with the women. One eloquent woman stated that she and her veiled friends had shared their stories with me because they trusted me and believed I would represent them in a truthful manner. She said that when she and her friends speak to outsiders, they are perceived as defending themselves, what they say is not credible. However, when the American reader eventually reads what I write, it will be credible, since I am a researcher.

Fatima Mernissi, in Scheherazade Goes West, quotes her wise grandmother, Yasmina, as follows: "You must focus on the strangers you meet and try to understand them. The more you understand a stranger and the greater is your knowledge of yourself,

the more power you will have” (2001, p. 114). Having followed wise Yasmina’s advice, I realize that this rapport with my research community enabled me to collect more substantial data than I ever dreamed possible. Nevertheless, I became concerned with my status as the researcher. While originally thinking I was an outsider, I had been graciously invited inside. However, further analyses clarified the situation for me. I was neither outside nor inside; I was positioned in the midst of our collective experience as immigrants in the United States. Although I will try to provide an accurate representation of the women’s lives as fully as possible, my observations and writings will reflect my own cultural background. Feeling empowered by wise Yasmina’s words, I sincerely believe this adds substance to the study.

CHAPTER 2

EXPLORING RESEARCH ABOUT MUSLIM WOMEN

As I explored analysis of the images of Muslim women in the West, I was interested in learning what scholars with a special interest in Muslim women as well as experts on the subject of Islam were writing about the images of Muslim women in the West. Like Halliday (1996, p. 195), I also questioned whether Western writing about Muslims and the Middle East over the past century or two has been, and continues to be, distorted by a set of prejudices born of European and imperial preconceptions. That being Halliday's definition of Orientalism, the concept I refer to in my Introduction.

Present day stereotypes of Muslim women are rooted in the writings of early European male travelers to the Muslim world who are referred to as Orientalists, since the area was known at that time as the Orient. Since male travelers to Muslim societies had extremely limited, if any, access to women, their interpretations and explanations of what they observed as customs approximated more closely the meanings given to them from the point of view of the Middle Eastern men they talked with (Ahmed, 1992, p. 149).

The images of Middle Eastern women brought back to Europe by male Orientalist writers were not realistically founded on the actual behavior of women since these men were unable to observe them. The only women that would have been possible for such men to have any contact with would have been entertainers or prostitutes, since entering the harem or female quarters of the house was forbidden to all men who were not close relations of the women who resided within. Thus, European male travelers, barred from

entering harems, created and improvised on what harems might contain in terms of seduction and mystery. Some European women travelers who were permitted access to the female quarters of Middle Eastern houses published alternative views of the harem. Their writings focused on the activities of daily life such as the beautiful costumes, the jewels, and the extravagant meal preparations, but their accounts remained marginalized and were unsuccessful in providing an alternative vision of Oriental or Middle Eastern life to that offered by male European writers (Sabbagh, 1996, p. xxii).

By the nineteenth century, an Orientalist image of Muslim women pervaded Western fiction and painting, focusing upon the veil which was perceived as inhibiting, as well as the harem, a space that was imagined to house sensuous women. Thus, the scholarship on Muslim women has been tainted by an Orientalist manner of understanding them (Hambly, 1998, p. 349). The legacy of these writings can still be found in the newspapers, magazines, and films of today. As in earlier centuries, writers remain fascinated by the veil and by the imagined lives of Muslim women (Mabro, 1996, p. ix). The veil is such a powerful symbol that it can blind people into false generalizations says Mabro (p. 1).

That Muslim women are oppressed is still today the often-encountered stereotype. Commonly asserted and rarely questioned, it passes for general knowledge and is accepted as an undisputed fact. But, the people who accept this image, as in earlier times, probably have never met with or spoken to a Muslim woman. In the absence of any access to the voice of real live Muslim women, such abstractions and stereotypes have dominated perception of them in the West (Cornell, 1999, p. 11).

The study of Muslim women is probably one of the least understood subjects in

the Western world. Few issues within the Muslim culture or community have attracted more interest and yet proven so susceptible to stereotyping as the issues involving women. As stated above, women in Muslim societies have been the subjects of stereotype images and generalizations in the West from the early romantic Orientalist writings to more recent scholarly and journalistic research studies. Subjugation and second class citizenship probably best describe the perception of Muslim women by the West today (Haddad & Esposito, 1998, p. xi). The subordination of women in Muslim societies has acquired the normative status of a cliché (Lawrence, 1998, p. xiii).

Modern day scholars often make only passing references to the status of women in Islamic societies, usually contenting themselves with emphasizing the practice of veiling, polygamy, concubinage, and the harem. The prevailing stereotype of Muslim women by Western observers continues to assume they occupy a despised and servile position in the social and economic order of Islamic civilization, with scholars being in accord that Muslim women are virtually the property first of fathers or older brothers and then of their husbands (Hambly, 1998, p. 3).

Fernea (1998, p. 42) states that modern accounts of Muslim women written by Western women often still portray women as in chains, religious if not actual, still living in a symbolic if not an actual or physical harem. Novels that are mass-marketed about Muslim women almost always tell stories of oppressed and wasted lives lived in total suffering and isolation, leaving images of their powerlessness (Sabbagh, 1996, p. xvii).

Unni Wikan (1991, p. 105) says that Western preconceptions about veiling are likely to be further affected by dramatic stories in the press or in books about strong-willed women who boldly revolt to rid themselves of the presumed vestige of the veil as

male tyranny. She continues that outrageous depictions of accompanying male revenge serve to bolster the conviction by the West that veiling is oppressive. Wikan clarifies the situation by stating that the women who revolt are experiencing veiling in the only natural way, according to Western ideals, and therefore are granted sympathy. But, women who veil voluntarily make no sense to the West and, therefore, make no news.

Writing about the images of Muslim women in the United States, Hasan (2000, pp. 127-129) says that when Americans see a woman wearing hijab, or the veil, they see a woman who is inherently foreign, uneducated, and oppressed. Women who wear hijab are looked at as alien and different. Hijab is probably the most enigmatic aspect of Islam in America. It looks repressive and may serve as symbolic proof of the stereotype that Muslim women are oppressed. Americans only accept what they understand, concludes Hasan. Lawrence (1998, p. 5) writes that behind the hostile Muslim men, Americans imagine the faces of Muslim women, homebound creatures marked alike by seclusion from the outside world and apparent oppression by their tyrannical husbands.

Leila Ahmed (1992, pp. 130, 244) emphasizes that this discourse on women, the veil and the struggles and divisions that accompany it, still exists. To this day, according to Ahmed, the struggle against the veil and toward Westernization and the abandoning of backward and oppressive Muslim ways is still the story framing most Western-based studies of Muslim women, including feminist studies. Whereas in early stereotypes, Muslim women were presented as living only for sensual pleasure and were condemned by the West for their wantonness, Muslim women's lives are today described as being devoid of the simplest of pleasures or achievements. Women are depicted as existing on the margins of society. Since the current stereotypes are linked to the political power

struggle between the West and the Middle East or Muslim world, some female Middle Eastern scholars who live and teach in the West emphasize that Western women writing about Muslim women must first make a conscious disengagement from the dominant ideology toward Islam (Sabbagh, 1996, pp. xiii, xxi).

Fernea (1998, p. 420) argues that Western scholars have often overlooked or undervalued the private female Muslim perspective of strength and independence within the female society where women exist, within private space, within women's space. Ignorantly thinking that the only important acts are those performed by men in public space, Westerners think that in order to gain agency, Muslim women must replicate such acts. This kind of thinking leads to an erroneous dismissal of the strength of women in traditional sexually segregated societies, emphasizes Fernea. Göcek & Balaghi (1994, p. 15) assert that by often portraying Muslim women as mute followers of tradition, some scholars have ignored women's creative use of tradition and their agency in creating tradition.

Writing about images, Cook (2001, pp. 127-138) says the negative image of Muslim women has interfered in cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. Their image as passive and oppressed has gained currency because it signifies beyond itself to a general category such as a faith and a culture. The images of covered women epitomize Islam. These women's bodies serve as icons of Muslim otherness and fit into and exacerbate preconceptions, representing something other than themselves. Concluding, Cook asks how can preconception accommodate lived reality? How can individuals control what they wish to project and what is projected onto them? Cook states that if we cannot overcome the interference of the image, then we must learn to listen to the

image speak.

With the recent involvement of post-colonial Muslims playing ever-greater roles in economic changes, both regional and global, the impact of these changes has become evident on societies everywhere with new actors appearing into public view. The most remarkable new presence is that of Muslim women. Women, to a large extent, have emerged at the core of politics in Muslim societies because they have been invested, or have invested themselves, with the representation of Islam. They have become the bearers of cultural orthodoxy, the very symbol of the faith and purity of the community. Women have become the key index of Muslim identity (Lawrence, 1998, pp. xiv, 5). The experience of Muslim women calls for a more nuanced approach to Islam and to global change. It is time to counter negative stereotypes about Muslim women with knowledge about their newly constituted roles, argues Lawrence (p. 3).

Marnia Lazreg (1994, p. 12) questions if it is possible to do scholarly work about Muslim women that goes beyond documenting existing stereotypes. As my months of study and research turned into years, after listening to many comments and opinions regarding my subject of "Muslim women" as research, I sadly found myself asking the same question. Is it possible to do scholarly work about Muslim women that goes beyond documenting the existing stereotypes? Is it possible to attempt to put an end to the fundamental dismissal of what Muslim women say when they speak a nonstereotypical language?

Many Middle Eastern women in American academia find it ironic that some American scholars often see no conflict between perpetrating the oppressive views of Muslim women produced by the dominant culture while simultaneously fighting against

the dominant culture's biased perception of women in general (Sabbagh, 1996, p. xii).

Others question if the study of Muslim women, a marginalized and often hidden group, poses a challenge filled with mine fields and uncertainties for scholars (Haddad & Esposito, 1998, p. 172).

When I originally became interested in researching female private space and later, specifically, Muslim women's spaces and life experiences in North America, I did not realize, never dreamed in fact, that I would be walking into a mine field. But, a mine field is what I did walk into. Unable and unwilling to turn back, but armored with Tucker's words (1993, p. 175) that we must provide historically and culturally specific analyses of non-Western women's situations and political actions, and that we must listen to these women tell of their own struggles, I began my research.

I have drawn together literary data provided by others in order to demonstrate that, as I stated in my introduction, the images of Muslim women in the West have been affected by Orientalism; that discussions of their role in Muslim society and the veil have been central in the East-West conflict of misunderstanding; and that Muslim women are still seen today either as embodiments of Islam or as helpless victims of it. This debate has raged for over two hundred years. However, the analysis of Orientalism does not usually go beyond what people say and write about Muslim societies. The necessary task is the analysis of what actually happens in Muslim societies (Halliday, 1996, pp. 200-201).

I agree that we must reexamine the assumption that traditional societies leave little or no room for female participation and critique other stereotypes of Muslim women, while examining their complex identities within Muslim society. I have become

sympathetic to concerns of how Muslim women are portrayed in literature and the media and seek to correct or clarify common misunderstandings of them. The goal of this research is to contrast the above-mentioned assumptions and stereotypes about Muslim women with the reality of the lives of women living in California's Silicon Valley and to explore further how these images affect them. By writing about Muslim women's life experience while living in North America, I humbly attempt to challenge stereotypical assumptions about Muslim women, hoping to modify Western generalizations and to give readers an opportunity to reconsider their image of Muslim women.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY: LISTENING TO MUSLIM WOMEN

My research goal was to compare the Western stereotypical image of the oppressed Muslim woman with what Muslim women themselves had to say about the reality of their lives. What did Muslim women think, how did they feel? So much has been written about Muslim women, I wanted to listen to them and to hear what the women had to say. What did they think about those who had written about them and who were still writing about them, those that talked about them, those that they encountered in their lives on the streets, in the marketplaces, in the workplaces of America? What was it like to live within American society? I wondered how the women felt about their contemporary image within American society. I also wanted their viewpoint on their own Muslim community, their family, Islam, and, of course, the controversial veil.

At the beginning of my research, I knew of a mosque in my local area of Silicon Valley but did not know how to introduce myself to its women members. A Muslim woman I knew offered to assist me. Stating that the study I wished to do was important, that it needed to be done, my Muslim friend told me that there were many women available for me to interview. "Young women, old women, I will find them for you," she said. She stated that Muslim women are misunderstood and that it would be her pleasure to help me with my study. With her busy and hectic work and home life, she was always ready to talk with me, meet with me, and to introduce me to women she or I thought would provide interesting and varied viewpoints of Muslim women's lives. She was tirelessly supportive of me and my research, always loving and full of

encouragement. Without her assistance, I would not ever have been able to make my journey into this Islamic community of sisters.

Aware that Muslim women are often grouped as a single identity, with the singular “woman” often used in place of the plural “women”, I wanted to explore how individual women I hoped to meet might challenge generalizations. For this reason, I initially decided to utilize the interview as my primary research tool. After meeting some of the Muslim women from this community, I realized that it would be possible for me to conduct a more complex research project. I decided to include some participant observation, attending the women’s meetings at the Center and conducting group interviews by gathering with small groups of women. I eventually utilized a combination of research methods: a structured format for demographic information and semi-structured and unstructured formats for interviewing the woman informants.

My original intent was to interview young adult women who grew up in North America, young middle-age women who were born abroad but immigrated to North America, middle-age women born abroad who have raised their children in North America, and older women born abroad, who raised their children abroad, but who are now living with them in North America. My plan was to interview educated, mostly working women, women who are active both within the Muslim community as well as American society.

After meeting with some of the women in this Muslim community, they agreed to cooperate with me in hopes of clarifying their lifestyle and beliefs for the American reader who, they assumed, would read my findings. I explained to these initial informants that I was looking for women of different ages and situations in life, different

Muslim realities in America. Since I was only going to interview a small group of women, I needed to choose them strategically. I needed knowledgeable, motivated, articulate, and accurate informants who were willing to communicate and cooperate impartially about their life experience. The women both understood and agreed, and so began the networking paradigm of my research.

From the spring of 1998 to the winter of 2000, I attended Friday night meetings at the mosque with the women, I participated in religious functions and discussions, I went on all-day outings, I went to their houses for dinner, they came to my house for dinner, or we met for coffee or tea at local coffee houses. I met with sets of mothers and daughters, sometimes together, other times I met with them separately. I also met with small groups of women and girls. I often asked at the end of a meeting if the women could refer me to someone else.

While it is most common for informants to refer someone like themselves to the researcher, these women, aware that I was looking for a balanced view of their community, were superbly resourceful in their recommendations and leading introductions. In this manner, a married woman introduced me to the unveiled divorced woman, and a young mother introduced me to the widowed and divorced convert. Realizing that I had talked with several women of her nationality, one woman introduced me to two women from totally different backgrounds. With the help of these women, I was able to choose women whom I believe show maximum variation of life choices and experiences, the situations women find themselves living in North America. Their answers are not dramatic or abnormal, but rather involve the actual challenges women encounter and how they choose to handle them.

It was my intention to capture the quality of life as lived by the women of this community. I wanted my research to be a medium for the women's voices. By encouraging the women to initiate conversations, and interrupting as little as possible, primarily to ask for clarifications and for the expansion of topics that seemed to have been covered too briefly, I tried to capture the emotional and intellectual relevance of the subjects being discussed by each individual woman.

My research was perhaps most profoundly affected by the nondirective approach I took, or what is more commonly referred to as a guided conversation, with additional questions added or old questions changed in light of new evidence. My decision not to pursue questions aggressively or conduct structured interviews enabled me to form my inquiry around matters that the women themselves found significant and central in their lives. I tried to ask questions when the women were already discussing a particular subject or event instead of abruptly introducing another topic. In this way, I was able to freely elicit their conception of their social and religious world.

Since we were on ordinary social terms, as I met with the women either in private or public, I was reluctant to violate these terms and, thus, I rarely took notes or tape recorded as we spoke, but rather wrote notes from memory as soon as possible after leaving them. Some of the women, however, insisted on being taped, in which case I respected their wishes and did so. While meeting with me in the privacy of our homes, some women agreed to have our conversations taped. Other women did not wish to be taped under any circumstances. I respected all of their wishes. I have reserved the use of quotation marks for words which I tape-recorded or wrote verbatim in my notes. For the sake of providing anonymity, I have changed names. In most cases, each woman chose

her own pseudonym.

By selecting women of various ages and backgrounds, listening and participating, I have presented in my writings the women's viewpoint of their life as Muslim women living in California's Silicon Valley, a multicultural community of North America.

I interviewed twelve women ranging in age from twenty-two to seventy-eight. Five of the women were in their twenties, two were in their thirties, two in their forties, two in their fifties, and one in her seventies. Mostly born outside of North America, with the exception of the older woman who had recently come to live with her daughter, the women had lived all or most of their lives in the United States or Canada.

Except for the older woman, the others were either students at universities or graduates from universities. One woman had a Ph.D. All the women either worked or studied fulltime with the exception of the woman in her seventies.

Four of the women were single, five married, two were widows, one divorced, and one both widowed and divorced. All of the married, widowed, or divorced had children with the exception of the woman who was widowed and divorced.

CHAPTER 4

JOURNEY INTO AN ISLAMIC COMMUNITY

The immigrant Muslim community in the United States consists of a variety of people from more than 60 nations who represent different linguistic, national and racial backgrounds (Haddad, 1991, p. 217). Some American Muslim organizations estimate that as many as nine to eleven million Muslims live in the United States (Hasan, 2000, p.183). Other estimates say that the number of Muslims in the United States may vary from two million to eight million. Most Muslims use an estimate from six to seven million.

The growth of the immigrant Muslim population in the United States is a recent phenomenon occurring over the last three decades, partially in response to changes in American immigration laws and the demand of the labor market. The majority of the recent Muslim immigrants are university graduates who economically integrate into the American middle class (Haddad, 1991, pp. 3-4).

The largest concentration of immigrant Muslims in the United States lives in California. The next largest population is in New York. Other states such as Illinois, New Jersey, Indiana, Michigan, Virginia, Texas, Ohio, and Maryland also have significant numbers of Muslim residents (Hasan, 2000, p. 45). Muslims in California are largely from the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. Muslims in New York come mostly from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North America (Haddad, 1991, p. 34).

The immigrant Muslim community in the greater San Francisco Bay Area consists of over 100,000 people (Haddad, 1991, p. 190). Although there are several mosques in the South Bay, most of these serve a particular nationality.

The women in this study were affiliated with one mosque. This mosque is unique in that it serves a variety of nationalities as well as American converts. It is a microcosm of Islam in America. In the early days of the high tech industry, the community was small, but as the industry grew, so did the community. Situated in the heart of Silicon Valley, this mosque attracts both highly educated and highly motivated Muslims. "People who come from the Middle East to work in California's Silicon Valley either come already highly educated or come to study and become highly educated," stated Dua, one of my key informants.

The mosque's Board of Directors, which is elected every two years, is representative of its many nationalities. From the beginning, the members decided they would operate the mosque according to the laws of Islam and not the customs of their native countries. Following this plan, the board makes an attempt to insure that everyone is represented. At the present time, the board of twelve has one female member who represents "the sisters," the term used to refer to the women of the Muslim community. There are plans to change this in order to have more female board members.

In an effort to reach the outside community, the members of this mosque hold several open houses during the year. Muslims invite neighbors and friends to come and ask questions with the hope of enlightening them and thus making them more familiar with Islam. Sometimes dinner is served, other times simply cookies and refreshments. One of these open houses always takes place during the holy month of Ramadan.

The women of the mosque have started a small but thriving on-site shop. It is staffed mainly by women who bring items of clothing back from their native countries to sell to one another. The shop is usually open on Fridays, Islam's holy day, when many

people are at the mosque. The women sell the clothing for a small profit and give a small percentage to the mosque.

Attached to the mosque is the school which has been in existence for about twelve years. At the time of this research, with approximately 400 students, it is at maximum capacity. However, it only goes up to the tenth grade. The community would like to be able to offer an Islamic education to its children up to the twelfth grade and is looking for another building.

The school has a Board of Directors elected by parents and by members of the mosque. Presently, there are no women on the board. I was told this situation will probably change in the near future. In the beginning, when the school was first founded, most of the women were young, with small children, and thus had little time to attend meetings. Now the community is a bit more mature and, with children growing up, some women members have more time, explained Dua.

The most important mission of the school is to promote an Islamic identity and to help children grow up not thinking or feeling as if they are different. The school is coeducational, but classrooms are segregated, with girls on one side and boys on the other. According to school rules, in preparation for their older years, girls must veil after the fifth grade. By veiling, I refer to the wearing of a white scarf to cover the hair. All children must wear a modest uniform. The community believes that after having a strong Islamic base while young, the children will be more disciplined and serious students during their university studies.

In the spring of 1997, as I journeyed down a major expressway in the heart of California's Silicon Valley, I was both nervous and excited about my scheduled meeting

that afternoon with the principal of the Islamic school and one of its teachers. In the midst of numerous large buildings with the appropriate large “dot.com” signs stood a modest building with no identification whatsoever. The address was my only guide as no visible markers identified this building as a mosque and a school.

I went inside, introduced myself to the first woman I saw, and was escorted to what looked like a conference room with a large table and chairs. Soon afterward, Dua, a young teacher, appeared and introduced herself. She was shortly followed by the principal, Moshira. I shared my proposal with the women, and they agreed to participate in my research. Not wanting to take up too much of their time, I thanked the women for meeting with me and left. And so began my journey into an Islamic community in the heart of California’s Silicon Valley. At that time, I expected to spend about six months interviewing some of the women and attending group functions at the mosque. However, life became complicated and I was not able to resume my research until the following spring.

In the spring of 1998, I once again contacted Dua. I was fearful she might not remember me, but she immediately made me feel comfortable and relaxed, inviting me to meet with her the following week at the Islamic school.

After meeting with Dua for about an hour, mostly discussing her girlhood years in Cairo, she invited me to attend the Friday night Koran discussion group in English at the mosque. I was thankful and delighted with this intimate invitation and, thus, began my serious research and what became a three-year-long journey into this Islamic community. I never dreamed that what began as a research project would produce what I hope will be long lasting relationships with these women.

PART TWO

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION ACTIVITIES

In the following five chapters, I share my observations as a participant in a variety of events I attended with some of the Muslim women.

CHAPTER 5

FRIDAY NIGHTS AT THE MOSQUE

[On Friday nights, women gather at the mosque to discuss, study, or debate topics or issues that are important to them. I was invited and attended some of these meetings.]

In the spring of 1998, I met again at the Islamic school with Dua. I returned the books she had loaned me the previous year and we once again discussed my research. Always gracious and willing to help, Dua invited me to attend the women's discussion group of the Koran the following Friday evening. There were several discussion groups for women during the week, some in Arabic and also Urdu, but on Friday evenings it was in English. Dua said that although the discussion was in English, women would be from a variety of countries and, if willing to talk to me, would have a variety of stories about their life experience as Muslim women living in North America. I accepted the invitation and we agreed to meet in the parking lot near the women's entrance to the mosque.

I arrived early and was a bit nervous. I had never been to a mosque and did not want to intrude. Dua arrived and we went into the mosque. After removing our shoes and leaving them at the door, we joined a group of women sitting circular fashion on the floor. Dua introduced me, explained my research, and we sat down.

Most of the women arrived at the scheduled starting time of 7:00 p.m., but others strolled in late—many, quite late. Usually with one or more children trailing behind, they arrived singly or in groups of two or three and joined the circle of women sitting on the floor. They were greeted and nothing was said to the late arrivals regarding the time. The discussion continued as the circle grew. On this Friday night, there were probably about twelve women by the end of the evening. The children played in a corner or in a

small adjacent room, with smaller ones and babies remaining by their mother's side. All the women watched all the children, while some of the children watched each other.

During the break, the group coordinator came and sat next to me. After introducing herself, she explained the organization of the group discussion. Periodically, the women make a list of subjects they are interested in and would like to learn more about and discuss. Each woman then chooses the topic she would like to lead a discussion on. She does research and makes a presentation. This is followed by an open session of questions and answers with group discussion. The coordinator's sole function is to keep track of the subjects to be discussed and who is to lead the group discussion. If a woman is not able to lead what she originally signed up for, another volunteers. If there is no one to lead the discussion on a given night, all of the women discuss the subject in an open manner. The women do not sign up to attend any particular Friday night session but rather come when they can and as often as they can. It is an informal gathering.

On the evening I attended, after taking a break, the group coordinator asked that everyone introduce themselves and say where they are from. It is common to hear names from many of the countries of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. Some of the younger women and the converts were born in America. The women were dressed in jeans and loose tops, loose pants and tunic tops, or the more classic long coat that has become the modern Muslim women's look. But some also dressed in a more regional Islamic dress. All wore a head covering, but while most used the more common white scarf, some wore very colorful scarves coordinated with their dress attire. Yet others wore very individualistic head coverings of various shapes and sizes.

After the meeting, I spoke with a Pakistani woman who was totally covered in

black. She told me in a very entertaining manner of how she and her bearded scientist husband, upon moving to a new home, had all of the neighbors in great fear of the “Islamic terrorists moving in.” As she lightly laughed during her tale, she recounted how on a Friday, the holy day in Islam, she had cooked for the entire neighborhood and sent her children to distribute the food. Continuing her tale, she stated that the neighbors are not afraid of them anymore and concluded with a smile, saying, “You see, that is Islam, we share.”

As I spoke with some of the women who had arrived late, I explained that my research was about their life experience as Muslim women living in North America. But, it appeared that it was difficult for the women to understand that my research was about them and their lives in America and not about Islam. A complex group in ages and nationalities, these women reached out to me as a possible sister within Islam. They were gracious, kind, and loving.

CHAPTER 6

GROWING UP IN AMERICA:

A MEETING WITH YOUNG MUSLIM WOMEN

[In order to assist me with my research, a young woman volunteered to gather a group of her veiled friends to discuss issues of veiling.]

Rawan, a member of the Muslim Students' Association at her university whom I had met at the Friday night Koran discussion group at the mosque, arranged a group meeting at her house. On that Friday night, we had talked about my research and she had graciously offered to gather together a group of her veiled friends in order to discuss the life experiences of young Muslim women living in America.

The girls arrived singly or in groups of two or three at a time. At the end, there were thirteen girls, ranging in age from fifteen to twenty-two. Most had been born in Canada, the United States, or England. Two were born in Egypt. All had been raised in North America. However, all referred to their parents' birthplace as their nationality. They said they were Egyptians, Palestinians, Afghanis, Libyans, and Lebanese. All of the high school girls attended public schools, and most of the college girls attended respected private universities in the area.

The girls appeared to know each other well. Some talked more than others, but they all talked a lot. As they arrived, I was introduced to them by Rawan. Everyone brought something to eat. We had salads, pasta, pizza, drinks, and later coffee, tea, and many desserts. It was a feast! After dinner we moved to the living room to begin our discussion of life in America for Muslim women.

We first discussed the common stereotype that they are oppressed. According to

them, Islam is freedom, not oppression. They said that they did not go to school dances and did not attend parties as a general rule. Most said that Islam is freedom from all of the negative things they are surrounded by in this society. It is freedom from having to buy into this system of dating, of exposing themselves physically, and of being touched casually by men they did not want to be touched by. One girl said Islam is freedom from attending parties where people got drunk, threw up, and did things they did not remember, but others did.

As I listened to these girls discuss what it is like to live in America as veiled Muslim young women, it appeared to me that for them the answer is—difficult. The girls said that they turned the negative into the positive and that it made them strong. They said that it was so hard, especially for the ones in high school, to battle their classmates' and often teachers' comments and attitudes that it bonded them to each other and gave them strength. All either born or raised in America, social outsiders in their own country, with no resentment, simply said that they turned the negative into a positive and became strong.

While discussing clothing and the veil, there was also much discussion of hairstyles. The girls talked of matching their veils to the outfits they were wearing and how important that is. They said things like, "You know, they notice," they being the society at large that these girls know is watching and judging them. The girls were aware of how they were representative of their society, how people watched the way they dressed and behaved. They spoke in amusement with a slight irritation, but no anger, of how women would ask if they were hot. One girl said she had explained to a woman dressed in shorts and halter top who kept saying, "I'm so hot, aren't you hot, it's so hot."

She said to the woman, "No, I'm not hot, the sun is not beating down on my skin."

In discussing how they were treated, I was surprised to hear that much of the negative treatment these girls had been subjected to came from teachers and professors. One girl talked of how one teacher, who was Iranian, had singled her out for ridicule. She was shocked and hurt. She said she opened herself up to him, thinking that he was a brother, but she was instead singled out for ridicule in class for being veiled. Another talked about an American professor of hers who appeared to be impressed by her strength, intellect, and mysteriousness. He talked of never once seeing her ankles during the semester and asked her if they could meet. She did not like this. She later expanded, saying that the professor had attempted to have a Muslim brother help him meet with her. When he was told by the brother that in Islam that is not how people meet, that permission must be obtained by her parents, he did not seem to understand or accept and continued to persist. She found him to be a great nuisance.

Two girls said they often volunteered to speak to classes at their university, if invited, in order to clarify the negative stereotypes that exist within American society. Others again said it was so difficult to survive within American society, especially at school, that what it did was separate the weak, or weed them out, that those girls who were strong enough to survive really bonded. Some said that their parents were nationalistic, they still were closer to the people from their native countries, but for the girls, it was the veil that bonded them. If they saw a veiled woman, she was a sister, and that was it. Living in America, it was Islam that bonded them, not a nationality. Islam, and not nationality, was the identifier for these young veiled women.

Living in America, they considered themselves American. Life was harsh and

people were often unkind to them. One of the biggest irritations, most said, was having people comment on how they had no accent or people thinking that they did not speak English, not to mention that often people thought they were stupid. Once again, the girls talked about teachers most often. They shared stories of being ignored in class and of not being taken seriously. As they talked about these issues, they did not seem to be really angry or damaged. They were mostly irritated. They spoke again of strength and of how these irritations strengthened and united them.

I asked how they handled social situations at school and if they had friends that were not Muslim. They said they did. One girl said she noticed that her friends who were not Muslim were, nevertheless, religious. Others said that they took each situation differently. If there was going to be liquor at a party for a friend, they would stop by early in the evening, or they might just come for a main event and leave. They did not appear to be bothered by this. All said that most of their friends were Muslim. They said that veiling and Islam was choice and that it was not hard to have it guide them. None of these girls talked of being forced to do anything by their parents. Some did, however, discuss that in some families, young girls are pressured to veil against their will, when they are not yet ready to do so. This results in a negative outcome with such girls, who are not committed to veiling, often ultimately removing the veil.

During our discussion about when they first veiled, some said they had started when they went to college and they thought it was easier because it was a fresh start. No one knew them before. Others said they had done it suddenly, during a school year, while in high school. These girls received great admiration from older girls who said high school was the hardest time to tolerate attitudes. The older girls told the younger

ones that it would get better in college. The girls explained to me that veiling should start at puberty but that everybody did it at their own time, when they were ready. Some of the girls said they had met great family resistance since their mothers had grown up in European-influenced times in the Middle East and did not veil.

The girls said it was easier to be Muslim in America than where their families were from. They said that “back home,” as they referred to their parents’ birthplace where they often visited for long periods of time, Muslim law was often combined with or misplaced by local custom and things got confusing with people arguing about what was correct. In America, isolated as a group, they were free to study the Koran and follow its word. They said that their families and friends “back home” were often surprised with disbelief when they were shown that the American was correct about a certain Islamic law. Educated and free to read the Koran for themselves, there was no negotiating with them. They knew Islamic law.

This group of girls agreed that being isolated made them stronger and bonded them one to another. For them, the veil is a protection from what is negative in American society. As soon as they put it on, the girls said, they gain respect from Muslim society. They also said that it gives them a certain amount of responsibility since they know that everyone, both within their society and American society, is watching them.

CHAPTER 7

A SUNDAY OUTING WITH THE SISTERS

[This is my description of the adventure of spending a Sunday with a group of veiled women traveling to San Francisco for an Islamic art fair.]

One evening while having dinner at my house, Miranda, the older daughter of Moshira, the school principal, said that in a few weeks there was going to be an Islamic art fair in San Francisco and asked me if I would like to join her and some of her friends. I normally worked on Sundays but felt I could not pass up the opportunity to be a part of a group of Muslim women, thus observing directly how American society behaved towards them. I had spent much time with the Muslim women, but it had always been within their society. I had never had the opportunity to be a part of them in the outer-American society.

The week before the fair, I called Miranda and asked her to buy a ticket for me. She appeared both surprised and delighted that I would be coming. The Sunday of the fair, Miranda and a friend of hers picked me up in the late morning. I had not met Miranda's friend before and found her interesting. She was of middle age, was a convert, and wore make-up. As we drove to pick up other friends, I listened to them discuss their experience as Muslim women living in North America. The radio was turned on to a popular station which both amused and puzzled me. I had been told that music was controversial in Islam, but that some was acceptable if it was not negative to Islamic morals. What they were listening to was not immoral, but it certainly was not spiritual either. It was popular American music. Interesting, I thought.

As we drove, Miranda and her friend discussed movies they had seen, restaurants

they had eaten at, and they even discussed what type of men they were physically attracted to. Miranda's friend appeared to be recently divorced. As they discussed where to buy clothing, the woman said that she still had many suits with short skirts from her previous non-Muslim life. I thought this was both interesting and puzzling. Was she planning on returning to that life, or was it just for nostalgia? Why would someone keep all of those short skirts if they were never going to wear them again?

Miranda shared that she wanted to go on a pilgrimage for young people but was not able to do so alone, without a guardian. She said that when she had called for information, she was told it would be necessary to be accompanied by an older woman, anyone over forty years of age. The person she spoke with suggested she invite her mother to join her, but Miranda did not want to go with her mother. She asked if I might be interested. I answered that I might be, realizing that I would need to convert before doing so.

We arrived in Mountain View where we were to meet two other women. One, a cute, petite African-American originally from the east coast, was going to be driving up with a man who had just arrived from the Bahamas in order for them to get to know each other better with the possibility of marriage. She was nervous and very giggly. I asked the women I was riding with if it was acceptable for them to be driving up alone since they had just met. They had been communicating for some time but had not seen each other before this week. The women said that normally it is not acceptable for a couple who is not engaged to be alone but that this was daylight and it was a group outing, so therefore acceptable for the two of them to ride alone in her car. The women said that everything in Islam was flexible. It depended on the situation. One needed to

use good judgment.

The second woman arrived and took the back seat next to me. It appeared that she had not been in the Bay Area for very long. Miranda and her friend had discussed how she had come from the upper United States, or maybe it was Canada, to marry a man in California's Silicon Valley. Miranda said to her friend, "You know how it is. Somebody says they know a nice girl somewhere." While she and Miranda appeared to be close friends, the newly arrived woman was a little distant toward me and the converted sister who was driving. Immediately after being introduced to us, she asked each of us if we were married.

We arrived at the fair and in a casual manner enjoyed all that was on display. Miranda knew many people and was very cordial introducing me and her other friends. It was a mixed group of people. Some women were veiled, others were not. When it was time to pray, all those who wished to do so went into a separate room, while others continued enjoying the art, the refreshments, and each other.

We did not stay very long since it was not a very large fair. Before boarding our cars, we agreed to meet back in Mountain View for tea "or something". The married woman requested to be dropped off at home so she could be with her husband. We did this and then met the giggly girl and her possible future husband for tea.

I had never been out in public with veiled women and was curious to observe the reactions. It was Sunday evening and the first two places we went into were crowded so we decided to leave. This was great, I thought. The more opportunity for me to see how American society gazed at these veiled women.

We finally found a place that was not very crowded. Meanwhile, I had noticed

that a group of veiled women, accompanied by a non-veiled woman and a black man, did not attract any attention going in and out of restaurants in the South Bay Area of San Francisco. As we ordered our drinks, Miranda's friend called her daughter, telling her that she would be home in a short while, and Miranda called home with the same message. Two hours later, we were still talking about restaurants, clothing, work, and other insignificant but nevertheless enjoyable subjects. We were enjoying ourselves as the time quickly passed by. The black brother was very kind and patient considering that this was what one would call "female conversation." I asked him if he had sisters and he replied that he did.

We finally departed and rode home. I thanked Miranda for including me in this Sunday outing and waved goodbye. I had not been in the house five minutes when my telephone rang. It was Rawan, Miranda's younger sister, asking if I knew where she was. I understood. It reminded me of my family. If you say you are going to be home in an hour and three hours later you have not yet arrived, your family worries.

CHAPTER 8

ISLAMIC AWARENESS WEEK AT A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

[Here I share my experience of attending events during Islamic Awareness Week at a nearby university with some of my informants.]

I read in the newspaper that a local Catholic university was celebrating Islamic Awareness Week. Fortunately, two of the meetings were occurring during my days off. I thought it might be interesting to attend and observe both the Muslims and non-Muslims in the audience.

I called Moshira's, the school principal, house and, talking with Rowan, her middle daughter who answered the telephone, asked if she or her sisters were planning on attending. Rowan replied that she had graduated and would not be attending, but that her younger sister, who was a senior, might be and that if she talked with her during the day, she would tell her that I was interested in joining her that evening for the first session. Shortly thereafter, I received a call from Miranda, the older sister, saying that she would be interested in joining me for the evening and invited me to come early so that we could have dinner together. I was touched by her sincere effort to meet with me. I had wanted to talk with her about her personal viewpoint on life, her family, and Islam, but did not want to impose myself. I was not yet quite comfortable in asking her personal or political questions. We agreed to meet at the university café about one hour ahead of the meeting.

I arrived early. Miranda arrived promptly at our agreed upon time, smartly dressed in a long skirt, blouse, and jacket with a matching scarf neatly wrapped snugly around her beautiful face with a milky white skin and deep set expressive dark eyes. It appeared that she might be wearing an elastic headband in order to keep her hair

smoothly back away from her face under her scarf. We dined on pasta and tea while discussing life experiences for young Muslim women living in America. Miranda told me that this was the first time she had been back to her university since graduating two years previous. She had met a man and fallen in love during her university years. They had become engaged but it had not worked out. When it came time to write the marriage contract, which every Muslim couple must do, there had been several things that he, she, and her family could not agree upon and the marriage had been called off.

As we walked around campus that evening, Miranda pointed out the places they had met, sharing some of their conversations. I sensed a certain amount of nostalgia and sadness in her tone of voice as she shared her memories with me, concluding that “we did not part in very friendly terms.” I appreciated even more so her willingness to meet with me at a place that held such strong emotional memories for her.

That evening we talked about engagements, marriage contracts, marriage limitations, bad marriages, and divorces for young Muslim women like Miranda living in North America. Miranda shared that the women warned one another to not even think, not even dream, of liking a man that was not Muslim. She said they told one another to just put that thought out of their minds. This is not allowed. It would never be allowed. “So forget it,” said Miranda, was what she and her friends told one another. Although, according to Islam, a man can convert and marry a Muslim woman, this would never be acceptable to the woman’s family, so “forget about it” was what Miranda and her friends reminded one another. They would tell each other, “Don’t even think about it!” she concluded, repeating herself.

After this conversation with Miranda, I was beginning to understand how

significant is the role played by the family, the community, and Islam in insuring that when two people do marry, they are compatible and have been prepared well for the lifelong union. Still, Miranda discussed several marriages she knew that were not working out well and might not last forever.

We talked too long and were late in joining the others, arriving just before the speaker for the evening began his presentation. It was a general presentation about Islam, I presumed addressed to the non-Muslims in the audience. This was followed by a question and answer period. As we departed, we were met by Miranda's younger sister Mariam and some of her friends, as well as other people they both knew. Some of these young women I had met at their house during the group meeting hosted by their middle sister Rowan a few months back. The woman who had come with us to the Islamic fair was also there with her husband. I noticed she was wearing eye make-up. Perhaps when with her husband, she beautifies herself more, I thought. Once again, she was polite but distant, shaking my hand while everyone else kissed me as they would any of their other sisters, as the women referred to one another. I recognized this as a distance maintaining action and respected her for it.

The following evening the subject was "Women in Islam." Miranda was not able to attend, so I went alone and sat at a back table and observed people as they came and went. There were some Muslims but also many non-Muslims. It was later explained to me that these people might not be that interested in the subject but rather attended since they received extra credit from their classes on religion.

The speaker was a female convert who spoke about the advantages of being a veiled Muslim woman living in America. As I observed the audience, I noticed the body

language of some not-so-veiled women in the audience who were dressed in typical university attire of tee-shirts and pants. It appeared to me that they not only disagreed, but perhaps even resented the comments of the speaker. There were an awful lot of rolling eyes at what the woman was saying. Although none spoke up during the question and answer period, I speculated that they did not appreciate having the covered woman state that she was more respected, perhaps implying she was a more respectable woman because she was more covered.

At the conclusion of the evening, I spoke with Mariam, the youngest of Moshira's (the school principal) three daughters, and some of her friends, some veiled, and others not. We discussed Islamic Awareness Week and how it was an attempt by the Islamic Student Association at their university to share information on Islam with students of other faith. Mariam walked me to the door as I departed. Tall and thin, she looked beautiful in a matching long dark green Islamic coat, the modern classic dress for many Islamic women, and dark green scarf neatly wrapped around her beautiful petite face, accenting her delicate features. As I walked toward my car, I reflected on the irony of how sensual and sexy Mariam had looked while totally covered.

CHAPTER 9

AN AFGHAN AFFAIR

[This is my observation of an explosive gathering some of my informants participated in where the main topic was women in Afghanistan.]

I read in the newspaper that two women from Afghanistan were in the Bay Area and would be speaking at a local church. It was my day off so I decided to attend.

I arrived early so that I could sit in the back in order to better observe the crowd and the speakers. Before entering, I was approached by some American-looking young people dressed in Middle Eastern-looking ethnic clothing handing out literature. Upon entering, I paid my donation and picked up more literature that was on two large tables.

Sitting in one of the back rows, I began to read the literature, observing people as they arrived. Most appeared to be American, but there were a few people who looked Middle Eastern and others South Asian, as well as some veiled women. As I read the literature, I realized that what had been handed me by the people outside the church was pro-Taliban. I prepared myself for an evening of confrontational dialogue.

At the appropriate time, a leader from a local peace center introduced the two young women who were mostly dressed in dark clothing, wearing no make-up with short, simple haircuts. He said the women were members of the women's underground movement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that for security reasons not much more could be said about them.

The first woman spoke briefly of the history of Afghanistan and the role and responsibility of the United States regarding its future. The second woman spoke about the status of women under recent past and present governments and the conditions in

Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. Following their presentation, there was an extensive question and answer period. This was intense but polite. As the women explained their leader's death and their need to live underground, a woman in the audience referred to the pro-Taliban literature and asked if they feared for their lives in the United States. The speakers acknowledged the literature, said that it was false information and remained eloquent, continuing the discussion.

The debate continued heated, but controlled, between the speakers, the audience and within the audience, with much controversy from all sides, especially from the audience. A veiled woman spoke in favor of the new government, saying her father and aunt had just returned from Afghanistan and "had no problems." A man who said he grew up in the camps of Pakistan and now was working in Silicon Valley spoke up in favor of United States policy in the region. The speakers talked of creating a secular democracy in Afghanistan, but a veiled woman in the audience stood up declaring this was impossible since Afghanistan was a Muslim country and in Islam there was no democracy. Finally, it was officially time to vacate the premises. Many people, however, stayed on to speak with the two women in a more intimate manner.

It was getting late but the debates continued. I watched and listened as these two secular women from Afghanistan were confronted by their veiled American-born Afghan sisters. They remained stoic. All of these young women had been denied the opportunity to grow up in a country they wanted to return to. The American-born wanted to work with the Taliban, the women speakers, who had fled with their families to Pakistan, wanted to overthrow them. I felt their pain, they were all wounded. The evening was an excellent lesson of how nationalistic, idealistic, and religious viewpoints are never

simple. These were young women from the same ethnic and religious background but with totally different life experiences. They were arguing for their future, for the hope of a peaceful future for their country—the country none had been able to grow up in but that all wanted to return to.

I also waited to talk to the women, to ask how specifically one can help the women in the camps of Pakistan. The woman replied that people could come to the camps to teach the women skills, or English. She also said it might be possible to document their lives. I asked how one could help the women economically, thus creating income for them. She replied that the women wove rugs that she and other members of their organization took with them on their trips to the cities of Pakistan, Europe, and America to sell. She gave me a business card with the address of their organization's headquarters in Pakistan and simply the first names of two women to contact. I was to simply say I had met her. She did not give me a place to contact her.

Visit the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan and write about the lives of the women? Sell the rugs the Afghan women in the camps of Pakistan weave to the world? I think I could do that! I went home and stayed up half the night—thinking.

PART THREE

THE WOMEN'S STORIES

In the following twelve chapters, I share the women's stories of their diverse life experiences. The reader will notice that many of the same themes recur in individual stories. These stories also reveal how the reality of the women's lives is in sharp contrast to their image as passive and oppressed victims of their men and Islam.

CHAPTER 10

MARIAM – A TRADITIONAL NEW BRIDE

[Mariam discusses her attitudes on life and her recent arranged marriage.]

I met Mariam at the group meeting hosted by Rawan. She was petite, with a beautiful olive complexion and a glowing smile. Her white scarf wrapped around her head stayed neatly in place all evening. Mariam was very vocal during the meeting as well as very friendly towards me, asking specific questions about my research. I called her the next day and asked her if we could meet and talk. Since she was newly wed, I thought it would be interesting to get the perspective of a young bride. We agreed to meet at a local coffee house/bookstore for tea the following afternoon. I asked if she minded if I taped our conversation. She replied that not only did she not mind, she preferred that I do so since that would enable me to write about what she said more accurately.

Mariam said she could spend an hour or perhaps two with me, but as one, then two hours passed, as I ran out of tape, we continued our conversation. She said she had not known most of the young women at the group meeting. When I commented that she appeared very comfortable, Mariam stated that since Muslims live by similar rules and have similar social viewpoints, it is very easy to adapt from one community to the next. She had only been living in California's Silicon Valley for a few weeks, having come from Canada, but other than geography and climate, "it is much warmer here," the Islamic community behaves much the same, says Mariam. We discussed her new life, her childhood in Canada, and her views on Islam. We even had a lesson on how to fold and tie a scarf on one's head so that it stays on neatly. She used a napkin for a pattern. I

offered to stop our conversation since it was getting late in the afternoon, but Mariam said that she was enjoying sharing her life with me and had time that day. Unable to transfer her university units from Canada, she might need to return soon and may not have another opportunity to spend as much time with me.

In the early evening, as we kissed and finally departed, Mariam hesitated, looking at my tapes and wondering out loud if she had “said too much.” She told me that she was very comfortable with me and perhaps had been too open. I assured her that she had said nothing negative about herself, her family, or her religion. A short time after our meeting, Mariam returned to her parents’ home in Canada to complete her studies.

Mariam’s Story

Mariam is twenty-two years old, was born in Canada, and is a new bride. She has three sisters. Her father is an engineer and her mother is a non-practicing medical doctor. When her parents first came to Canada from Egypt, her mother did apply for a license to practice medicine, but with four daughters to care for, she decided that it was more important for the family unit for her to stay home. Mariam emphasizes that Islam does not forbid women to work and that she, herself, is about to finish her university studies and that her mother encourages she and her sisters to study and be employed.

Although she was born in Canada, Mariam spent large periods of her childhood living in several countries in the Middle East. Because the family unit, including the extended family, is the core of Islamic society, her family tries to go home as often as possible, ideally every two years. Since Canada is very far from Egypt, making the trip extremely expensive, her father took assignments when possible in countries closer to home. By doing so, the family could return home more often and since these were

Islamic countries, Mariam and her sisters could study Islam more intensively and even attend Islamic schools which were not available in Canada when she was younger. The family returned to Canada when Mariam was a young teen.

The Muslim Manual

Although Mariam had mostly Muslim friends while growing up, she also had several non-Muslim friends. Growing up Muslim in Canada was not a problem according to Mariam. The Islamic community is very close, like an extended family, and the surrounding community was kind and understanding. Mariam's non-Muslim friends were tolerant of her faith and always adapted themselves to her beliefs. Her teenage years were not bad, she says.

While growing up, Mariam did not live her life like other girls. Although she and her non-Muslim friends had different perspectives on some things, they could get along and agree on others. Her friends were considerate of her beliefs, and if they were having a party they wanted her to attend, they would invite only girls and prepare food she would be able to eat, food that did not include pork or pork products.

"A lot of people don't realize the reason I do what I do until they mature. People live their lives in different ways. Life in Islam is like having a manual." By having a manual and reading it, Mariam says she was able to mature earlier and more easily than her non-Muslim friends. She explains that life can get very messed up unless you have a manual and read the manual. People who grow up without the manual make many mistakes before they understand life, but for Muslims, life is clear and less problematic if they read their manual. Her husband was brought up in the same manner, reading and following the Islamic guidelines for life which Mariam refers to as the Muslim manual.

White Cotton

For Mariam, veiling is natural and no problem socially. Wearing the veil is not only spiritual, it is also practical. Mariam feels she can do anything when wearing the veil that other women do without it. It does not restrict her physical or social movement in any way. Actually, she says it is often an advantage. In warm weather, the cotton absorbs the heat, contains the moisture, and keeps her head cooler than it would be if it was exposed to the heat. By choosing cotton, including under garments, the veiled Muslim woman, with her loose clothing, actually is able to stay cooler than most other people, concludes Mariam. Shopping is no problem either for Mariam. She looks for garments she likes and feels comfortable wearing, continually building on her wardrobe as she finds new pieces that appeal to her.

In the Muslim community, according to Mariam, veiling is an assumed choice. Girls usually veil when they reach puberty, when they begin to look like women. However, each girl must do it at the time she is comfortable with making the decision. It is a progression, with some girls waiting a little longer until they are ready. Once a woman veils, people look at her as a representative of Islam.

Although Mariam lives a comfortable life as a veiled woman, she is aware of the images portrayed by the media of veiled women as oppressed victims. The media reinforces these stereotypes by constantly repeating this image, as well as other negative images of Muslims, like terrorists. This upsets Mariam very much. Still, for Mariam, life in Canada and now the United States is comfortable, not like in France where Mariam has read recently that Muslim women can't walk around wearing the veil.

A Long Distance Romance

Mariam married a man from an Islamic community several thousand miles away. She was in Canada and he was in California's Silicon Valley. She says that this is not unusual, that the communities in North America interact, stay in close contact, and communicate with each other. When a man is ready to be married, he and/or his family begins to look for a wife. "He asks people, his family looks, he looks; the contact is always from the man's family to the woman's family." When a woman is ready to be married, her family also makes the community aware of this, but they do not contact a family with a son. In this ancient tradition, Mariam's husband first contacted her family. He first called and spoke with her mother, then with her. It is common in Islam that the families have a lot to do with two people meeting. The woman, however, has the ultimate decision, states Mariam.

In her third year of university studies, and of marriageable age, Mariam felt ready to be married. After the initial phone contact, she spoke on a weekly basis for many months with her husband-to-be. Utilizing the telephone, theirs was "a long distance romance," says Mariam. Although it was not necessary that her husband be of the same national background, since "Islam crosses all borders," Mariam feels fortunate that he is. Having a similar background makes life a little easier.

The regular weekly telephone conversations were a formal situation. During this period, the couple discussed the big issues in life and became comfortable with each other. They exchanged photos but never saw each other in person. When Mariam felt ready, she and her family took a vacation and traveled to her future husband's community in Silicon Valley to sign the marriage contract. In her case, the contract was like being

engaged. According to Mariam, there is no formal engagement in Islam. It gives the couple time to get to know each other better. Before signing the contract, Mariam and her husband got to know each other on “the critical level.” After the contract, they were able to “do the fine tuning.” Before the contract, they discussed the big issues in life, and after the contract, the small issues.

After signing the marriage contract and spending some time getting to know each other on a more personal level, Mariam and her family returned to Canada in order for her to finish her year of studies. Four months later, they returned to her husband’s community and publicly announced their marriage.

For Women Only

Before leaving her home to join her husband, a great wedding ceremony took place in Mariam’s community, enjoyed by her family and friends. Although it is now common and also traditional in her community in Canada to have mixed-gender wedding celebrations, Mariam chose to have a celebration in the older tradition of women only. With a women only celebration, there could be dancing, singing, and drumming, and the women would not need to wear veils.

The celebration was informal and arranged entirely by her family and friends. Many people cooked a variety of dishes creating a great feast. Others lavishly decorated the rented hall. Although music is a controversial topic in Islam, drumming is considered natural and acceptable. Mariam says she is fortunate to have talented friends who drummed and sang cultural songs, adding greatly to the festivities and bringing people together. She did not need to hire musicians. Her friends provided the entertainment.

Although many people have very expensive wedding celebrations, Mariam likes

things personal and did not want to spend a lot of money. If a celebration is for family and close friends with people coming together to help each other, there is no need to spend money. "In Islamic communities, immigrants, rather than being just friends, become more like family, they bond," says Mariam.

Realistic Dreams

After completing her school term, Mariam and her family returned to her husband's community where they hosted a small, mixed-gender wedding celebration which also introduced her to her new community. Now living with her husband, there are new challenges in Mariam's life.

Although far away from her own community and family, Mariam is adapting well to her new surroundings and everyday life. The weather is good, and the Islamic community is large and very active. Since her husband's family is back home in Egypt, the couple is alone. Mariam believes this is good for them, that it helps to develop the relationship, making them "each other's brother and sister." They can help each other to develop their own strong points.

Mariam says that in the Islamic tradition, couples usually waited to get married until they have all of the necessary household items needed. Now more people marry early; not having everything helps to build the relationship, says Mariam. Although her husband has a good job and had an apartment ready for her, there is still much preparation for the future.

With one year left in her studies, Mariam will return to her old community to complete them. Unable to transfer, she has much time and money already invested. Education is critical in Islam. To seek knowledge is a requirement for every individual

and being educated is very important, says Mariam. Finishing her education requires that she and her husband be separated. When Miriam and her family signed the marriage contract and made wedding celebration preparations, they were not aware that she would not be able to transfer most of her college credits. "We have to take time to face the responsibilities that come with privilege. Too many people waste time because they can't deal with responsibility," concluded Miriam.

In discussing the future, Mariam is open to either living in her present community or returning to Egypt. Her husband's mother is getting old and may need assistance but, again, Mariam stresses that she and her husband will base the decisions they make in life on responsibility, logic, and economics.

CHAPTER 11

RAWAN – THE ISLAMIC ACTIVIST

[Rawan shares her faith and her views on the political attitudes of the West regarding Islam.]

When I first began talking with Fatima about my research, she told me that a good friend of hers was the principal of the Islamic school at the mosque, that she had three daughters, that the middle one was very active in youth activities, and that it would be very good for me to meet her.

When I first met Moshira, the school principal, in the spring of 1997, she did not appear very eager to work with me, which I respected. She owed me nothing. One year later, when I resumed my research and contacted Dua, a teacher at the Islamic school, she invited me to the women's study meeting at the mosque on Friday night. During the break that evening, a young woman came and sat next to me, introduced herself, told me that she was active in the Muslim Students' Association of her university, and offered to help me with my research. She asked what I needed and I replied that I would like to meet with young veiled women to discuss the life experience of Muslim women living in North America from their perspective. She shared some of her complaints about the media and academia, and said that she was willing to discuss the real life experience for Muslim women living in North America. I was going away for a conference, so we agreed that when I returned the following week, she would set up a meeting. As Dua and I left the mosque that night, I described to her how friendly and cooperative Rawan had been and how willing and eager she was to work with me. Dua replied that Rawan was the school principal's middle daughter.

Not only did Rawan set up a group meeting with her sisters and friends, she introduced me to other women as well. Rawan wanted to change how American society saw her and her veiled sisters. She was angry with the media, angry with the Middle Eastern scholars who she felt were trying to please the West, and she was angry with professors who repeatedly assigned books that portrayed Muslim women in a negative way even though she presented them with alternative choices.

Rawan was full of energy and drive, her main goal in life being to change the world's view of veiled Muslim women. We met several times to discuss my research which, of course, greatly interested her. I visited at her house with her mother and sisters or sometimes just she and I talked. We exchanged books. We had read many of the same books, but I had some she had not read and she had Muslim literature I had not read. She and her family came over to my house for dinner, we sometimes met for coffee.

Rawan had just graduated from the same prestigious Catholic university as her older sister and many of their friends. Unlike many other girls who had majored in the hard sciences, she had chosen to study the social sciences. Since she was not quite sure what to do next in life, she was teaching Islamic studies at the Islamic school.

Rawan's Story

Born in Egypt but raised in America, Rawan is comfortable in both places but considers America her home. She returns to her birthplace often, at least once a year, where her family has a residence. During these long yearly visits, she is able to maintain a close relationship with her large extended Egyptian family.

In her mid-20s, Rawan lives today as she has lived her entire life, totally within

the Islamic community. All of her social activities are with Muslims. She is very comfortable with her family home life and her social world in America.

Structured Beginnings

Family and social life were very structured for Rawan while young. By providing her with a wide range of activities, her parents made it easy for her to study Islam and follow its rules. She grew up in a totally nationalistic social Muslim world. All of her friends and all of her family's social activities were with people from Egypt. In addition to an active social life, on Saturdays and Sundays all of the children attended Islamic school, with lessons in Arabic. Rawan says she did not like this, thinking it was too much to study on Saturday and Sunday and admits she did not learn much. She did enjoy meeting with her friends, however.

While she was still a very young girl, her mother started working at the community Islamic school located at their mosque. Contrary to popular opinion, it is common for women in Egypt to work outside the home, states Rawan. While working, her mother met other nationalities and the family's social circle expanded. She had always seen and talked with other nationalities during events held at the mosque but had not mixed socially with them before.

In high school, her social world continued to be mostly Muslim and Rawan liked it that way. She did not mind not participating in activities such as dances. In fact, she thought they were silly. Some of her non-Muslim friends, who did not want her to "miss out," would often encourage her to attend alone, without a date. It was difficult for non-Muslims to understand that she did not want to do it, that she was not interested in doing what Islam did not want her to do and that it was her choice. She did attend home parties

with some non-Muslim girls and also invited them to her house, but she was not interested in school-related social events.

College life was more social for Rawan. She joined the Muslim Students' Association and held the position of president for two years. The students organized many functions for both males and females, inviting speakers from the world of Islam. The members also did much outreach to their university and the local non-Muslim community.

Although both males and females did outreach, Rawan thinks that it was most effective for a sister to speak on the subject of women in Islam. She also thinks it was very effective when a brother and a sister gave a joint presentation, making it obvious to the audience that in Islam, the sisters are not subservient to the brothers. During these presentations, most people were civil, although occasionally, some were hostile. Most often it was the women who displayed hostility towards the sisters, concluded Rawan.

Going to the Mosque

According to Rawan, in America the mosque is the center of the Islamic community. Back in their native country, Muslims might go to a mosque. In America, the mosque is the center of Islamic life. It is where gatherings, classes, celebrations and prayers take place. In America, Muslims go to the mosque.

In most Middle Eastern countries, it would be unheard of for a woman to marry a man that is not of her nationality; it would not be acceptable. Rawan says that, in America, it is possible to marry any nationality. People meet and mix at the mosque's many organized activities. It is very common to marry a nationality other than one's own.

There are also classes on various subjects, and study groups on the Koran are conducted in Farsi, Urdu, Arabic and English. Everybody is welcome; converts are welcome. According to Rawan, Islam is an open society embracing others. Islam gives direction for life, says Rawan.

Women Are Not Public Goods

After studying the writings of the Koran for several years, Rawan decided to veil, or cover as the sisters say, in her senior year of high school. She was fearful of the reaction she might encounter from her classmates and teachers but found most people to be supportive. Stating that these occasions are when we find out who our friends are, Rawan was satisfied with the reaction she received from her friends and teachers. Aware of the often asked “why do they do it” question, Rawan says that veiling is done for religious reasons, that it is written in the Koran for women to cover and be modest, emphasizing that “it is not reactive to the attitudes of the West” as it is often stated by some writers on the subject of veiling and women in Islam.

Recently, states Rawan, Middle Eastern, Arab, or Islamic women writers have written many articles and books on the subject of veiled women. These female scholars do not serve Islam or Islamic veiled women. They are apologists to the West, they do not speak for Islam and are, in fact, trying to please the West. They should stop saying that they are speaking for Muslim women, “they are doing no good,” continues Rawan. These women write that Muslim women veil as a reaction to the West or a reaction to colonialism and that they are maintainers of tradition. Also written is that women veil for practical reasons such as being able to go out in public places and work. Always these women writers portray Muslim women’s actions as reactive to the West, never do they

write that Muslim women veil for religious reasons that are written in the Koran. "They should just stop writing," concludes Rawan.

Another group of scholars Rawan is irritated with are university professors at American universities. Speaking specifically about her own college years, Rawan recalls that although there now exist Middle Eastern study classes, with professors claiming to be experts in the region, these generally do not present the Middle East or Islam in a realistic manner. Rawan says that professors seek out books that show Islam and especially Muslim women in a negative manner. She remembers discussing the selection of books assigned to a class with her professor and attempting to change the books, but that he insisted on repeatedly assigning books about village women, books on female circumcision, and generally books that showed Muslim women in a negative image. Rawan does not understand why American academia insists on presenting Islam in only a negative way. She wonders if it is politically motivated.

For Rawan, shopping for clothing is difficult. It is expensive to dress Islamic. It takes more fabric and much more planning. Most clothing is too revealing. Rawan shops seasonally, buying long sleeved items when she finds them. Shopping for formal wear is the most difficult. Everything is either low cut, has slits, or has no sleeves. Fortunately, Rawan's family has a seamstress who alters, makes dresses, and even makes scarves to match outfits from sheer fabrics. However, most of her beautiful scarves are purchased back home in Egypt during her yearly visits where the selection is great and the prices reasonable.

Another often asked question of veiled women is why they dress in such a non-feminine way. Often asked by a woman, Rawan answers with her own question, "what is

feminine about wearing jeans like men wear.” In Islam, men dress in a masculine way, they wear pants, and women dress in a feminine way, they wear skirts or dresses. Both dress conservatively, covering most of their body with loose clothing. Rawan stresses that at home women wear more sensual clothing, showing more curves, but in public, they cover. “In Islam, women are not public goods.” In Islam, women are private beings, their bodies are not for public consumption.

Rawan says that American women show everything. They leave nothing to the imagination. They show every little part of their bodies. It is puzzling to Rawan that it is these women who treat her with the most hostility. Men are generally respectful of her but it is women who show animosity towards her. Rawan wonders if they are threatened by her modesty and how she is treated with respect by men.

A Purer Islam

Because of the political situation back in her native country Egypt, it is easier for Rawan to follow her religion in America. Here, people can gather at the mosque with no fear. Much studying is being done by Muslims in America, both formal and informal. People are more aware of their religion and the need to understand it. People from different places gather and discuss what is culture and what is Islam. They study and form a purer form of Islam.

In discussing politics, Rawan says that today no country is an Islamic state. Countries in the Middle East are more cultural than religious, reflecting the culture of the region. They are not true Islamic governments. The people of the Middle East mistake their governments for the Islamic religion, but most are not Islamic at all, states Rawan.

Rawan says that an Islamic law often discussed by the West is that an Islamic

woman cannot marry a non-Islamic man. Rawan is not bothered by this law. Why would she want to marry one, she exclaims! She would like to marry an Arab man and would prefer it if he was from the Middle East. She would like to raise her children in an Arab country so they can learn to read the Koran in its original state. This, to Rawan, is very important. It is not important to her if he is rich or poor, ugly or not, what is important is religion. If she loves him, he will be good looking, concludes Rawan.

Although Rawan would like to marry soon, she is not actively hoping for a husband to appear. There have been some arranged meetings for the purpose of a possible marriage but “the chemistry just was not right,” says Rawan. For the time being, she will continue teaching Islamic studies at the Islamic school. Rawan says it is important for students to prepare as they enter the greater society, to know that they do not need to apologize for who they are, to be secure in themselves and their religion.

When a Sister Speaks

Presently, Rawan is part of a speaker's bureau at the mosque. She speaks to schools and community organizations, loves doing it, and loves the questions. She would like to be trained to speak to churches. Muslims need to do more outreach in order to educate others, says Rawan. They need to write more and speak out more. This is difficult, states Rawan, since they spend most of their time explaining their religion and beliefs, leaving little or no time to create and expand.

Women are effective speakers for Islam, especially on women's issues. Rawan learned during her college years that when a sister speaks, the audience listens more attentively. More questions are addressed to women speakers regarding their role in Islam. It is a good opportunity to explain the true Islam.

Rawan would like to learn Arabic better so that she can translate the Koran with ease and is considering going home for a year to do such. Her hopes for the immediate future are to study and share Islam with other Muslims as well as people from the outside community who are interested. There is much work to be done by Muslims to improve their lives and their public image. "Muslims today cannot live in a bubble," concludes Rawan.

CHAPTER 12

MIRANDA – THE LIMINAL ONE

[Miranda is an independent professional woman attempting to live a social Muslim life.]

I met Miranda at the group meeting of young women at her house which was hosted by her sister Rawan. She did not say much at that time, but what she did say was simple and clear. There was something mysterious about her even though she spoke in short direct sentences.

While I continued my research during the following two years, Miranda was the sister with whom I spent the most time. It was Miranda who invited me to attend an Islamic Art Fair in San Francisco with some of her friends. When I called her house during Islamic Awareness Week at the Jesuit university that her youngest sister attended, it was Miranda who promptly returned my call and expressed interest in joining me. Besides having dinner or meeting for tea with her mother and sisters, Miranda and I also dined alone, sometimes at my home, other times out. Although I sometimes taped our conversations, most often when we spoke I came home and wrote notes.

In the beginning, I was hesitant to ask very personal questions about her personal or love life or her attitudes toward her family and the Islamic community. However, it was Miranda in her direct manner who told me after a couple of meetings to go ahead and ask whatever I wanted, she would not answer anything she did not want to. As I began to understand her and her attitude towards life, I was reminded of an anthropological term I had learned long ago called liminality. Liminal people exist on the edges of their society, they are incapable of being in the center or behaving as they should. Miranda was like

that. She was a good Muslim woman, but she just would not fit that mold of the ideal daughter, or some day of wife or mother. It isn't that liminal people want to go to another society where they will fit in better, they are not able to fit the mold in any society. The disobedient ones, I would say, to use my own term.

Since I was looking for different perspectives on the life experience of Muslim women living in North America, it became very important to include the viewpoint of a very independent, young, and successful career woman. Although she lived at home and followed Islamic religions and social rules, with Miranda there was no compromising. Many men expressed an interest in marrying her, but she was in no hurry to get married. Miranda was not about to be pressured by anyone, not her family, not anyone. As she once stated to me, "It's my life."

Miranda's Story

Elegantly beautiful, in her mid-20s, Miranda has an icy sophisticated air about her. However, when with friends, she is warm, friendly, very intelligent, and extremely social. A graduate of the engineering school of an elite private university in California's Silicon Valley, she works in the high tech world. A social critic of her native Egyptian society as well as American society, she is financially and socially independent and is more interested in travel than marriage.

To Be Covered

Miranda did not "cover," the term often used by Muslim women, referring to the veil, until she was a sophomore in college. Prior to making her decision, she had done much reading and was an active member of the Muslim students association at her university. Still, she had not felt ready until one day a friend asked what she was waiting

for and told her of a hadith, a saying from the prophet Muhammad, that stated that no unveiled woman will enter heaven. Although still young, Miranda thought she could die anytime, “anybody can”, says she, and soon after that, she veiled.

Veiling is more than just putting on a scarf. A veiled woman stands as the image of her culture, states Miranda. Although it is supposed to be done at puberty, every girl or woman does it on her own time. Miranda exclaims, “She does it when she wants to. Miranda kept the same friends after veiling, but added others. She says, “Friends are friends, veiled or not.” She does not judge her friends who have not yet veiled. After all, when she was not veiled, she did not like it when asked when was she going to cover. She was often uncomfortable when unveiled while in the presence of veiled women, thinking that they appeared better than she and more religious. On her yearly trips back home to Egypt, her cousins would often ask, “When are you going to cover?” Miranda says she did not like that.

Being veiled did not make much difference in Miranda’s social life. Most of her friends throughout her life had always been Muslim. She had never been interested in doing any of the activities that a devout Muslim woman should not do, such as going out dancing and drinking, so not much changed. Some people stared in the beginning, which she found understandable, but over all not much changed.

The media image, says Miranda, of veiled women is to be blamed for their treatment by society. Newspaper stories portray Muslims as terrorists who mistreat their women. Movies show Arabs as bad men and their wives as subservient. Even during her university studies, Miranda says that one of her professors, a woman who says she is an expert on Islam, had the class reading books about village women, like A Wife For My

Son and Guest of the Sheik. These books are okay, she continues, "But what do they have to do with my life?" That is why people stare and think the things they think. People are not as friendly to a veiled woman. Miranda does not care what people think. They can have ideas, but when they meet her they change their minds. "Why would they think I would put myself in a bad position? If people think that I am stupid, then I think, no, you are stupid! I know how you live, you don't know about me," she concludes.

Shopping for clothes is difficult but not bad. Most clothing is either too short or too tight, short sleeved or sleeveless. Miranda buys things when she finds them, adding them to her existing wardrobe. There are seamstresses in the Islamic community, but they are mostly used for alterations. Her family employs a woman from Bosnia who sews up slits on long dresses, sometimes makes the entire dress, or other times she makes matching scarves or jackets for existing garments. Miranda buys clothes at local stores, she buys designer lines, and she buys what she likes and what looks good on her. Being well-dressed is very important to her. She likes being fashionable and says that at work she is known as "a fashion plate" and that some of her coworkers often come by to check out what she is wearing.

Aside from the above-mentioned irritations, Miranda feels that life in North America is not bad for veiled women. There is little discrimination in the workplace. Some people are cold, but few. In the cases Miranda is aware of regarding job discrimination, the woman filed a lawsuit and won. This is not a problem, continues Miranda. Veiled women have freedom of movement and are free to live their lives as Muslim women. Miranda says that in the high tech world of California's Silicon Valley where so many people dress in various international styles, being veiled does not look so

very odd. She recently went on a job interview and was a bit anxious about how she would be received but encountered no problems. She was offered the job but declined it when her present employer made her a counter-offer in order for her to stay.

With Struggle Comes Strength

Although born in Egypt, Miranda grew up in America. Her social world has always been Muslim. While in high school, she had some non-Muslim friends and did some things with them during the week but, on weekends, it was always a Muslim world. Still today, those same families get together and Miranda continues to be a part of that social world.

Miranda does not go to the mosque on a regular schedule. "I go when I go." When she was engaged sometime ago, she was more involved with the activities at the mosque but now, not wanting to answer questions about the broken engagement, she is not very involved. Nevertheless, she is an active member of the Muslim community in her area. It is a growing community that embraces many nationalities of Muslim immigrants as well as an ever-growing number of American converts, many of them black and Latino. Miranda thinks this is wonderful and says, "They are welcome."

Miranda thinks it is easier to practice Islam here than in the Middle East. She finds it sad that Islam started there but "those people are throwing it away." They don't go to classes like Muslims in her community in America and they do not try to learn more. Muslims are more serious here. In Egypt, her birthplace, people take Islam for granted; it is all around them. "If you go somewhere where there is no Islam, you have to struggle and with struggle comes strength. People in Egypt think this is a bad place," concludes Miranda.

Miranda thinks this is odd, saying that her cousins back home in Cairo do things she does not and would not do. There, people “confuse custom with Islam.” Miranda says that countries like Egypt have certain traditions that they have been following for many years and assume they are Islamic but that they are not. They are national customs that people confuse with Islam. Here people study Islam and follow it without the interference of national customs or traditions. One of her cousins, on her wedding day, in a gender mixed celebration, did not veil. Miranda thought her cousin was so virtuous, so pure, so innocent, so religious, then on her wedding day, “she showed everything.” Miranda says, “I’m fine with culture but I would not give up my Islam to fit culture. At the wedding, she showed everything to her husband’s friends. Does she think they will not remember what she looks like the next day?” To a veiled woman, to be veiled is to be dressed, to unveil is to undress. The belief is that what is covered is private and not for the world to see. In her community, Miranda finds people are becoming more Islamic, even if they are in the farthest place away from the origin of Islam.

I’m a Museum Piece

Miranda knows that she should get married since she is in her prime. She would like to, but it may never happen. She does not know how to prepare for something that may never happen. She is often approached by interested men and finds the attention flattering, but there are many issues to be considered.

Her parents want her to marry someone from Egypt. Miranda says she does not care about that. “I don’t care, I don’t care if he’s green.” He must, at the very least, be from a Muslim family, not a convert. Her mother cannot imagine her being married to someone whose family is not Muslim. Miranda likes dark men; she likes black men.

There are many dark or black Muslims, but they are often converts. When her mother asks her why she can't be like other women, she answers her, "You have been chosen to be tested."

Miranda says that there are some things she wants and that she will not settle for less. She is willing to get married if someone brings her a man worth her while. While describing a possible future husband, some people say that he is Egyptian and an engineer, she answers, "So what, so am I." She finds the marriage search a pain, stating that many of the handsome men who are introduced to her are like a nice gift box; when you look inside, it is just tissue. She would like to tell her well-meaning friends to take back the box, it is just tissue. When she does meet and like a man, she tells him, "Think of me like a museum piece, you can look, but don't touch the glass." Miranda is afraid to commit herself to anyone. She is not about to give away anything.

She is presently attending a class on marriage rights in Islam and is happy to learn that women have many rights in Islam, even regarding divorce. Throughout the year, various experts, both male and female, teach classes at local mosques on the teachings of Islam. There is a fee for each session, lasting usually six or eight weeks, and books on the subject are available for sale. Some classes women teach women only, some classes men teach men only, some classes are taught to both men and women, usually by a male. Miranda says that women are most comfortable teaching to women only. Miranda and her family and friends attend many of these classes. She says that she and her friends, while attending the class on marriage, would giggle and wonder if perhaps they are becoming much too wise. She says it would be nice to have a husband, just to try at least, but she is not interested in moving to any Middle Eastern country. She is used to the

West and likes living in metropolitan areas. She likes visiting Egypt but is not willing to move back.

Miranda says that her parents think she is difficult, that she does not like anyone, and is not very easy to work with. She knows she is "a little difficult." Her mother tells her she worries about her and Miranda answers, "Me, too!" Still, she knows women who are older than her and are not married.

Dreams of Spain

According to Islam, a woman needs to have a male guardian; she needs to live and travel with a male relative as social protection. Miranda understands this and does not necessarily disagree but, nevertheless, it is becoming more difficult to live at home. She and her single friends discuss the subject often.

Miranda says she is becoming reactive. She makes her own money, makes more than some men, and she recently bought her own car. There will come a time when she will have to go. "It isn't like I'm going to come home from a club with a man." She wonders why she can't live some place decent, on her own.

The travel issue is perhaps the most difficult to resolve. She has traveled alone but it has been to leave her father and meet her grandfather. She would like very much to travel. She is fascinated by the dark peoples of North Africa and the Moorish culture of Spain but, Islamically, she cannot travel without a male relative. According to Islam, it is the duty of males to protect their female relatives. It may be possible to travel with another female, but she must be going to meet someone and not just looking for a hotel when she arrives. Miranda does not know anyone in Spain. She is not interested in doing anything improper or wrong, she would just like to travel.

In thinking about the future, Miranda would like to work and live in the world of fashion design, perhaps importing Islamic fashions. She loves fashion and would like to design. If she didn't have to work, she would like to study design, but for now she cannot do it. She is working and taking classes. "I just cannot do it right now." For the present, Miranda will continue working at a well-paying job she does not love, living at home with a family she does love, studying Islam, and dreaming—dreams of Spain.

CHAPTER 13

LAILA – THE AFGHAN

[Laila describes how her Afghani upbringing differed from other Muslim girls and how this affects her present behavior and future plans.]

I was having coffee with Rawan one day when she suggested that I meet with her friend Laila. She had been at the group meeting at Rawan's house. I remembered her as extremely articulate and friendly, so I agreed to call her. Rawan said that being Afghani, Laila would have a different perspective to offer of the life experience of Muslim women living in North America. Rawan said she would call Laila and tell her I would be calling.

In a few days, I called and Laila invited me to her house in the afternoon after she got off from work at a woman's health clinic. She met me at the door and escorted me to a large living room, sparsely furnished but with a marvelous deep red Bokara rug. It had not been long since her mother's death, and Laila said the family was still attempting to adjust. She had a younger brother and sister who came in and out without obstructing our conversation. Laila was frank and excited about sharing her dreams and ambitions with me. Rawan was correct—Laila's experience of life as a veiled woman in America was very different from hers.

Laila's Story

Unlike most of her friends who return to either their birthplace or the birthplace of their parents, Laila has never been to Afghanistan. The country has been at war her entire life. Her parents who emigrated more than 20 years ago have never been back. Now with a new government, there appears to be some hope.

Born in America, Laila was raised within the Islamic moral and religious code but yet in a liberal manner. Her mother, a gynecologist, saw what can happen in a society if girls are not informed, educated, and experienced at taking care of themselves and did not want this for her. Laila grew up within the Afghani community learning Arabic in order to read the Koran and Afghan Farsi so that she could write to the family she has never met back in Afghanistan.

This continual communication with her family has assisted her in maintaining a link to the land she hopes to visit someday. She writes often and bases her social and political opinions on what her family has to say rather than the American news media, says Laila. She is encouraged by the behavior of the new government and has faith that she will return to the land she has not been to but is, nevertheless, her home.

Afghanis are Very Tribal

To be born in America but raised in the Afghani community within Islam is very comfortable for Laila. Her home and social life have always been very free. She likes her freedom and likes living here. It is all she knows, says Laila. Afghanis are very tribal, which amuses her. They stick to their own kind, they are very clannish, she says. Because of the war, there are many different kinds of Afghanis in America from various economic and ethnic groups. Some people came as immigrants before the war, such as her parents, and are highly educated. Her mother was a gynecologist and her father is an architect. Others came as refugees during and after the war. The large Afghani community is extremely social and has many functions. It amuses Laila that the first question asked is always what is your family name or where are your parents from. She enjoys these gatherings and has many friends, most of whom are Afghani. In

fact, she cannot keep up with the many invitations she receives and must, for cultural reasons, attend. It is unacceptable to say no. Thus, for Laila, weekends are enjoyably exhausting.

Islam Is Not A Religion, It Is A Way of Life

Although in her youth Laila attended regular lessons on Islam, the veil or veiling was not a significant part of that teaching. Afghans are not rigid about the veil, says Laila. It is important but not highly stressed. Most of her close Afghani friends today do not veil, others do so but not consistently.

Laila became more interested in Islam and veiling during her university studies at a local Catholic university where she majored in biology. She met other Muslim women from the nearby mosque who did veil. She was in her early twenties. Now the religion is more important for her and she looks at life differently. Although she attends her father's mosque, which is made up of only Afghans, she prefers the mosque of her non-Afghani friends which is multi-ethnic and conducts all major functions in English. With these friends, it is Islam that binds them rather than ethnicity.

Go Ahead, Look Like a Clown

When Laila made her decision to veil, her mother tried to discourage her. Born in an era in Afghanistan when women dressed very Western or European, Laila's mother did not veil and did not want her daughter to. She, in fact, told her "Go ahead, look like a clown." She died without ever seeing her daughter veiled.

Laila likes being veiled and likes the respect she receives from most people. They are careful how they speak in front of her, she says. They watch their words closely, but she does not think most people are uncomfortable with her veiled presence. She behaves

very American, her speech and mannerisms are like any other female college student. It is just that she is a veiled Muslim woman.

Discussing the behavior and manner of dress of some non-Muslim women, Laila feels sorry for them. They "show everything," she says, what privacy do they have? She is also not amused by the many women she meets who call themselves liberal but then attack her for her religious beliefs, her style of dress, and her way of life. She does not understand how they can call themselves liberal but be forever talking about a story they read or heard about some Muslim woman who was being mistreated by some Muslim man someplace. Their stories are not nor have they ever been a part of Laila's reality. She has no time or patience for these people; they are not worth her time, concludes Laila.

Although Laila likes the veiled way of life, she finds it challenging at times. It is difficult for veiled women to stay physically fit. When she did not veil, she would often ride her bike, but now that is not possible. She has a membership at an all women's gym and considers herself lucky, stating that traditionally veiled women have very little access to physical activity and thus become physically unfit and often overweight.

The change in dress style is also difficult for Laila. She does not like long sleeves at all. The first item of clothing she removes when she arrives home is her long sleeved top. She prefers pants to skirts and often wears them with a long loose top. Although she does have traditional long dresses with matching scarves in the bright beautiful colors she loves, she prefers loose pants and tops. She also has no problem putting on jeans and a sweatshirt if she is doing something rugged outdoors such as camping. This does not bother her. Laila does not think this is un-Islamic behavior.

While most of her matching outfits are purchased overseas—she purchased some beautiful ones recently when she went to Saudi Arabia—shopping in America is a problem. It is very difficult to find modest clothing, especially for evening or formal occasions. Everything has slits, states Laila. She feels lucky that she can afford to buy something when she finds it. Laila says she does not know what poor women do. Some wear the classic coat; it is easier and more economical.

They Are the Last to Get Help

For the immediate future, Laila is preparing to go out of state to obtain a master's degree in community health. Going away to school is very uncommon for most Muslim women but not for Laila. Because of the protective attitude of most Muslim parents towards their daughters, they often prefer that girls attend a local university so that they may continue to live at home. Laila is not interested in getting married for a very long time. Her father supports her in her ultimate career goal to be a gynecologist like her mother. She is certain that he turns men away who request to meet with her, without even asking her. He has always been very supportive of women, their independence, and a high level of education, concludes Laila.

Laila wants to dedicate her life to working in Muslim countries for women's health issues. She wants to "help any Muslim woman in any country. Anywhere, they are the last to get help." Recently a Taliban leader who was visiting at her family's home invited her to Afghanistan, stating that as a Muslim woman and not a Western woman bringing Western ways, she was welcome. I asked Laila about the accounts in the news about the Taliban and how they were treating women. She replied that she did not believe the American media. She believed her relatives in Afghanistan and they wrote

telling her that the nation was safer since the Taliban had taken control, that everything was out of control before but things were better now. Several years in the future, Laila plans on returning to the home she has never been to and helping Muslim women with their medical needs.

CHAPTER 14

SARA – THE UNVEILED ONE

[Sara details her struggle with veiling and finding a husband.]

I had planned on only interviewing veiled Muslim women for this study, but one day, while talking to Fatima, one of my key informants, she asked that I include her unveiled daughter. Fatima said that Sara would offer a different perspective on the life experience of Muslim women living in North America. I could not say no to her and, as it turned out, Sara's story does add another dimension to the study of Muslim women living in North America.

Fatima said Sara was about to leave for Egypt but that perhaps when she returned, we could get together. She warned me that her daughter would need some time to get to know me, that she would not just trust me immediately and share her thoughts, ideas, and feelings. I understood this and was willing to be patient. One evening, not long after this conversation, before Sara had left for Egypt, I was at Fatima's home when Sara came home. Fatima had said that there would be no time for us to talk since Sara would be busy packing, but somehow Sara made time. She joined Fatima and me for tea and we had a lovely and rather lengthy conversation about life, mothers and daughters, mothers and sons, sisters and brothers, social customs, and much more. Fatima and I are about the same age, our daughters are about the same age, and our sons are about the same age. We are both immigrants, I from Portugal, Fatima from Egypt. Our morals and ethics are very similar, and even our parenting style is similar. As a result, we had a very enjoyable and animated conversation. Sara did excuse herself in order to pack, but we agreed to meet when she returned from Egypt.

I called Sara when she returned and we arranged to have dinner at my house. When she arrived, she said that she could not stay long. She was working fulltime while studying for her MBA and did not have much time. I asked if I could tape our conversation and she agreed. I turned my phone off so we would not be disturbed. We dined and talked about her family, her love life, the Muslim community, Islam, and, of course, the veil. It was getting late, but we continued with our lively conversation. I did not mind, I was enjoying it. I thought about Fatima warning me that it would take time for Sara to open up to me and was thankful that it had not. We had a very nice conversation and she stayed late. After Sara left, I checked my phone and there were two messages, both from Fatima. She was worried because it was not like Sara to stay out so late without calling her. I called Fatima and apologized.

Sara's Story

Sara, a 28-year-old beautiful, articulate engineer working on her MBA, is satisfied with her life. She has lived large portions of her life in Egypt as a young girl as well as a working adult and considers herself fortunate to have had the opportunity to travel widely and extensively.

Born into a religious family, Sara considers herself very religious and perhaps the most religious of her circle of friends. Although her parents belong to a closely linked Egyptian Muslim ethnic community, she has always had a variety of friends from other ethnicities and religions. These have always been first generation children of other immigrants from various parts of the world.

Sara says she is not ready to veil. Everyone has a different state of faith. Islam is a religion of faith. It does not matter how a woman dresses as long as she is modest.

Veiling is for modesty, continues Sara. Some women wear the long loose coat and others just the scarf. The prophet said women should cover every part of their body except the face and hands, Sara says. How each woman does it is up to her. There are many levels of interpretation. According to Sara, Islam is not a religion of judgment. Each person must listen to what the religion has to say. What you do with that knowledge is up to you, she concludes.

Veiling is a very difficult decision, states Sara. There is no going back. It is not written anywhere specifically in the Koran that women should veil. Veiling is an interpretation of the prophet's statement that women should cover themselves. Perhaps it is an incorrect interpretation, says Sara. It is possible that another interpretation will appear, she continues. Maybe these people are wrong. Sara finds veiling hard, really hard. She cannot do it right now. The veiling issue is a very big issue. She believes a woman can look decent without being veiled and that a woman can dress modestly without veiling, but she would like to veil someday. "It is something I want to do if God wants me to do it. I cannot justify to not do it. I don't want to say that I should not do it. I'm just not ready to do it." Sara is at a state that all is left for her to do is put on the scarf. She doesn't wear tank tops or short skirts. But, still, veiling is very difficult. She does not think she is as attractive veiled.

Two years ago, while working in Egypt, she did veil during Ramadan, the holy month of fasting for Muslims. She received both positive and negative reactions. The very positive reactions came from her working male colleagues, the negative reactions came from management. Back home in Egypt, veiling is considered a backward thing to do and is associated with the less educated. Sara says in Egypt, none of her friends veil.

The upper classes associate more with looking European or Western. Her veiled image was not a positive one for the marketing position she held. Her employer was not happy and she asked Sara if the scarf was going to stay.

In her local community in North America, veiling is very recent. Five years ago, nobody veiled, says Sara. Her mother did not veil until recently. People are becoming more religious and are doing it earlier in life. Since more women are veiling, it is easier now to be veiled in America. The more women that veil, the better for them to face the outside community. Within the Muslim community in California's Silicon Valley, there are enough women who do not veil so that Sara is still comfortable. The mosque that Sara and her family belong to, however, is run by the more religiously conservative people. When she was younger, Sara was more intimidated by groups of veiled girls. Today, she is more open to having friendships with them. Very religious people often make others feel uncomfortable by asking them why they are not veiled. This happens often, states Sara.

Sara believes that women who are veiled but who are not really convinced put pressure on others to get veiled. Some families pressure their daughters, she says. This is not according to Islam. No woman should be pressured to do it. Younger women become more judgmental if they have veiled under pressure. Veiling must be done out of conviction, emphasizes Sara. It is easier if one is not alone and it is easier if everyone is veiled, but it cannot be imposed. Sara is comfortable with her wide circle of friends who appear less religious to the Muslim community because they are interested in a wide variety of subjects, not just religion. They are more open minded, she concludes.

The subject of clothing is very controversial in the Islamic community, the

wearing of pants especially so. Pants, says Sara, are more defining than loose skirts or dresses and are therefore considered less modest and, thus, a controversial issue. Style of dress and veiling is very personal. Every woman does it in the stages in which she feels comfortable, how she can do it. Some very fashion conscious women pull the veil back and let a slip of hair show, some just partially cover their hair. Women do it in the manner in which they feel attractive, according to Sara. Other clothing is equally important, nothing should be very tight, showing the curves of the body, nor should it be sheer. Women should not wear pants with blouses tucked in or short sleeves. Although there are many places to shop, it is still time consuming and difficult to find clothing that is attractive but still within the Islamic tradition. If it fits well, it might be low cut or have a slit up the back or be short-sleeved. It takes time to shop to find modest clothing. Evening wear is the most difficult of all. There are some seamstresses in the Muslim community but not many, says Sara. Most women just learn to shop. There are many choices; it just takes time.

Sara would like to veil in the future and is confident that when the time is right, she will veil. Everyone does things at their own pace. It is not a matter of men, it is a matter between a woman and God, within herself. "I live with the thought that someday I will do it, but I cannot do it now. The biggest struggle is between you and yourself, between what you think God asks you to do and what you feel attractive in." Veiling is a daily struggle. Sara says she is not willing to subject herself to the prejudice that veiled women encounter. Veiled women are treated differently. It is not bad if they are young and have American accents, but if they have a foreign accent, like her mother, they are treated as stupid. This makes Sara angry. People like her mother pay taxes; this is their

country. The most common attitude is for veiled women to be treated as stupid if they have a foreign accent and as weird if they do not. Acknowledging that veiled women are in fact segregating themselves within the larger society, it still makes Sara angry at how her mother and other veiled women are treated.

According to Sara, prejudice comes from ignorance. The more culturally diverse an area is, the more tolerance and understanding exists for veiled women. Overall, California's Silicon Valley, the society Sara and her community live in, is a tolerant society. It is better than other parts of the country, better than other countries. Veiled women do still worry about job opportunities, but in their region, people don't really care about what an individual is wearing but rather they look at how well a job is being done.

The Social World

Growing up in America as a Muslim female has been, for Sara, an enriching cultural experience. The various nationalities who worship together at the mosque go their separate ways socially, segregating themselves according to place of birth, with the biggest division between Arabs and Indo-Pakistanis. These national groups create a social world for their children, giving them a built-in peer group. The families from each national background attend each other's celebrations such as weddings and birthdays. They spend religious holidays together and often go on vacations together. Sara, however, from the time she was a young girl, has always had as her intimate group of friends, immigrants and the children of immigrants from a variety of national and religious backgrounds. She has made her choices of what functions to attend or not on a case-by-case basis. This has not been difficult and has prepared her well for the multicultural life she continues to enjoy as an adult.

Since the friends she chooses are also religious, her choices of what functions to attend are mostly social rather than moral. As a college student, when everyone was doing the bar scene, Sara would go but would not drink. Since her friends love and respect her, they do not pressure her and respect her decisions. If they are going swimming in bikinis and she does not do so, they understand. If they are having a party where alcohol will be served and she does not attend, they understand. Often these same people alter their social behavior in order to accommodate her beliefs. These days, with everyone more mature, life is even less complex. Rather than going to bars, most people go out to dinner. Sara and her friends often spend a day outdoors shopping or enjoying nature.

Sara is happy with her life and her many friends from families of diverse international and religious backgrounds. She has no Muslim close friends and likes it that way. Other people are tolerant and understanding of differences and this creates a certain type of person. Immigrants have a common ground and they make America a more open society. These people have a more global understanding—you are different, they are different, this is a world of differences.

Sara is in no hurry to find a husband. Islam is a religion of fate. She will meet the right man at a certain time. If she worries or not, she will still meet him at the same certain time. She is very happy with her life and loves living at home with her family. Her family is very important to her. She would like to stay living near them when she does get married.

Although according to Islam what is required is that her husband be a Muslim, Sara would like to marry someone from her own national background. She feels this

would give her children like roots, a more common background, which would be good for them since they will already be far from their parents' roots. It is best to have both parents be from the same culture. This is important if they are living in America. It would not be as important if she was married and living back home in Egypt since there the children would be surrounded by the culture.

Sara says she has been engaged twice to two extremes. The first man was exciting and dangerous, the second one was nice and boring. She has had two extremes and is looking for the middle. Sara feels that, according to the Arabic saying, the third time will be a charm. However, she is not looking for a husband. She has many distractions such as her job, her studies, and her friends. Some people think of her as "poor girl, twenty-eight years old and not married," but Sara is not looking. She has no problem not being in a relationship and has no anxieties. She has had two relationships and is secure in being alone. She has faith in God, states Sara affirmatively. Whatever is written is written; she will meet him when it is time. Sara says she has a strong faith and prays to God for a good husband and good seed, meaning healthy children.

In looking toward the future, Sara believes it is easier to live in America as a Muslim than back home in Egypt. Here there exists a certain amount of tolerance for differences. It is a more diverse community. Back in Egypt, the secular society tends to look at religious Muslims, especially the women who veil, as backward. Secular society is very Westernized or Americanized. Here, people tend to mind their own business. America is not a bad place to be a Muslim and Sara would like to think that it will only get better. Prejudice is about a lack of information or understanding. When people understand the Islamic culture better through social education, life will improve for

Muslims. Over all, this is a tolerant society, better than other parts of the country and better than other countries, concludes Sara.

CHAPTER 15

SUZANNE – THE DIVORCED ONE

[A young divorced woman, Suzanne outlines the difficulty of raising two daughters alone in America.]

Fatima and I were sitting in her living room one day drinking tea while we discussed the many different possible life experiences of Muslim women living in North America. She said her upstairs neighbor was divorced and did not veil, that she had two young daughters, and that the older girl who was about twelve did veil. Fatima offered to contact her neighbor, explaining my study to her, and ask her if I might call her to set up an interview. A few days later, Fatima called me saying that her neighbor had agreed to talk with me and was expecting my call.

I called Suzanne and we agreed to meet on a Saturday night since we both worked long hours during the week. She invited me over for tea saying that we could talk for about an hour that first time and perhaps we could meet again later. I agreed, of course. When I arrived, her daughters came out of their room where they were playing and Suzanne introduced me to them, giving me the title of "Auntie." She offered me tea and cookies, and we sat down to a pleasant conversation about her life in North America.

We talked about her life but also about ourselves and our common life themes. She worked in the travel industry and I also have worked in the travel industry. She was divorced with children and so was I. It was a comfortable conversation. When the hour was up, I got up to leave, but Suzanne asked me to stay a little longer and poured more tea for us. The girls would appear and disappear every now and then, giggling and irritating each other as is the common behavior for two young sisters.

We continued our conversation with Suzanne sharing the hardships of her life as a single Muslim woman and mother of two young girls, living alone in North America. Life was not easy for Suzanne. I understood her very well. We talked for more than four hours. As I was leaving, Suzanne invited me to come back another time. "We can sit out on the balcony and have tea in the evenings," said Suzanne.

Suzanne's Story

Suzanne never had a mother; her mother died giving birth to her in Egypt. Her father remarried. When Suzanne was a young teen, he accepted a faculty position at an American university and moved the family to North America. With her father's encouragement, in fact with his insistence that education was armament for the future, Suzanne obtained a degree in marketing. She married and gave birth to two daughters. Before reaching the age of 30, Suzanne's stepmother had gone home to die, her father died in America, and she became a divorced woman. Thankful for her father's advice, Suzanne began the next stage of her life, living as a single young woman with two daughters to raise.

Armored Struggle

Suzanne works for a travel company in corporate America where she is the only Middle Eastern woman. According to Suzanne, the prejudice of white America is becoming more difficult to tolerate, affecting her advances and raises. Her strong Middle Eastern personality and sense of drive and accomplishment is not appreciated, she says. She is working hard to reach a top management position where she will be less subject to the ignorance and prejudice of management towards Muslims and especially Muslim women.

Although life is financially difficult, Suzanne enjoys her independence and looks forward to providing a good life for her daughters, especially education. She gives them the same advice her father gave her, that education is the armament for life. Even if they marry young, they must finish their education, states Suzanne. Considering them her best friends, she enjoys being capable of helping herself and her daughters. Her ex-husband, now remarried, shares custody of the girls, but Suzanne takes no money from him.

Naturally a social being, Suzanne says she enjoys a wide circle of friends of many nationalities and religions and often hosts dinner parties at her home for them. Suzanne states that the wealth of America is the diversity of people one can meet and make friendships with. However, she also maintains close ties with the Islamic community, hosting women only parties to satisfy the wishes of her female Muslim friends. Occasionally she has mixed parties, but mostly she entertains women only, if these are with her Muslim friends.

Although Suzanne does not have any close family in her native country, Egypt, she returns as often as possible and is looking forward to taking her daughters with her the next time, "so that they can remember." Moving back, however, is out of the question. Her life is here in America with her friends and her daughters.

Unveiled Pragmatism

Suzanne believes in veiling and would like to veil someday, but she cannot do it at the moment. It is impossible to veil and work in corporate America, she says. There would be no way she could veil and advance. She knows of professional women, mature women, who had to quit their jobs in order to be able to veil, Suzanne says. It is impossible to work in the real working world of America and veil, concludes Suzanne. It

might be possible if working in a secluded environment, but not if one is a part of the greater American society. With the wars in the Middle East and the part the media plays, Suzanne finds prejudice against Muslims, especially veiled Muslim women, is growing more intense. She worries about her daughters and the hardships they will encounter. When out with her older daughter, who veils, she notices the change in behavior and attitude, how they are looked at, their treatment, and how it differs from when she is out alone.

Even if Suzanne could veil in the workplace, it would be more difficult to exist within the social fabric of American society as a single veiled woman. She would attract attention to herself and be scrutinized and criticized for her movements and actions. She is better off dressing modestly as she mingles with society.

Most women who veil successfully, says Suzanne, are married or single and living at home. They have the protection of their husbands or fathers. They live fairly secluded lives, mixing mostly with other Muslims and either do not work or work in a secluded environment. Suzanne is alone and she needs to take care of herself and her daughters and needs to work in the real world that is America. If she was married and did not work, she would like to veil. But, she is single and must work, so she is not able to veil at this time.

An Independent Old Woman

Suzanne likes being single and in charge of her life. She will continue to work hard to create a better life for herself and her daughters. She is planning on advancing into a senior management position and says she “is working very hard towards that.” Never satisfied with the present situation and always wanting to improve herself, she

plans to further her education in preparation for her older years. She is looking forward to being an independent old woman and enjoying family and friends with a little less struggle.

For the time being, Suzanne works hard, lives a decent life, is raising her daughters like her father raised her—to be educated and armored for the future. She believes in Islam and would like to go to hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. She goes to the mosque during Ramadan, the holy month for Muslims, and to listen to guest speakers. Suzanne feels that “the veiled ladies at the mosque” may have negative opinions of her, but holding her head up high, she forgives those who judge her. Only God knows what is in your heart, concludes Suzanne.

CHAPTER 16

DUA – A YOUNG MOTHER

[Married to her mother's cousin, Dua describes their courtship in Egypt, and partnership in marriage in America.]

Dua was the first sister Fatima referred me to when I originally started my research. Dua was a young teacher at the Islamic School. She actually was also a student at the same university I was attending, just finishing her year of student teaching.

In the spring of 1997, I went to the Islamic school to meet Dua for the first time. I was a little nervous. I did not know what to expect. I did not know how I would be received. I had never had a conversation with a veiled woman. Fatima did not count. I had known her for such a long time and, besides, she did not veil when we first met. So, I was not sure what to expect.

I arrived at the school, introduced myself, and said I had an appointment with Dua. Soon a tall and beautiful young woman appeared. She showed me to the conference room where we sat and talked and were later joined by the school principal, Moshira. I presented my research proposal to them. Dua said that many people are curious about Islam and come to the mosque or the school to ask questions. She said that Muslim women know they are misunderstood by American society and are always willing to attempt to clarify their position within Muslim society. Offering to loan me some books on the subject, she said that it would be her pleasure to discuss with me her life experience as a Muslim woman living in North America. We agreed upon a time to meet on the university campus the following week in order for me to receive the books she wanted to loan me.

We met the following Tuesday. I took the books and thanked her as she left with some of her Muslim sisters. I had complications in my personal life and, although I continued with my studies, I was not able to do any research for the next year.

In the spring of 1998, afraid Dua might either not remember me or not want to see me, I gave her a call. She was very gracious and agreed to meet with me at the school once again. I returned her books. She was now finished with her student teaching and was working fulltime. We decided it was easiest to meet at the school since her children were there and could play with other children. We had a nice conversation and she invited me to a discussion group on the Koran the following Friday evening at the mosque.

I met with Dua several times at the Islamic school. It was not possible for us to talk for more than an hour or so each time since her children were waiting. During our first meeting, I had asked her if I could tape our conversation and she replied that she preferred I did not. So, with Dua, I always took notes. Other times, I would call her at home and we would talk by telephone. Dua was always pleasant, relaxed, and cooperative. She ended all of our conversations with the same statement, saying for me to call anytime I needed to ask something else.

Dua's Story

Born and raised in Egypt, Dua has lived half of her life in America and now considers herself Islamic American. Her father is an agricultural engineer and her mother is a computer programmer with a degree in business. At age 16, she met her future husband.

Falling in Love

During her last year of high school, Dua met her mother's cousin who had been away for some time studying and working and they liked each other. One of the main reasons Dua felt comfortable in considering marrying her mother's cousin was that the women in his home were treated like the women in her home, there was no difference. She suspects the fact that her husband and her mother are the children of two brothers who married two sisters may have greatly influenced this similarity in home life, especially the high value, respect, and fair treatment of women in the household. Because her mother is the oldest child of her family, and her husband the youngest, there is only nine years age gap between Dua and her husband. Although cousin marriages are common in Egypt, her mother was not in favor of such a union and would have preferred a marriage between non-family members.

Because education is very important in Egypt and the last year of school very difficult and competitive, her family did not tell Dua of her cousin's request to marry her until she was finished with her studies. They married and came to North America soon afterwards. Immigration officials convinced the couple upon arrival that she should take her husband's name in the American tradition and not use her father's family name as was the custom in Egypt. Her husband strongly resisted the idea but was finally convinced to do so. Her father was very upset and would often tell Dua to return to her family name. Although she would like to again use her family name since it identifies her as Dua, daughter of, continuing her father's lineage, she does not really mind using her husband's family name, which is also her mother's family name.

A Supportive Partner

Dua and her husband settled in California's Silicon Valley near an Islamic community. He went to work as an engineer and she enrolled at a local university. With his support, she completed her studies with a degree in computer science and obtained a math teaching credential. During this time, they had three children. In discussing how she was able to study, work part time in order to acquire her teaching credential, and take care of a household with three children, Dua simply stated that her husband was very supportive of her education and her work and helped greatly. They did what was most important and let the rest go. On weekends, Dua would cook large amounts of food which the family would then just heat and eat during the week. Not cooking in the evening was very helpful, says Dua.

It was also very helpful that Dua did her student teaching at the local Islamic school, located at the mosque. Her children went to work with her and came home with her. While the youngest attended preschool, the two oldest ones went to regular classes. Today, she teaches full time while all three of her children study at the school. The school currently goes up to the tenth grade and is at full capacity. There is a growing list of students wanting to attend and the governing board would like to expand the school to the twelfth grade, but, says Dua, "There are no buildings for us to buy in Silicon Valley." Her son is getting older and she would like her children to graduate from the Islamic school and go on to a university.

Dua is very thankful for the existence of the school, making it possible for her children to not have to attend public schools which she does not like. She worries about the morality of America and would not like her children to attend public schools. Dua

says that she feels very strongly about the religious values of Islam and thinks public schools do not promote such values. She thinks it is important while her children are young that they are with people who think and believe as they do. It is important that they not be looked at as strange or different if they do not go to school dances or have boyfriends or girlfriends. She is as concerned for her son as for her daughters. Dua says that other than the fact that girls veil, boys are also expected to dress modestly. Their social lives are guided according to the same religious values. This was the way she was brought up in Egypt as a young girl. The social rules were not different for her from her brothers. Whatever was acceptable for her brothers to do, she was also allowed to do. Dua remembers that as a young girl, if there was a school trip for two or three days, she was able to participate. Dua stresses that she is not saying this was the case in all families, but it was in her family. She is raising her family in a similar fashion. The girls and the boys follow the same Islamic rules for social behavior. Because she is a teacher at the Islamic school, her work, family, and religion are all in the same world.

Cloistered in Islam

Religion, according to Dua, is more important here than in Egypt. Back home, all of society helps with the social behavior of both children and adults. People watch and correct each other's behavior. Aware of this, an individual is careful with his or her behavior, never knowing who is watching and almost certain that any wrongdoing will be discovered. In America, society is very individualistic. People are isolated, they don't even know their neighbors, and so they don't know what they are doing. Here, the mosque is the Muslim community. Back home in Egypt, the community is the entire society; people watch out for each other.

Although back home the society is more aware of behavior, all people are not necessarily very religious. For Dua, in a way, it may be easier to live here. She and her family are surrounded by very religious people. All the women at the mosque veil and people here are more religious and closer. It would be very difficult to raise her children in North America without the Islamic community, says Dua. She would be unable to have a Muslim social life or do things with other Muslims.

Dua says that it may appear that she and her family are isolated, but that they are not. They live in American society and have contact with other people in their daily living. It is only in their social and religious life that they confine themselves to the Muslim society. When asked why she does not mix socially with non-Muslims, she simply answers that it makes no sense to be with people who do things or believe in things that she does not. However, adds Dua, dealing only with Muslims socially still provides contact with diverse people. Unlike many mosques, this one is made up of many nationalities. Although all of her social life is with Muslims, she and her friends interact with a variety of people from many countries with different customs and traditions.

The Mosque is Like the Family Home

Most mosques in North America consist of mostly a single national group, but Dua says the mosque she and her family are part of is in the center of Silicon Valley and includes many different nationalities as well as converts. Many different people sit on its governing board. There are different language meetings for the study of the Koran, such as Arabic and Urdu, but the main events or functions at the mosque are always in English. English is the unifying language.

According to Dua, the mosque is like the family home. It brings people together. If they were back home, they would go to their parents' home to meet or gather. Away from home, the Muslims of her community meet at the mosque. For the women, it is the gathering place where they get together and become like family. In America, the community is the family substitute; all of the nationalities mix at the mosque, says Dua. Sometimes the different national groups have separate gatherings for special personal celebrations, but most events are mixed. At the mosque, people have weddings, birth celebrations, and different family celebrations. There are also special events like classes and guest speakers for the members to attend and participate in. Dua and her family participate in many of these events. It is part of their identity of being Muslim in North America.

Discussing life outside of the community, Dua once again says that she sees no reason to mix with people who do not live the kind of life she thinks is important. Life in America is good because of the support from the Muslim community. It would be very difficult, otherwise. The community is the family substitute.

A Mother's Influence

When Dua was sixteen, she wanted to veil, or cover as the women refer to it. Her mother, who did not veil at that time, convinced her not to. In those days, it was the custom for women to veil only when they were older, upon returning from the pilgrimage to Mecca. It was not common for young women to veil; it is more so now. Her mother stressed that Dua would be moving to America after her forthcoming marriage and that it would not be possible to veil in America. Dua chuckles as she relates this. Her future husband was very religious and asked his mother to request to her parents that she agree

to veil after they were married. Her father did not object but her mother fiercely did, and so Dua remained unveiled.

After moving to America, Dua's husband continued to ask her to veil, but she did not do so for more than two years. After awhile, belonging to the Muslim community where most of the women did veil, she decided to cover. Dua stresses that her husband only asked her to veil, that she veiled when she wanted to, when she was ready. She did not tell her husband when she was going to do it. One day she tried veiling when she went to teach school. She says she told herself, "I'll try it today and see how I like it, how I feel." She tried it and was comfortable and so continued to veil. Today, she is very comfortable being veiled. She likes it and wears nothing but the traditional or classic coat that many modern women wear. The mosque has a shop where the women can buy classic Islamic fashions. Dua however, buys most of her clothes on her almost yearly trips home to Egypt when she visits her family.

A Mother's Duty

Dua says that veiling is according to religion, not tradition. People in America are more informed and better educated. They are not as influenced by others and their fashions. In a way, veiling is like a fashion. The more women veil, the more other women feel comfortable with it. According to Dua, women veil when they become more religious. As more women veil, others feel freer to do so. Even in Egypt, more women are veiling now, concludes Dua.

Dua made it clear to her daughter that at puberty it would be necessary for her to cover. It was a religious necessity. She already wore the Islamic school uniform which has a veil, why not keep it on the rest of the time? Veiling, says Dua, is taught, not

imposed. If the outside world wants to call that forcing her daughter to veil, let them. Every parent directs and educates their children in the manner they think is important and correct. If the children decide to change later, that is their decision, but she must direct them in the manner she thinks is best and in what she believes is correct. A mother must do what she believes is right, stresses Dua. It would be very difficult to live a veiled Muslim life without the support of the community. Dua feels very fortunate to be a part of a large and growing Islamic community.

A Journey With No Return—America Becomes Home

Life in America is comfortable for Dua. Her children were born here and she knows how to make it work for her. She can get around, is free to travel, and does what she pleases. She is comfortable with her community and her family life here. She misses her family back home but is willing to settle for a yearly visit, states Dua.

Dua and her husband have discussed returning home but have come to the conclusion that they have been in North America too long and are accustomed to the American way of life. She hopes that her children will do well in life here. Her only goal for the future is to do the best job she can raising her children.

CHAPTER 17

JUDY – THE CONVERT

[Judy discusses her reasons for converting to Islam as well as her experience as a married, widowed and divorced Muslim woman.]

One day, talking with Dua at the Islamic school, I noted that while I was enjoying discussing her life experience of a Muslim woman living in North America, her story was almost too ideal. I asked if there were women with lives less fortunate than hers. Dua said that she did not think her life was ideal, that she and her husband had a normal life of a family raising three children, but that she understood what I meant. She said there was a sister working at the school who was both widowed and divorced and was also a convert. In order to limit the length of my study, I had originally not planned on interviewing converts. However, Dua said that this sister was at the school at that time and that she would be happy to go and ask her if she would be willing to meet with me. I agreed to it.

Dua came back a short time later with Judy who pleasantly said she would be happy to meet with me and gave me her telephone number. I thanked Dua for her time and for introducing me to Judy, and departed. As usual, Dua was calm, relaxed and extremely gracious. A few days later, I called Judy and we agreed to meet at a library near the Islamic school. I was glad I had decided to talk with a convert. Judy's story of her life experience of a young widowed and divorced Muslim woman living in North America was an interesting contrast to the life experience of immigrant women living in America.

Judy's Story

Born in America into an immigrant Catholic family, Judy grew up like any typical all-American girl. However, in her early twenties, she fell in love and her world changed. But, mostly it was Judy who changed. She found a new world and another self.

A Very Young Widow

Judy converted to Islam when she was a young woman and fell in love with a man from Egypt. When they first met, he was not very religious. Shortly after they were married, he became very ill. Desperate to help him cope with his illness, she called the local mosque. The people she spoke with responded immediately. After several visits with mosque members, they both converted to Islam. Judy and her husband decided to return to his country so he could be close to his family. While living in Egypt, Judy worked and she also began to veil. The people there both admired and respected her for veiling. After a year, her husband died. They were both in their mid-twenties. She returned to North America, went to work at her old job, and moved back in with her parents.

So Where Are You From, Really?

The most amusing but often difficult situation for Judy is how some people in North America cannot comprehend that she could possibly be American. Although she has an American accent, she is often asked if she understands something that was just said to her. She is often asked where she is from. When she answers that she was born in North America, people often persist, asking her again where she is really from. Judy thinks this reflects the ignorance of the local population about Muslims but believes it is improving as the population of California's Silicon Valley becomes more diverse. But,

still, for Americans, it is odd that an American woman would actually choose to veil, continues Judy. People think that it is imposed upon her by her husband, that she is oppressed by him. Judy says they do not understand that veiling, or covering as the women refer to it, is an act of free choice.

According to Judy, people in America do not understand the freedom veiled women have from being treated as a sexual object or symbol, the freedom of being treated like a complete human being. By veiling, a Muslim woman is demanding to be looked at first as a person and then as a woman. Her sexuality is a private issue, concludes Judy.

Judy says another positive part of the life of veiled women is the close bond women form with each other. In a world of only women, without the presence of males, women form close, lifelong loving friendships and relationships. Utilizing Islam's old laws and rules, which Judy thinks work very well for the modern world, the women nurture one another through life's hardships and celebrate life's joys. Before converting to Islam, there was no guidance in Judy's life. She went to church and prayed, but she did not feel she received guidance. Now, says Judy, Islam gives her direction on how to live life.

According to Judy, women in Islam do not have to contribute to the support of the household. The religion says that the husband must support his wife. The wife does not have to work but if she does, the money she earns belongs to her. She is not obligated to share it. For all of this, continues Judy, the Muslim women need only accept the husband as the head of the household. This does not mean she is subservient to him, it only means he is the head of the household in a symbolic sense.

A Second Attempt

After being back in America for less than a year, Judy married a friend of her husband's from Egypt. Although she liked being married, the marriage was difficult. The cultural and social differences could not be worked out, even with help from the people at their local mosque. After three years, Judy divorced her second husband. According to Judy, contrary to popular American belief, women can and do initiate divorce in Islam. She says the term divorce is misunderstood in America. During her divorce process, Judy asked for and received support and assistance from the brothers in her Muslim community. Single once again, she returned to live with her parents.

Islam is the Unifier

The Muslim community Judy belongs to is a rather unique one. Many mosques in North America are ethnically segregated with different national groups forming their own community, says Judy. The members of this community, in the heart of California's Silicon Valley, however, come from many different countries. They gather and discuss Islam, decide what is tradition and what is religion. The result is a purer form of Islam than they practiced in their native countries, concludes Judy.

For intimate social gatherings, some nationalities still stay together, but for larger celebrations, most people mix. For a certain group of people who belong to this mosque, nationality is no longer significant. Islam and living in America is the core of their existence for these people. "Islam is the unifier, it crosses all borders." It is within this group that converts like Judy feel the most comfortable and welcome, she says.

There are many American converts. Women converts marry mostly immigrant men while male converts usually marry other converts. There does exist a high rate of

divorce between male immigrants and converted American women. Judy says that it is very difficult to understand another culture. "It is very hard to understand the hidden, subtle manner of belief and behavior of another society," she concludes.

Always Hopeful

After almost ten years of single life, Judy is once again engaged to a man from her mosque. She has a good life living at home, has many friends and has returned to school but, states Judy, "I like being married." Unlike her first and second marriages, when she was a much younger woman, she has a more pragmatic attitude towards this third marriage. She will continue with her studies and her work. Judy likes working in an office in corporate America. For Judy, veiling and working in corporate America has not been a problem. When she first decided to veil, she approached her supervisor and told him of her intention. The reply was that it was acceptable and that her new look would not affect her position. People behaved a little oddly at first, admits Judy, but realizing that she was the same person, that she as a worker and an individual had not changed, life returned to normal. Judy did work at the Islamic school for a short time but feels that she can do more good to change the American image of veiled women by working outside the community than within it. Judy is hopeful for the future.

CHAPTER 18

THREE GENERATIONS: THE STORY OF FATIMA – HER
LIFE WITH HER MOTHER AND HER DAUGHTERS

[A college professor, Fatima shares her endless frustrations with juggling her work and home life.]

I have known Fatima for several years. At the beginning of my research, we both belonged to a woman's gym and saw each other several times a week. During those years, we often discussed the events in our lives. We had talked about her decision to veil, her daughter's return to Egypt, and her concerns about her mother's health. I did not know, however, much about the Islamic community in our area.

When I decided to focus my research on Muslim women, I shared with Fatima my anxiety about finding informants. I explained to her that I wanted to talk with a variety of Muslim women. She answered that Muslim women were, in fact, misunderstood and that it would be her pleasure to help me with my study.

Fatima first arranged for me to meet a friend of hers who was the principal of the Islamic school that was part of the large mosque to which they belonged. She also arranged for me to meet one of the teachers at that school. Fatima introduced me to her mother and her daughter. Fatima also introduced me to her neighbor who is divorced and does not veil.

Fatima, with her busy and hectic work and home life, was always ready to talk with me, to meet with me, and to introduce me to women she or I thought would provide interesting viewpoints of Muslim women. Fatima and I met many times during the time I was conducting my research, and we talked on the telephone often. We sometimes met at

our neighborhood coffee house, but mostly she invited me over to her house. It was more convenient for her and since we live near one another, it was also convenient for me.

Fatima was tirelessly supportive of me and my research. Fatima was loving and full of encouragement. Without Fatima's assistance, I would not ever have been able to make my journey into this Islamic community of sisters.

Fatima's Story: The Early Years

Fatima grew up during an era when women in Egypt did not veil. As a young woman, she wore short skirts, jewelry, and make-up. She met her husband when they were both undergraduate engineering students in Cairo. Fatima says that although it is still a common practice for Muslim families to play an active part in arranging marriages for their children, in her family that was not the case. Both she and her sister chose their husbands freely on their own. After their first child was born, Fatima and her husband came to North America to do graduate studies. After several years, her husband had a Ph.D. and she had a master's degree. They returned to Cairo and had a second child. They both taught at a local university, but after serious insistence from her father, Fatima applied for a Ph.D. in North America. It was his death request to her. He told her that her brother had a Ph.D., her sister had a Ph.D., her husband had a Ph.D., and so must she.

The family returned to North America and Fatima enrolled in a private university in California's Silicon Valley. Fatima was content with her life. Her husband had a good job working as an engineer, and she was in no hurry to finish her studies. They stayed seven years. The Islamic community in their area was very small at that time. They did not yet have a mosque. Her daughter did not have girls her age to be with. Life was difficult for her. Fatima and her husband had many arguments about what her daughter

would be allowed to do socially. Determined to give her daughter a normal life in North America while still maintaining a religious Islamic life, Fatima says she did and said whatever she needed to in order to accomplish this. They chose girls from other ethnic religious groups for friends and, most importantly, she developed a close mother-daughter relationship.

The Islamic community grew. They built first a small mosque, then a large one, and then a school. Socially, most of the ethnic groups stayed within their own people, but they mixed at the mosque. According to Fatima, nationality, ethnic background and class are still very important to the parents of this mosque, but their children do not feel that way. Their identity is linked by the experience of growing up Muslim in North America. Although Fatima's daughter became a participant within this social scene, she was always several years older than the other girls. She attended social and religious events at the mosque and at her parents' friends' home, but her own close circle of friends continued to be other ethnic religious people, never Muslims.

When her daughter was a young teenager, Fatima and her husband decided to return home to Cairo in order to give their children a more religious and national social environment to grow up in. They both obtained teaching positions, found a maid, and enrolled their children in private schools. In order to live at their expected class level, they needed to work very long hours. Life was very expensive. After several years of living in this manner, Fatima says she and her husband had a serious discussion. She told him they were defeating their purpose in this manner of living. They both spent many hours away from their children and the children were being raised by their maid. Fatima told her husband to return to North America to look for employment, saying that she and

the children would follow. Two years later, upon the completion of her daughter's high school studies, they came back to North America, back to California's Silicon Valley.

Back to America to Stay

During this time, Fatima had begun to cover her hair, not yet veil, but just cover her hair with a loosely knit woven hat. She had worn this all during her graduate school years. Now a professor, she continued to wear modest Western attire, little make-up, and the knit cap. Some people teased her, asking if she was bald or if she had not been able to comb her hair that morning, but life for Fatima, teaching at a private university in Silicon Valley, was not very harsh or difficult.

Fatima's daughter, at the insistence of her father, enrolled in the engineering department at an elite private university. She had wanted to study medicine, but he convinced her that medicine was a very long road and that if she studied engineering, she would be completely educated after her B.S. and she could still continue on if she wished. Once again, life was difficult for Fatima and her daughter in their relationship with the father. In order to do well in her studies, her daughter had to stay at the school lab long and late hours. This was not acceptable socially for a young Muslim female. To be out late did not look good, it was not appropriate behavior. It was a negative image for a young Muslim girl. More arguments followed between Fatima and her husband. She once again needed to reason with him, to convince him that in order for their daughter to succeed in the field he had chosen for her, she needed to spend many hours in the lab.

Fatima's son, who was high school age, was enrolled at a boy's Catholic private school. Although he was younger and did have other boys his age at the mosque, because he attended a school with boys of other religions, his friends, like his sister's, were

mostly also of other immigrant and ethnic groups. Also like his sister, his friends were seldom American.

After graduating from college and working for two years, Fatima's daughter decided to return to Cairo. To her, her home was her birthplace. She spent her teen years there, had friends there, and family she could live with, so home she went. While back home, she lived with an aunt and worked in the marketing department of an engineering company.

The years her daughter was away were probably the calmest in Fatima's life. Her son had graduated from high school and was away at college. Her mother was living back home in Cairo near her sister and her daughter. Fatima went home every year to visit them and her daughter also came to visit her in North America. The Islamic community continued to grow and religion became an even bigger part of Fatima's life. She decided to veil, totally. This was a very difficult and serious decision. Once she veiled, there was no going back, it was a serious commitment. She was concerned with what the reaction might be from her faculty peers, school administrators, and her students. She consulted with all except the students. They assured her that nothing would change. She would not be treated differently. When the day came and she returned to the classroom veiled, Fatima thinks that the students did not even notice; no one said anything. She continues to wear fashionable modest Western clothing with her head veiled in the modern Islamic manner, scarf neatly held in place under the chin fitting snugly around the face.

Life As a Balancing Act

While both of her children were away, Fatima decided to bring her mother to

North America to stay with her. Her house was empty, and her mother was old and needed medical attention. Fatima says that, in Islam, it is the daughter's duty to take care of the mother. She says that, because of this, there is no social network for old people. Now living in Silicon Valley with Fatima, her mother spends most of her days alone. She does not understand English so she does not watch television. She has no hobbies or friends. Fatima says there are few older Muslims in the area and, mostly, she reads the Koran. Fatima feels sorry for her mother since she is old and frail, but her mother takes up all of her time. She needs to pay much attention to her so that she feels loved. She needs to take her to the doctor often. Fatima fears that some day she, too, will be old and frail and hopes her daughter will take care of her.

A year after her mother came to live with her, Fatima's daughter decided to return to North America. She had been gone for five years and had enjoyed the social life of living back home in Cairo but felt she was not advancing professionally and needed to return to North America. She had met a man, fallen in love, and became engaged. She thought her fiancé would not mind moving but, to her surprise, he had come to visit and told her that he did not want to move to North America. He wanted to live at home to be near his family. The engagement was off. Now almost thirty, she was considered quite old to be single within the Islamic community. All of her Muslim acquaintances were married and had children. She was having a difficult time relating to them. Fatima spent a lot of time talking with her daughter and she tried to do things with her. She told her daughter that God would take care of things. Fatima's daughter was having a difficult time adjusting to the reality of her new life.

Life was very difficult for Fatima, her mother took all of her time. Her daughter

really needed her, also, but told Fatima that she understood and knew Fatima had to take care of her mother. Fatima was also neglecting her job, she felt. She had papers to correct and she did not know when she was going to get that done. Meanwhile, she was concerned about her husband. He did not complain, but she knew that she was also somewhat neglecting him.

Several months later, Fatima's life had become a little calmer but remained somewhat complex. Her daughter was adjusting once again to living in North America and had started graduate school. Utilizing her childhood experiences, her daughter continues to have a wide circle of ethnic friends and enjoys a healthy social life. She is not concerned with finding a husband and is thankful that her family is not pressuring her to get married. Fatima's mother is still not accustomed to living in North America but she now spends some of her time with her other children and appears to be in better health. Her husband has been very busy traveling in connection with his job, giving Fatima a little less to worry about at the end of her hectic days of teaching. Now, however, her son is in need of her time and attention. He had been engaged, but it had not worked out. She spends much of her time talking with him. Maintaining a close relationship with her son and her daughter has always been very important to her, concludes Fatima.

A Look Toward the Future

It is Fatima's hope and wish to soon wear the coat attire of the modern Muslim woman, a long ankle-length loose garment. She would like to be able to do this soon. She would wear the coat in public but would continue to wear more personal clothing in private. She thinks it is more important to veil in America than back home in Cairo. At

home, the entire community is veiled by Islam, says Fatima. There is no need for a woman to protect herself from outside elements in Cairo. The veil is the Islamic community.

In America, it is different. Women need to identify themselves and protect themselves from the outside world. This is the main reason that more Muslim women veil when away from home, says Fatima. In many of the families now living in America, the daughters first veiled and then the mothers followed, continues Fatima. The mothers had grown up in the Middle East in an era when few women veiled. They had emigrated and created community but continued unveiled. Their daughters, however, raised in North America, felt a need to veil. Although most girls veil after reaching puberty, oftentimes they veil before. According to Fatima, this is a strange phenomenon that appears only in North America. It is never the case in their home country.

Fatima is looking forward to growing old in North America. The Islamic community in California's Silicon Valley is large, loving, and embracing. There is no need for Muslims to worry when they become old and die, says Fatima. The community takes care of them. According to Fatima, when a person dies, the members of the community pick up the body and prepare it for burial according to Islamic law and tradition. There is a cemetery for all Muslims. If the family of the deceased cannot afford to pay for the funeral and burial expenses, the community pays for it.

Life in America is good for Fatima, she exclaims. Muslims are free to gather and worship. Because she lives in a richly multicultural area, she feels little resistance to her veiled attire. There are some looks or remarks but nothing she cannot ignore. Her children are loving and religious. Her mother is near her, so she can take care of her.

The weather is good and the air is cleaner than back home in Cairo. Fatima is content with her life in North America. She is looking forward to becoming more religious and to the growth of the loving and embracing Islamic community.

CHAPTER 19

MOSHIRA AND HER THREE DAUGHTERS

[Moshira tells the classic immigrant story of coming to America just for a short time, and later realizing that she is here to stay.]

Moshira was one of the first two Muslim women Fatima referred me to in the spring of 1997. She was polite when we first met at the Muslim school but a bit resistant. As I shared my proposal with these two women on that first day, I remember Moshira standing up across the conference table from me, with her arms crossed in front of her body, asking me, "And so why is it that you want to write about us?" I was a bit uncomfortable but did my best in explaining my reasons. I did not see or talk with her until the following spring.

In the spring of 1998, when her daughter Rawan arranged for a meeting of girls at her house, Moshira was not home in the early part of the evening. She arrived later and we sat at her kitchen table talking for a while with a few of the girls. Moshira was once again friendly but reserved.

The family was about to go on one of their yearly visits to Cairo that summer. They had to go during the hot summer months because of their school schedules. Moshira was the principal at the Muslim school and the girls were students. I asked Rawan if she thought it might be possible for me to talk with her mother about her life experience of living in North America as a Muslim woman. Rawan said her mother was very busy shopping for gifts to take back home and packing, but she would ask her. We made an appointment and I went to their house. Moshira, the girls, and I sat at the kitchen table for a couple of hours and talked. I knew she was very busy so I really

appreciated her time and told her so.

I met with Moshira and her daughters several more times during that following year. One evening while having dinner at my house, Moshira shared an experience she and her friends had with a female American journalist who said she wanted to write about Muslim women. Moshira said that after she and a group of friends met with the journalist, they sensed that they had not communicated well with her and told her so. The journalist replied that Moshira and her friends were not representative of Muslim women in general, and she could not write about them as such. I had a flashback to Moshira standing across the conference table at the school, with her arms folded asking me why did I want to write about them, and I understood her much better. While discussing this subject at a later date, Moshira said that she and the women of her community have grown accustomed to having people only believe what they hear and read about them if it fits into the stereotypical view of Muslim women as oppressed victims of their men and their religion. Moshira says that she considers herself a normal Egyptian woman and that being college-educated is not rare in Egypt, since it is free. She does not understand why people only want to hear the negative viewpoint about Muslim women, especially those living in North America.

When I met with Moshira, it was always with some, if not all, of her three daughters. Besides discussing her life experience as a Muslim woman living in North America, we also discussed our children and ourselves. We had grown up in different places—she in Egypt and I in Portugal—but in the same era with similar social and moral values.

Moshira's Story: Life Before the Veil

Moshira grew up in Cairo in an era when women wore fashionable clothing and made weekly trips to their hairdresser. While a student at Cairo University where she studied pharmacy, of several hundred female students, only one or two veiled. Veiling, says Moshira, by modern Egyptian women began as a lower class movement that crept into the upper classes. Moshira says that eventually upper class women took up the veil and the wearing of modest Islamic clothing, thus unifying the look of all Egyptian women.

It was not until after living in North America for several years that Moshira first started covering her hair with a knit cap, and she did not veil until after the birth of her third daughter. After this very difficult birth with grave complications and a long recovery period, her husband asked her if she might not want to veil. She did want to, but found it very difficult to do so at that time. Moshira recalls that while discussing the veiling issue with her husband, he advised her to make sure she was certain when she did veil. Veiling, says Moshira, is a very personal commitment for a woman. It is something a Muslim woman does out of faith and conviction for her religious beliefs. Veiling, continued Moshira, is not like a fashion item that women put on and take off in a casual manner. Veiling is very serious. After some time, she did veil and now likes her look and the respect she is generally given by American society. Often men tell her that they admire her choice, says Moshira.

Finding modest clothing is not difficult, although most often what can be purchased is not very attractive or fashionable. Moshira buys most of her scarves in Egypt where there is an abundance of beautiful choices and also her classic coats,

although she mostly wears what is referred to as Western clothing such as skirts, tops, and jackets with a professional look.

As her daughters got older, they often asked her if they, too, would need to veil someday. Moshira says she always answered yes. The youngest daughter had the most interest, asking many questions. Moshira says she accomplished the veiling of her daughters with a lot of prayer. She was teaching Islamic studies at the Islamic school located at their mosque and thought, why not teach it at home to her daughters, also. So she began Koran lessons at home with the girls. Emphasizing again that it took a lot of prayer, Moshira states that as it happened, all three daughters veiled during the same week. The youngest one was a junior in high school, the middle daughter was a senior, and the oldest one was a sophomore in college.

We Are Not Here to Stay

Moshira met her husband during her university years and agreed to interrupt her studies and join him in Canada where he had a teaching position at a university. At that time, her husband made a promise to her father that she would be able to return to Cairo in order to complete her university studies. They did return shortly but it was for Moshira to give birth to her first daughter. She was young and it was her first baby. She wanted to be at home with her family. The second daughter was also born in Egypt. It had always been Moshira's intention to return to Egypt, raising her family in her own homeland, but once again the family came back to Canada where eventually her third daughter was born.

In order to fulfill the promise made to her father, the family again returned to Cairo. They hired a woman to take care of the girls while her husband worked and

Moshira completed her B.S. in pharmacy. The family returned once again to North America, this time to California's Silicon Valley, where her husband accepted a more lucrative position in the engineering field. Always with the intention of going home someday, one day soon, Moshira and her husband continually created timelines for themselves about when they would return home permanently. First they said they would return when the youngest daughter finished grammar school. When that time passed, they planned on returning at the end of her high school years. But the years passed and the girls grew up.

While the girls were young, Moshira made the decision to stay home and raise them herself. She had not been satisfied with the arrangement in Cairo where she had hired a woman to take care of the girls and decided she wanted to be in charge of the care of her daughters while they were young. She wanted to take care of them herself, exclaims Moshira. When her youngest daughter was in her early school years, Moshira started teaching at the Islamic school. Her teaching position was manageable since the school hours were somewhat short and most of the preparation could be done at home. However, after a few years, she became principal of the school and the work hours away from home became very long, making life difficult for Moshira and her family. This was a significant social position in the community and she was expected to attend many functions as a representative of the school and often of the Islamic community. When her third daughter started her last year of university studies, Moshira resigned.

All the while as they returned home each year, Moshira and her husband planned on staying permanently some day soon. They purchased a home in a good neighborhood in Cairo where the girls could maintain a close relationship with their grandparents,

aunts, uncles, and cousins during their extended yearly, sometimes more frequent, visits home. Meanwhile, they were becoming more accustomed to life in America and to American wages. With the girls growing older, the longer they stayed in America, the lower the possibility of going home to stay.

As the girls started their university studies and eventual employment, it was becoming clear to Moshira that it was too late. Her oldest daughter, especially, had no interest or intention of returning to Egypt to live. On a recent trip back home, Moshira had arranged for a job for her but she was not interested in the least and refused to go. The two youngest daughters show an interest in returning often and enjoy their yearly visits with the extended family back home. They are even considering moving back for a year or two in order to study Arabic while teaching school. The oldest daughter, however, will have none of that. She is not even interested in returning home once a year with the rest of the family, stating that the world is a very big place and she would like to see some of it, not just Egypt. Sometimes, while stating that she is tired of going back to the same place every year, she is confronted by her sisters who tell her that the reason for the trips is to see her family. She answers that she can see them in America. Her sisters clarify that they are talking about their extended family back in Egypt. She shrugs her shoulders and again says that the world is a very big place. At these times, Moshira sits silently as she watches and listens to her daughters debate.

Sleepless Nights

While raising three daughters in America, Moshira says she prayed much and slept little. Their teen years were filled with mostly pain and fear for Moshira. As the girls grew older, Moshira says that out of every year, she spent three or four months

worrying and not sleeping. She clearly and vividly recalls one occasion when, as she walked out of her house to talk to a neighbor, she noticed the woman appeared to have aged excessively overnight. That mother then told her that her daughter had been pregnant without the knowledge of her family and had called her from the hospital to inform her she had just had a baby. Moshira remembers how frightened she became at this tragic news from her neighbor. This was a good Christian religious family. If it happened to them, feared Moshira, it could also happen to her family, and she prayed even more.

Recollecting that the teen years were mostly filled with the fear and pain that accompanies having children and worrying about them, Moshira continued her story saying that she had the most difficult time with the oldest daughter since she was the first. Her daughter would often question her social limitations of not being able to attend school games or dances, arguing that everyone else was doing it, so why could not she. Moshira continuously needed to explain to her that she could not do as everyone else and why not. Mixing the sexes, especially during the teen years “when the hormones are running wild,” says Moshira, is not acceptable to Islam. Muslims believe it is best to separate the sexes especially during those years. Moshira recalls that it wasn’t that her daughter really wanted to date or dance, that she was very modest in dress and conservative in behavior. Her daughter was simply curious. After a while, it stopped being such a problem; her daughter understood as she matured.

One evening, as Moshira sat at her kitchen table telling her story of motherhood in America, her daughters sat with her and silently listened, not interrupting nor challenging her facts. After coherently and chronologically telling her story of raising

three daughters in America, Moshira stood up and, sighing, glanced at her daughters and exclaimed, "There, now they can tell you their horror stories." With this final statement, she left the room.

In recalling their childhood, the girls shared that their social weekend environment, while they were very young, had been totally structured by their parents. Their friends had been the children of their parents' friends; thus, they had lived in a totally Egyptian social world. It was not until more recently that their social world expanded to include other Muslim friends. Now in their twenties, these girls had formed strong and bonding friendships with many of their childhood friends. Stating that every girl makes her own decision regarding veiling, they shared that some of their friends had chosen to not veil, at least not to as of this date, but that the veil issue was not a friendship issue and it did not affect their close long relationships.

Discussing their possibility for marriage, the sisters agree that although it was traditional for the oldest daughter to be married first, this was no longer strictly followed. When I asked about her plans for marriage, the oldest daughter shrugged her shoulders and said, "I don't know if I would like to be married. I've never been married so I don't know if I would like it."

In a later conversation, this time relaxing in her family room with a cup of tea again surrounded by her daughters, Moshira stated that she worries less about them now that they are adults than during their teen years. She hopes that her hard work on their upbringing during their early years was effective and that they will always behave according to the Muslim way of life. She would like to have her daughters married so that she will need to worry less about them. Her oldest daughter, however, says Moshira,

“is being very difficult.” Her daughter is being very selective with the many men who have shown a serious interest in marrying her.

A Future of Dreams

Now that she no longer needs to devote long hours to her job at the Islamic school, Moshira finds herself very active, devoting even more time to a variety of needs within the Islamic community. Her first venture is in the fashion world. Because it is difficult for Muslim women to find attractive clothing to purchase in North America, Moshira and some of her friends have started a business where they will control the manufacturing, importing, and selling of Islamic fashions. Moshira believes that women can dress attractively and fashionably while still being modest according to Islam. She hopes to expand her business to include other items of interest to women such as textiles.

Recently she also accepted a position as a more sophisticated modern day version of the ancient matchmaker role within the Islamic community. Because the Islamic community is sexually segregated, young people are not able to easily meet prospective future husbands or wives. They may attend many functions at the mosque or participate in other social gatherings but because they are always seated at separate tables or in separate rooms, they have difficulty meeting each other.

The community is concerned about this and is attempting to facilitate what is becoming a very big problem—that of finding a wife or a husband. Moshira is not yet sure how she will accomplish this since she does not wish to become a dating service. She is working on a system where people can be screened and then brought together based on some common issues or interests. A meeting will be arranged but, after that, it is up to them, says Moshira. “The chemistry must be right.” Moshira is aware of other

impersonal dating services for Muslims. Hers will be very personal. She wants to utilize her knowledge and personal friendships within her community, perhaps work with women like herself in other communities, in order to bring young people together. She emphasizes that it is a very important and responsible part of parenting, finding a partner that is compatible for their children.

With this service, Moshira hopes to be able to help her daughters, also. She would like them to marry Egyptian men but recognizes that being raised in America, it would be difficult for them to marry a man who has lived his life in Egypt. She hopes that they will marry an immigrant with family in Egypt so that he will want to return home often to visit.

Now in America for more than twenty years, Moshira's immigrant dream has gone from "We are not here to stay," to "Soon we will go home," to "Some day we will go home." She and her husband will stay in America until he retires. At that time, they will make their Cairo home their primary residence. If her daughters marry men with families in Egypt, she will be assured that they will visit often as is their custom. If not, they will become an international or global family. Moshira says she is looking forward to growing old within her own Egyptian society where old people are treasured and respected and are not made to feel like they are in the way or a burden to their families and to the national community.

CHAPTER 20

ASMA – A RECENT WIDOW

[An assertive Indian woman, Asma describes some unpleasant difficulties with her educational goal, her work environment, and veiled life in America.]

While having tea with Rawan one afternoon at a local coffee house, I said that I felt my study was a little off balance. I had enjoyed meeting her and her family and friends, but they were mostly Egyptian and young. Rawan agreed and said that certainly I should meet sister Asma. Rawan said that sister Asma was Indian and a recent widow. She said sister Asma was very active in the Muslim community and had a lot of energy. Sister Asma was always trying to get the sisters from the mosque to do more, to be more active in the activities of the Muslim community. “You need to talk with her,” said Rawan. Sister Asma would certainly have a different perspective on life as a Muslim woman in North America, asserted Rawan.

As we departed, I thanked Rawan once again, for giving of herself and her time, and for helping me find a diverse group of Muslim women living in North America. Not long after that, while visiting with her and her family at their home, Rawan told me she had talked with sister Asma and that although she was very busy with her family and her work, she would be glad to talk with me. After several telephone conversations and changes of meeting times, Asma invited me to her house one evening after we both were off work. One of her sons greeted me at the door and escorted me to a large living room sparsely furnished with a mixture of Western and Indian furniture. Asma entered soon afterwards and graciously shared her life experience of an Indian immigrant Muslim women living in North America. Her young daughter joined us for some of the time and

after our agreed time of about two hours of conversation, I thanked her for her time and left. She was friendly and articulate and said I was welcome to call her again if I needed to.

Asma's Story

Asma emigrated to America as a young bride thirty years ago, accompanying her physicist husband who was working toward his Ph.D. She had a B.S. in biology and was hoping to enter medical school and fulfill her lifelong dream of becoming a doctor. Before leaving her native India, both she and her husband had promised her mother that she would pursue an advanced degree upon arriving in her new home called America.

Asma says she was surprised that when she arrived in North America, she saw no professional women. She saw women doing low level work but saw no professional women. She was shocked at the attitude towards women in America. She applied to medical school but was not admitted. She was told that she would soon become pregnant and drop out. This was unbelievable to Asma who says that in India, many women are professionals, that indeed some hospitals are staffed entirely with women doctors.

For the next several years, as she did indeed become pregnant and have children, Asma continued her attempts to enter medical school. She was never successful. As she accumulated university credits during this time, she was able to obtain another B.S. in the medical field, but never a medical degree. As she looks back over the last thirty years of living in America, this is the largest wound, the cause of most pain for Asma--the fact that in America, land of the free, she was not allowed to be a doctor.

On Being Different

Asma and her husband have always mixed with people other than their own

nationality or religion. Still, she says they have paid a very high price for being “different” in America. Although she attributes her inability to obtain a medical degree to the attitude towards women in America, she thinks that if she wasn’t different, someone might have advised her, helped her, or assisted her in finding a way to achieve her goal. Now, as her own children attempt to educate themselves, she says university people with whom she comes in contact still treat her as an outsider, always asking where she is from and telling her that many people want to attend the university they are interested in. Asma strongly resents this attitude. Long ago she became an American citizen hoping to be treated in a more inclusive manner by Americans. She does not like being asked thirty years after living in America and paying large sums of dollars in taxes where she is from, with the implication that she is an outsider and that her children do not deserve to enroll in top American universities like any one else.

She feels that her husband also did not advance because he was different. Although he was a successful physicist and contributed greatly to the companies he was associated with, he never achieved the level of a vice president nor was he ever rewarded adequately in a monetary manner for his many contributions. Still, says Asma, “He has done very well.”

Since she lives in California’s Silicon Valley, a large metropolitan area with large groups of immigrants arriving from many diverse parts of the world, life in North America is becoming socially a bit more tolerant, but Asma feels that the people with power are still difficult to deal with. She is still consistently asked where she is from, when she states her home town in California, she is often asked repeatedly where she is really from. Asma feels this is consciously done in order to alienate her and make her

aware of her difference. She does not like it.

I Can't Watch Her All of the Time, Only God Can

The mother of three sons and two daughters, Asma can honestly say that raising her children as Muslims in America has not been a problem. From the beginning, she and her husband taught by example, they lived the life they wanted their children to learn to live. Asma liked watching television when she first came to America, but as her children grew up, she did not want them to learn the behavior on the screen, so she stopped watching it herself. She always behaved in the way she wanted her children to behave. Teaching by example is, according to Asma, the way to parent and teach children.

During the teen years of her older children, there was no friction with them over what they would or would not do. They knew what was allowed according to Islam and never asked to do anything that was not. Her children knew they could not go to school dances or the all-night graduation parties and so they did not ask to go. While growing up, her children had a variety of friends from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. They were not allowed to spend the night at their friend's house but their friends could come spend the night with them.

Although she loves working in the medical world, Asma has always worked part time, choosing to spend more time with her children. Children are more important than money, says Asma. Working in a lab in the medical profession makes it possible for her to work part time. It is not difficult for her to arrange to have a weekday evening and weekend schedule. As her children grew up, the older ones watched the younger ones in the afternoon until her husband arrived home from work and she herself came home a

few hours later.

Asma and her family live a full Islamic life. They go to the mosque for Friday prayers, her children have always attended Sunday school, and they attend many events at the mosque, both social and instructive. When the older children first started school, there was no school at the Islamic center so they attended public elementary school and private high school. The middle children were able to attend Islamic elementary school and private high school. Her youngest daughter, who is ten, will hopefully be able to graduate from the Islamic high school since the school has recently expanded its program.

All of the older children have attended or still attend the university of their choice even if it is not close to home. When her older daughter expressed interest in going away to school, Asma did not hesitate in her support of her daughter's decision. Together they went to research her daughter's school of choice. Having her daughter alone and away from home did not bother Asma, who states that if she did a good job, she does not need to worry about her daughter. "I can't watch her all of the time, only God can."

Just four months prior to our meeting, while Asma was visiting her family in India, her husband died. Although this has been very hard on her and her family, it has brought her and her children even closer to one another, says Asma. Her older sons took full responsibility for the funeral arrangements and continue to play a significant role within the family unit even though one lives and works in a far away state and another is away at school. For the moment, Asma continues to work part time since she still has a 10-year-old daughter at home.

I Don't Believe in a Isolationist Attitude

Asma enjoys living a multiethnic life. "I don't believe in a isolationist attitude," she says. She mixes socially with her neighbors and the people she works with, she likes mixing with everybody. She and her husband have always attended many social events with local political people, people from her husband's place of work, as well as Indian and Muslim people. While attending events with non-Muslims, people were always respectful of their religious beliefs and practices. It was never an issue or cause of any problem. When her daughter was married, Asma invited many people, not just Indian and Muslims. She invited neighbors, the people she worked with, and the people her husband worked with. When her husband died, many people came to the funeral: local politicians, friends, neighbors, and work colleagues as well as the local Muslim community.

The mosque is at the center of their life in the Muslim community and both she and her husband have always been very active building and expanding it. The mosque is itself a multiethnic center, attracting Muslims from many countries. At the mosque, they gather and meet. It does not matter the nationality. "Islam is the same everywhere," says Asma. The local Islamic community is large and growing. By hosting speakers for fundraising events, the community can and does raise large sums of money for social and political causes they believe in.

Are You Going to Dress Her Up Like You When She is Older?

When Asma was a young woman in India, she wore a full body cover including face and hands. After arriving in America and studying the Koran in more detail, she realized this was not necessary and now covers her head but not her face and hands.

Dressing in the modest Muslim manner is not difficult for Asma. She buys some of her clothing when she goes home to India. She buys some scarves from Middle Eastern women who always bring back extra ones from their trips back home and buys the rest in America. When she was younger, it was a bit more difficult but now that she is older and “more talented,” she sews much of her wardrobe herself and has no problems. For Muslim women, the buying and selling of clothing has turned into a sort of cottage industry, says Asma. Most women buy more than what they need when they return to their countries for visits with the intention of selling some of the clothing items to other Muslim women upon returning to America. In this manner, most of the women almost always have someone from whom they can buy clothing items they need, especially scarves.

Although dressing in the Muslim manner is not difficult for Asma, how she is treated by strangers in public places as she goes about her business is extremely irritating. Strangers stop her in the street and insult her in a rude and sometimes crude manner, she says. They think that she is stupid and does not speak English, speaking slowly and loudly as they address her. These people, mainly women, stop her and ask her intrusive questions about her style of dress. One woman stopped her as she walked with her young daughter and asked her, “Are you going to dress her up like you when she is older?” Others stop her and make comments about immigrants and how they take away from Americans. On one occasion, a woman was so aggressive and abrasive towards her that Asma threatened her with calling the police. She used to get very angry when this happened in the past but does not let it bother her as much now, continues Asma.

Applying for jobs as a veiled Muslim woman has also been a problem for Asma. When she went for her first job interview, which was with a woman, she did not veil, since Muslim women only need to veil when in the presence of men. She was hired and on her first day at work, arrived veiled. She had been fearful of not being considered for the job if she veiled at the interview, but hoped that once hired, based on her qualifications, she would be able to veil with no problem. The woman supervisor who hired her was very critical of her style of headdress, telling her it was not professional. The woman continued to give her a hard time, frequently asking her why she was "doing that," wearing the scarf, and asking when was she going to take it off. Although Asma was doing a good job, this women supervisor gave her a bad review. After several months, Asma found working under this woman's authority too difficult and quit. It was too hard being criticized all of the time, exclaims Asma. Having learned her lesson, for the next job interview she covered her head. At her present job, the situation is much better. She is treated well and likes the people with whom she works.

Asma says Americans are still very judgmental about how she looks, making comments to and about her in the street. Life in North America is getting better but it is still very hard. The growing presence of other different looking immigrants in California's Silicon Valley has helped. "The more different people arrive, the less different others appear," she concludes. Asma says that Muslims must take responsibility for how they are treated, that they need to reach out to the larger community, but they must also confront their abusers. Most Muslims have good incomes, pay a lot of taxes, and they and their children have the same rights as anyone else living in North America.

The Whole World is God's Land

Having lived in North America for thirty years, an American citizen, Asma no longer considers herself Indian but rather Muslim/American. Although she returns home to India to visit her family every few years, she does not do so as often as some other immigrants. America is her home; she has been here a long time. Perhaps it might be different if she came from an Islamic country, but for Asma, "Islam is the same everywhere." People might eat different foods as they celebrate special days or dress differently, but Islam is the same, "The whole world is God's land."

At fifty-one, Asma says she is already old and does not wish to live to be very old and be a burden on anyone. She is looking forward to continuing her work, her close relationship with her children, and to having grandchildren.

CHAPTER 21

HADIJA – AN OLD WOMAN IN A STRANGE LAND

[Hadija talks about her dependent status as
an old woman living in a strange land in the home
of her adult children.]

When Fatima and I were discussing what kind of informants I was looking for in doing my research, I said that I would like to talk with some older women. I felt it was important to write about the life experience of an older Muslim woman living in North America. Fatima said there were not many older Muslims living in the area. Her mother was staying with her for the time being and, although she did not speak English, Fatima agreed to translate if her mother was willing to meet with me.

I was invited to come and visit with Fatima and her mother one Sunday after I was off work. The house was quiet and peaceful. Her daughter was in her room studying, her husband was on a business trip, and her son was away at school. The petite Hadija came downstairs and the three of us sat in Fatima's cozy and comfortable living room discussing life in North America.

Hadija's Story

In her late seventies, Hadija grew up during an era in Egypt when women did not veil. She now wears a loose veil in the fashion of an older woman, not the scarf that is now more commonly worn by younger Muslim women. The widow of a college professor, she has two sons and two daughters. The sons and one daughter, a professor at a nearby university, live in North America. The other daughter lives back home in Cairo.

For over two hours we discussed what her daughter calls "the dilemma of an old woman." I began our conversation by asking Hadija what she missed most from Egypt.

She answered softly that she missed everything. I then asked her what she liked most about living in North America and she replied that she did not like anything about living in America. That was the beginning of our conversation as we sat in her daughter Fatima's living room dining on sweet potatoes and jasmine tea. As she peeled her sweet potato, breaking away small chunks, she slowing and thoughtfully spoke while she ate.

In her homeland, she has her own apartment, an independent life, a daughter, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. The daughter, a professor, is very busy and travels often. When Hadija is home, she worries about her grandchildren who live in North America. When she is in America, she stays mostly with one son and daughter who live near each other. She is totally dependent on them and has no privacy. When she is in America, Hadija says she does not worry so much about her grandchildren and great-grandchildren back home. Her son and daughter would like to convince her to stay but neither can afford a larger home.

Hadija first came to America some twenty years ago to help one of her sons raise his children. Fatima explained that it is the Muslim custom for the father to be granted custody when a couple is divorced. At that time, a much younger woman, Hadija had no choice but to help. She was very busy with the children and did not think much about her experience of living in North America. She stayed for five years until her son remarried. She returned to North America several years ago and stayed with her daughter for about a year. After living at home back in Cairo for some years, she is once again living in North America. She alternates her time between her son's and her daughter's home. Hadija likes being near her children and their families, but misses the independence she has when she is home.

In America, Hadija has no private space. In both her son's and her daughter's house, she shares a bedroom and closet space with a granddaughter. She is dependent upon her daughter and daughter-in-law to take her to doctor's appointments and any other place she may need to go. She has no freedom of movement and no friends. The Islamic community in the area is young. Consequently, there are few old people. Everyone is very busy working. Hadija does not speak English. Since she is not in her own home, she says she is not comfortable participating in the household chores. She is not familiar with the kitchens here so does not do much cooking although she would like to. Hadija says everything is different, that nothing belongs to her. For Hadija, life here is very lonely and isolated. Several times during our conversation, she says she misses her independence. She is accustomed to being in charge of her life. Hadija says she gets along very well with her children and their families and, although she likes being near them; slowly, and thoughtfully, Hadija exclaims that she would rather be home in Cairo—alone and independent—missing them.

Back home in Cairo, Hadija lives alone in her own apartment and has a community of neighbors and family, including a daughter. All she needs there is a telephone. She orders everything she needs and has it delivered to her home. She has a woman who does the household chores and she is able to get around freely. Back home she lives the life of an independent woman.

After awhile, having stated several times how much she missed her independence, Hadija exclaimed that it was very difficult to be an old woman, that she was fearful of being alone, afraid of an emergency, that it was hard to be old, that she feels dependent on everybody, and would rather be independent. Then slowly, and thoughtfully, she

stated that perhaps if she had some private space, she might consider staying in America. It is hard to be old; it is difficult to be an old woman. There is no answer, no solution, concluded Hadija, slowly and sadly.

When I first thought about my meeting with Hadija, I was prepared to ask broad social questions. I thought perhaps we could compare and contrast the Islamic community in the new world with the old world, or she might have some comments about how the grandchildren and their lives differ. Perhaps she might say something about how the veil was being worn and how different things were from when she was a young woman. With her opening exclamatory statements, saying that she did not like anything about America, I thought I was on my way to a discussion on some complex social issues. However, after listening and watching the pensive and fragile, if not frail, Hadija repeat several times her discomfort with her loss of independence, I surmised that what concerned Hadija most was her existence, her own personal survival. I realized that for Hadija, life in North America was dependence upon others, her homeland was independence.

PART FOUR

THE SISTERS SPEAK OUT

CHAPTER 22

SUMMARY

The purpose of this research was to contrast images with reality, to juxtapose what women said about themselves with their image in Western societies. In the chapter on literature, utilizing the data from scholars, I shared what has been written about Muslim women. In this chapter, I summarize what the women said about themselves. My study initially posed several questions: what is it like living in North America, how do Muslim women maintain a Muslim identity while living in the United States and, specifically, what were the women's opinions on the veil, their family, Islam, the Muslim community, and the outside community. This chapter is a summary of what the women said about these subjects.

I have organized what the women said around the major themes of the veil, Islam, the Muslim community, and their family, as well as the greater outside community.

The Veil

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons. Koran 24:31 (Ali, 1997, p. 873).

The general agreement is that veiling is for religious reasons. It is written in the Koran that women should cover and be modest. Although veiling usually occurs around puberty, women said every woman does it on her own time, when she is ready. The term "to cover," often used by these women, is synonymous with "veiling." To cover is to

veil, to veil is to wear a scarf covering their hair.

To the women in this study, to veil is a very personal commitment for a woman, something a woman does out of faith and conviction for her religious beliefs. It is not like a fashion item that women put on and take off in a casual manner. Veiling is a very difficult and serious decision. Once a woman veils, there is no going back. It is a serious and permanent commitment. Since Muslims living in the United States are informed and educated, women veil as they become more religious. As more women veil, others feel more comfortable doing so as well. Veiling is according to religion, not tradition, said Dua, a young mother.

Veiling is spoken of as an assumed choice, usually done when a girl begins to look like a woman. Each girl must do it at the time she is comfortable with making the decision. It is a progression, with some girls waiting a little longer until they are ready. The women agreed that once a girl veils, people look at her as a representative of Islam. Veiling is not seen as reactive to the attitudes of the West, as some writers on the subject have said. Veiling is more than just putting on a scarf. A veiled woman stands as the image of her culture. Every girl or woman does it when she is ready, when she wants to. Suzanne, a divorced woman, would like to veil someday, but she cannot do so while working in corporate America. For a young Afghan woman, the issue is not significant, since Afghans are not rigid about the veil, it is important but not stressed. Some women who consider themselves very religious choose to dress modestly without veiling. Women said veiling is not a matter of men, it is a matter between a woman and God, within herself."

How the women wear their scarves and what color these are varies. Each woman

has her own individual way of dressing and wrapping her scarf. Most women purchase scarves in their homeland or from other women, who always buy more than they need when visiting their native countries with the intention of selling some of the scarves upon returning to the United States. Some of the women wear the classic Muslim coat, a long-sleeved, ankle-length loose garment, all or most of the time. Others sometimes wear the coat, pantsuits other times, or long skirts with blouses and jackets. Some of the women, especially younger ones, wear jeans and long loose tops, yet others wear only skirts.

Most of the women appeared to be very fashion-conscious, taking much time and care to match their scarves to the outfit they were wearing. Although their bodies were totally covered, young and old, women took great care with their appearance discussing colors, fabrics, and the fashion of their garments in great detail. Women said it was difficult to shop for modest clothing in the Muslim tradition: scarves, long skirts or pants, no low fronts or backs, no slits on skirts. They bought what they liked when they found it. It was somewhat difficult but not impossible. It took time and patience. It was most difficult to find formal or evening wear. Most of the women said shopping was very time consuming. One woman made most of her clothing. There are also seamstresses in the community who make mostly formal wear, often even matching scarves.

All of the women said they liked their modest way of dressing, that it was cool and comfortable, contrary to what others think. Each woman dresses in her personal style, how she is most comfortable.

Islam

Our Lord! Make of us Muslims, bowing to thy will, and of our progeny a people Muslim, bowing to thy will; and show us our places for the celebration of due rites; and turn unto us in mercy; for thou art the oft-returning, most merciful. Koran 2:128 (Ali, 1997, p. 53).

The stories reveal that for women living in North America, Islam gives guidance for life. It helps them make decisions. They are able to study the Koran and practice a purer form of Islam that is not affected by national customs.

Contrary to their common stereotype as oppressed, younger women often stated that, for them, Islam is freedom, not oppression. It is freedom from all of the negative things they are surrounded by in American society. It is freedom from having to buy into the system of dating, of exposing themselves physically, and of being touched casually by men they did not want to be touched by. One young woman said Islam is freedom from attending parties where people get drunk, throw up, and do things they do not remember, but others do.

"Life in Islam is like having a manual," said another woman. By having a manual and reading it, Muslims are able to mature earlier and more easily than non-Muslims. "Life can get messed up unless one has a manual to read. People who grow up without the manual make many mistakes before they understand life." For Muslims, it was asserted, life is clear and less problematic if they read their manual. Other young women said Islam is not just a religion, it is a way of life.

Informants believe the existence of the Islamic school in this community makes it possible for children to learn their religious values. They feel it is important for children while young to be with people who think and believe as they do. It is important that they

not be looked at as strange or different if they do not go to school dances or have boyfriends or girlfriends. It is important for students to prepare as they enter the greater outside society, to know they do not need to apologize for who they are, to be secure in themselves and their religion.

Young women said they found it easier to be practicing Muslims in America than where their families came from. In those countries, Muslim law is often combined with or misplaced by local custom and people become confused, arguing about what is correct. In America, isolated as a group, Muslims are free to study the Koran and follow its word. Educated and free to study the Koran for themselves, these women said they often surprised their families in their parents' native countries with their knowledge of Islamic law.

According to many women, in the Middle East, people do not go to classes like Muslims in America, they do not try to learn more. Muslims are more serious here. In Egypt, people take Islam for granted, it is all around them. "If you go someplace where there is no Islam, you have to struggle, and with struggle comes strength," stated Miranda, a woman in her mid-twenties. People in Egypt confuse custom with Islam. They have certain traditions that they have followed for many years and assume they are Islamic, but they are not. They are national customs that people confuse with Islam. Here, people study Islam and follow it without the interference of national customs or traditions.

Informants generally felt that being part of a Muslim community makes life easier in America since the women are surrounded by very religious people. Religion is very important here. Back in their native countries, all of society helps with the social

behavior of both children and adults; people watch and correct each other's behavior. In America, they said society is very individualistic, people are isolated, do not know their neighbors, and do not know what they are doing.

Yet others said it is easier to be a practicing Muslim in America since here exists a certain amount of tolerance for difference. It is a more diverse community. Back in Egypt, the secular society tends to look at religious Muslims, especially veiled women, as backward. Secular Egyptians are very westernized, said a woman who does not veil. Here, people tend to mind their own business.

Another advantage of living a Muslim life in America is the ability to study Islam. People are more aware of their religion and the need to understand it. Muslims gather and discuss what is culture and what is Islam. Immigrants from many different countries, the members of this community, gather and discuss Islam, deciding what is tradition and what is religion. Most of the women agree the result of their ability to study the Koran is a purer form of Islam than what is practiced in their or their parents' native countries.

The Community

The believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another; they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil; they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and his messenger. On them will Allah pour his mercy; for Allah is exalted in power, wise. Koran 9:71 (Ali, 1997, p. 459).

The Muslim community for the women is like the family in North America, with the mosque at the center, much like their parents' home had been back in their native countries. At the mosque, people have weddings, birth, and family celebrations. There are special events and guest speakers. Also, classes on a variety of Islamic subjects are

offered and study groups on the Koran are conducted in Farsi, Urdu, Arabic, and English. The community is very close, like an extended family. "In Islamic communities, immigrants, rather than being just friends, become more like family, they bond," said a young woman. Back in their home country, the community is the entire society. In America, the mosque is like the family home, it brings people together. If they were back home, they would go to their parents' home to meet or gather. Away from home, Muslims meet at the mosque. For the women, it is the gathering place where they get together and become family. In America, the community is the family substitute. The mosque is the center of life for the Muslim community. It is a multiethnic center attracting Muslims from many countries. It does not matter the nationality since "Islam is the same everywhere," concludes one woman.

Nationality, ethnic background, and class are still very important to most parents at the mosque. Various nationalities worship together at the mosque but separate socially, segregating themselves according to place of birth, with the biggest division between Arabs and Indo-Pakistanis. These national groups create a social world for their children, giving them a built-in peer group. The families from each national background attend each other's family celebration, spend religious holidays together, and often go on vacations together.

For young women, social life is often very structured while young. By providing them with a wide range of activities, parents make it easy for them to study Islam and follow its rules. They often grow up in a totally nationalistic social Muslim world. All of their friends and their family's social activities are with people from their parents' native countries. In high school, some may have some non-Muslim friends and do things with

them during the week, but on weekends, it is always a Muslim world with family and friends.

Some of the young women said it was difficult for their non-Muslim friends to understand they were not interested in doing what Islam did not want them to do. They were not interested in participating in activities a devout Muslim should not do, such as going out dancing and drinking. Most of the young women stated they made their choices on what non-Muslim functions to attend during their younger years on a case-by-case basis.

As young women grow older, they continue to attend the get-togethers of their youth and continue to be part of that social world. Many of the women said although it may appear they lead isolated lives, this is not the case. They have contact with the outside community in daily living. It is only in their social and religious life that they confine themselves to the Muslim community. It makes no sense to them to be with people who do things or believe in things they do not. Since the mosque is made up of many nationalities, they interact with a variety of people from many countries with different customs and traditions. Women said life in America is good because of support from the Muslim community. It would be very difficult otherwise. It would be very difficult to raise children without the Islamic community, to have a Muslim social life or do things with other Muslims.

For intimate social gatherings, some nationalities still stay together, but for larger celebrations, most people mix. For the younger women of the mosque, nationality is no longer significant. Islam and living in America is the core of their existence. "Islam is the unifier, it crosses all borders," exclaimed one woman. Their parents are often closer

to people from their native countries but, for young women, it is the veil that bonds them. If they see a veiled woman, she is a sister. Living in America, it is Islam that bonds them, not a nationality. Middle-age women are looking forward to growing old in an Islamic community that is large, loving, and embracing. Satisfied with their lives as part of this unique multiethnic Muslim community, most of the women plan on growing old in a country they have accepted as theirs.

The Family

Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour. Koran 17:23 (Ali, 1997, p. 680).

The family unit, including the extended family, is extremely important to all of Islamic society. Important decisions, like education and marriage, are discussed in great detail among family members. Most families budget for frequent trips to their homeland. Families make a serious effort to remain connected to their families back in their home country. Although it is expensive to travel, families try to go home as often as possible. During these visits, Muslims living in North America are able to maintain a close relationship with their large extended families.

Some women return as often as possible, taking their children with them so they can have memories of their native country. Others return home to live in order to give their children a more religious and national social environment to grow up in. Some families purchase a home in their native country so their children can maintain a close relationship with their family during their extended yearly visits home. An Afghan woman, who has never been to Afghanistan, learned Afghan Farsi so she could write to

the family she has never met back in Afghanistan. This continual communication with her family has assisted her in maintaining a link to the land she hopes to visit someday. One Indian woman, who does not return home as often as some other immigrants, considers the United States, where she has lived for over thirty years, her home. For her, Islam is the same everywhere.

Education is another very important issue. Most of the women said that in Islam, both males and females need to be educated. Education is critical in Islam. To seek knowledge is a requirement for every individual. Some women said they returned home after being married in order to complete college degrees. Others were thankful to their fathers for insisting they pursue practical college degrees that enabled them to earn a living. Several informants said their husbands had interrupted their careers, or helped with household chores and taking care of children, in order to facilitate the completion of their college education. Several of the women only received permission to marry and immigrate to North America after they and their husbands promised her parents that they would pursue advanced degrees upon arrival.

Young women, living in the United States, talked of their parents moving to better school districts during their lower education years in order to give them the opportunity for a higher quality of education. Most were attending or had graduated from prestigious private universities. Some were researching possibilities for advanced degrees out of the area.

Other important decisions, such as marriage, are also discussed in great detail among family members and the community. The women said arranged marriages are a practical attempt at uniting two people who are compatible. The families and the

community cooperate to find suitable mates. Families research a prospective mate's social, educational, and financial status and their family background. It is common in Islam that the families have a lot to do with two people meeting. The woman, however, has the ultimate decision.

Usually a meeting is arranged for the purpose of a possible marriage, but "the chemistry must be right," said the women. Muslim women must marry Muslim men. They can be converts, but this is not acceptable to most parents. They can be from any Muslim country but, again, most parents and some of the women prefer to look for a husband from their own national background. Having a similar background makes life a little easier. This will be good for their children since they will already be far from their parents' homeland. It is important to have both parents be from the same culture if they are living in America.

In discussing their family life, younger women talked much about trips to their parents' homeland, Muslim social activities, and their educational goals. Middle-aged women shared traditional stories of the hardships of raising children in a strange land, balancing work and family, and their hopes for the future.

The Outside Community

O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well-acquainted with all things. Koran 49:13 (Ali, 1997, p. 1342).

These Muslim women know they are misunderstood by American society and say they are always willing to attempt to clarify their position within Muslim society. They

are not obsessed with what others think of them and try to educate the American public about Islam. However, they say they are not responsible for the attitudes and beliefs of others. Several of the women said they really did not care what others think. Putting aside the negative, most of the women prefer to concentrate on the positive side of their life in North America.

Most of the women stated the media was to blame for the negative treatment they received. They felt the media's negative image of Islam, especially of Muslim women, was a major factor in the negative treatment directed towards them by the greater outside society. The media reinforces the stereotypes of veiled women as oppressed victims by constantly repeating this image. Newspaper stories portray Muslims as terrorists who mistreat their women. Movies show Arabs as bad men and their wives as subservient. Women of this community say they have grown accustomed to having people only believe what they hear and read about them if it fits into the stereotypical view of Muslim women as oppressed.

Some of the college students who belong to the Muslim Students Association often volunteer to speak to classes at their university and to the local non-Muslim community in order to clarify negative stereotypes that exist within American society. There is much work to be done by Muslims to improve their lives and their public image. "Muslims today cannot live in a bubble," said one woman. During these presentations, most people are civil, although, occasionally, some are hostile. Most often it is the women who display hostility towards the sisters. Men often treat them with respect, but seldom women. It is women who are their harshest critics. It is women who most often attack them, criticize their belief and manner of dress. One woman said she did not

understand why the modest veiled body of her and her sisters should be a threat or an irritation for American women, but it appeared to be so.

Women expressed some irritation about how the outside community treats them. They are often treated like they are stupid or don't speak English. Sometimes people stare. Life in America as veiled Muslim women is difficult, but they turn the negative into the positive. It makes them strong. It is so difficult, especially during high school years, to battle the classmates' and often teachers' comments and attitudes that it bonds them to each other and gives them strength, creating a link with other Muslim women. Some of the women said Muslims must take responsibility for how they are treated, that they need to reach out to the larger community, but they must also confront their abusers. Most Muslims have good incomes, pay a lot of taxes, and have been in the United States for many years. They and their children have the same rights as anyone else living in this country.

Unveiled women were more aware of the difference in how they are treated when out alone versus when in the company of their veiled family members or friends. One woman said with the wars in the Middle East and the part the media plays, she finds prejudice against Muslims, especially Muslim women, is growing more intense. She worries about her daughters and the hardships they will encounter.

Women also shared instances of confrontation in their daily lives with teachers and professors. Some of the younger women said they were ignored in class or were not taken seriously. College women expressed irritation with their professors. Some women recalled that although there now exist Middle Eastern study classes, with professors claiming to be experts in the region, these generally do not present the Middle East or

Islam in a realistic manner. Professors seek out books that show Islam and especially Muslim women in a negative manner, books that do not relate to their lives. They felt this is the reason people stare and think the things they think, why they are not friendly to a veiled woman. People believe all veiled women are like the characters in these books.

Although most of the women prefer to socialize almost totally with other Muslims, some of the women choose to mix with the outside community. At least one woman was happy with her life and her many friends from families of diverse international and religious backgrounds. She believes other people are tolerant and understanding of differences and this creates a certain type of person. Immigrants have a common ground and they make America a more open society. These people have a more global understanding. You are different, they are different, this is a world of differences. Other women said they enjoy a wide circle of friends of many nationalities and religions. The wealth of America is the diversity of people one can meet and make relationships with. Maintaining close ties with the Islamic community, they also enjoy living a multiethnic life, mixing socially with neighbors and people they work with.

Women of this community are secure with themselves and with their position within their family and the Muslim community. Most said they look forward to their lives becoming more comfortable as more immigrants move to California's Silicon Valley. Reflecting the sentiments of most, one woman said America is not a bad place to be a Muslim. Prejudice is about a lack of information or understanding. When people understand the Islamic culture better through social education, life will improve for Muslims. Overall, this is a tolerant society, better than other parts of the country, and better than some other countries. The greater ethnic and national diversity, the more

different people in their area, the less they appear different. Most of the women credited the larger presence of other immigrants as the most significant contribution to their comfortable lives in North America.

CHAPTER 23

ANALYSIS

In my introduction, I stated that Western societies have two interpretations of Muslim women: either as embodiments of Islam or as helpless victims forced to live by its tenets. As I attempt to provide a culture translation of what the women I interviewed said, I will argue that Muslim women living in California's Silicon Valley are embodiments of Islam, and do live by its tenets, but are not helpless victims forced to do so.

Perhaps the most prominent image in the West of Muslim women is that they are forced to veil by the men in their families. The women I interviewed said veiling was a matter of choice for them, that women chose to do so at the time they are ready, that it is a decision between a woman and God. Especially puzzling, I am certain, to Western societies, is the fact that most young women living in North America actually veiled before their mothers. The imagery of the oppressed Muslim woman is so significant in Western mentalities that all, not some, but all of the conversations I have had during my years of research have started with this presumed imagery. This issue of choice is difficult to present to non-Muslim mentalities, but like Halliday (1996, p. 103), I believe that part of the researcher's job is the object of clarifying and improving public debate on the issues they study.

The women did discuss cases of some women who were pressured to veil by their families, and others who first veiled but then decided not to. But, said the women, since these women who do not choose to veil of their own free will do not remain veiled, and others are not strong enough to remain veiled, this made those who were committed to

being veiled stronger, creating a bond between them. This research is about practicing Muslim women; therefore, we must keep in mind that it is the viewpoint of these women that is presented here. For these women, the choice is theirs, and that is the point I am presenting.

Connected to the negative perception of oppressed veiled women, women here are very fashion conscious, taking great care in choosing fabrics, styles of dress and coordinating veils. Considering how time consuming and expensive it is to find appropriate modest clothing, we can only conclude that the image they choose to present is very important to them. Although not stated by the women, but observed by me, sensuality is a part of this public image, which is, I think, something else that is not imagined by non-Muslims. I found the manner in which some of the women wrapped and pinned their scarves very sexy.

What I was not prepared to hear was that non-Muslim women are the harshest critics of the women's style of dress, while non-Muslim men treat them with respect. Like them, I also wonder why, and, I must say this fact disturbs me. Perhaps this is a possible research subject for another woman researcher. Like them, I also question why the modest attire of veiled women disturbs non-Muslim women. Having presented the women's point of view for a number of years, both within academia and to the person on the street, I can testify that the women are correct. Men do ask me why the women cover themselves, but women are indeed often irritated by it. Why, indeed, are American women, who consider themselves to have the most freedom on earth, upset by the fact that Muslim women, whom they consider to have the least freedom, choose to dress as they do. Good question, I say!

Another imagery I am often confronted with is that of arranged marriages.

Western images portray Muslim women are married off to unknown men against their will. During my years of research, I have been challenged on this subject a variety of times. The reality is that arranged marriages are in fact just that—arranged. Two people the community or families think might get along are brought together, then if the couple thinks they might get along, they continue to see each other. This is presented here simplistically but is, nevertheless, close to the more complex reality. Marriages are not imposed upon young women. The women choose whom they wish to marry. Several of the young women, in fact, told me of having been engaged several times but then deciding that the match was not right. Others spoke of having many men contact their family in pursuit of marrying them and of they themselves rejecting the idea. Arranged marriages are an attempt by the family and community to bring two compatible people together. Taken into account is the man, his family, and his finances. The best interests of the woman are what drives her family in their search for a possible mate.

Another area which challenges the Western stereotype of Muslim women is the importance of education in their lives, both for themselves and their parents. Families clearly make sacrifices so their daughters can be well-educated. But, most surprising were the stories of how husbands had to first promise to facilitate the completion by the women of their education before being allowed to marry them. Promises had to be made to both fathers and mothers about the continuation or completion of advanced degrees before the permission of marriage to a daughter was given.

Women said practicing Islam in North America is like a manual, that it gives them guidance for life and that, contrary to what non-Muslims think, it is freedom, not

oppression. After listening to various women state this, I understood their point. Having their religion to guide them, the women, especially the young ones, are saved from the temptations of modern day America. They do not date, do not wear the latest fashions, do not participate in the variety of activities which can lead young people into behavior that is often not good for them. They are, in fact, saved by Islam from the temptations of American social life.

What I observed as I spent time with the young women was that they were not preoccupied with what men think or want. Their conversations were about their own personal world. They were focused on what was best for themselves and their futures. They did discuss fashion and hairstyles, but it was about what they liked. Saved by Islam from wondering who they were going to go out with on Saturday night, they made their own plans. Their lives were structured according to Islamic principles, but the women, including the very young, appeared to like it that way. The community provided many choices for them.

Women feel they are able to practice a purer form of Islam than their families in their home countries. Able to study the Koran without the interference of national customs, the women say they actually have more freedom than their families back home to study their true religion. Surrounded by a non-Muslim community, but supported by their large Muslim community, the women were extremely proud of the fact that they studied more than their relations in their home countries, felt they knew more about the true Islam, and were, in fact, able to practice a purer form of Islam in a strange country. They believe they study their Islam and practice it in a pure and free manner, without the interference of their home countries' national customs.

Evaluating how the Muslim community maintains itself in North America was most interesting. Since Islam is a religion of structure and discipline, these principles are applied by the community to maintain itself in a strange land. The women said the mosque is at the center of the community like their family home back in their native countries with Muslims from many lands becoming like family. The veil bonds the women. They wear different veiled fashions, depending on their national origin, but the significance is identical. It bonds the women and makes them sisters. Parents structure the life of very young women, usually within nationality boundaries. As girls grow older, they acquire friends of other nationalities, but almost always the women lead totally Muslim lives.

Since these structural patterns appear to repeat themselves in other Muslim communities, as the women grow older and become available for marriage, their choice in North America is wider than if they had remained in their native countries. The search for a husband, or wife, is wide and multinational since, according to the women, Islam is the same everywhere. Living in North America, the women can choose from many communities and from within the many nationalities. Indeed, since I first began my research, I know of two young women who have married and moved to other states and one has moved to another country. Living in this community in a not-so-friendly society is actually an advantage for young women in their search for a husband.

Family and its influence upon the lives of Muslim women is very significant. The family back in their home country is extremely important and although it is very expensive to travel back to their native countries, families budget for it. All of the women, including younger ones born in the United States, spoke of their relatives back

home in very personal terms. These close ties are also extended to family members who are part of other Muslim communities in other parts of the world. The women spoke of their extended families with a sense of connection and strength, without any indication of distance or alienation. This added to their feeling of community, the fact they felt connected to all of their extended families no matter how far the geographical distance.

When I first started meeting with the women, I thought that since so much was said about them in a negative tone, that they would perhaps concentrate on replying to their negative image, but this was not the case. Although I did ask the women about negative images of them in the non-Muslim world, they often replied that they were aware of it, did not like it, but I was pleasantly surprised to realize that they did not let what others think greatly affect them. I attribute this to their sense of self-confidence and belief in their way of life. The women did say they know they are misunderstood, that the outside community apparently seems to be only interested in reading or hearing what fits into their preconceived stereotypical ideas of Muslim women. But, the women felt they could not do very much to correct this. Frankly speaking, most did not care.

Although the women have public contact with the non-Muslim world, most of their personal lives are spent within the Muslim community. Most blamed the media for contributing to their negative image, but young college women also had harsh criticism for their professors, who they said also promoted the stereotypical images of Muslim women as oppressed victims of their society by the books they assigned their classes to read. I found this extremely disturbing. I had read much written by Middle East scholars

who teach in American universities making similar statements. Yet, I had hoped this was not true. But, apparently, not only is the person on the street comfortable with the negative images of Muslim women, the media promotes it and, unfortunately, according to my informants, so do college professors.

It is significant for me to point out that although the women said life in North America is comfortable for the various reasons mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the major reason all of the women gave for their comfort zone of life in California's Silicon Valley was its large number of immigrant residents from all corners of the globe. Many of the women said that with so many different looking people, with such a great variety of ethnic dress and culturally diverse behavior, they did not look so different and, therefore, did not stand out very much.

Many women felt their manner of dress attracted more attention in other parts of the United States than it did in Silicon Valley. As an immigrant woman, I, and many others like me, agree with the women. Of the many advantages of living in California's Silicon Valley, the most enriching experience is the advantage of living in a global immigrant community. This makes me wonder if the women would have such a positive opinion of their life in Silicon Valley if there were no other different looking people. I am sure they would not.

Referring to my opening paragraph, I hope I have presented a brief but convincing and clear argument that the Muslim women I interviewed are by their own personal choice of dressing in the contemporary Muslim manner, embodiments of Islam. They are choosing to, by their manner of dress, announce to the world their faith and belief in Islam. By discussing the decisions the women make regarding their personal and

professional lives, I hope I have clarified that Muslim women living in California's Silicon Valley have agency, they are empowered by the Islam they practice to make their own decisions and are not, as is their image, forced to live oppressed lives.

CHAPTER 24

CONCLUSION

Challenging Stereotypical Images

This study investigated the lives, thoughts, hopes, and dreams of a community of Muslim women living in California's Silicon Valley. The main object of this research was to explore reality of the women's lives and how they see themselves within their Muslim community and compare this to their stereotypical images in the West.

The primary goal of this research was to listen to Muslim women speak their mind. By writing their stories of how they maintain a Muslim identity and live the life of practicing Muslim women while in the United States, my main purpose was to give Muslim women the opportunity to counter the negative images the West has of them if they chose to do so.

I hope that by writing stories of the women and not about them, by sharing my own personal stories of participant observations, and by summarizing what the women said and then analyzing the data, I have done what I said I would attempt to do in my introduction. The data within the stories documents that the women have agency, making decisions regarding the control of their bodies, their lives, and their futures. Women's lived life experience contrasts sharply with images or stereotypes of them as passive and submissive, oppressed victims of their men and their religion.

In my literature review chapter, I said that by writing about the reality of the lives of Muslim women living in California's Silicon Valley, I was making a humble attempt to challenge stereotypical assumptions the West had of them, hoping to modify such and giving the reader an opportunity to reconsider their image of Muslim women. I hope I

have done that as well. By reading these stories, I hope the reader will recognize that these women, representative of others like them in their community, may be similar to many other women, immigrant or not, living in North America.

Maintaining an Islamic Identity Within American Society

In my introduction, I said Muslim women maintain their identity while living in North America by creating community, continuing relationships back home, and practicing what they see as a purer form of Islam. The women's stories document this pattern of adaptation in their behavior. By reading about other Muslim immigrant communities, I realized these same patterns of adaptation exist elsewhere in the Western world. I now understand why some of the women said it is easy to marry and move to other communities (Roy, 1996).

The women said they created community by practicing Islam daily. Prayer, fasting, wearing veils, accompanied by social activities and classes for their children is what their life is about. This pattern is consistent everywhere Muslims go to live. Their goal is to create an authentically Muslim micro society within the greater society at large. The strategy, according to Roy (1996, p. 81), is for the creation of Islamized spaces that are replete with networks of mutual social and economic aid.

By opposing the assimilation of immigrants, Muslims favor the creation of Islamized spaces. Such spaces form their own territories and are naturally reinforced, thus becoming liberating zones for the Muslim community. It is what Roy (1996, pp. 82-83) calls shrinking the public space to the family and the mosque, with the mosque becoming central in the Muslim social space. The women repeatedly referred to this concept in their stories.

Continuing relationships with family back in their home countries is also a significant factor in maintaining Muslim identity for the women while living in North America. The women talked about returning often to visit, sometimes to live, or of purchasing homes with the hope of returning someday. They also discussed how they maintain links with other Muslim communities. Since such communities have similar patterns of adaptation to their local society by creating Islamized spaces, these strategies facilitate the fluid movement from one immigrant Muslim community to another. As I stated above, this is most significant for young women who marry and move to communities often thousands of miles away from the one they grew up in.

The women in the Muslim community in California's Silicon Valley said they were able to practice a purer form of Islam in a strange country because they were free from interference of the local customs of their home countries. Immigrants from many lands, the Muslims in this community create what Agar (1994, p. 108) would call culture, or what happens to people when they encounter differences and change their consciousness to figure them out. By creating this new culture, or what I would call American Muslim culture, within a tolerant and cosmopolitan atmosphere that is home to immigrants from all over the world, Muslims in California's Silicon Valley establish Islamized spaces where they are free to practice a purer form of Islam in their daily life.

Lessons for the Researcher

After doing historical research on Muslim women, reading contemporary accounts about them, researching the writings of Muslim female scholars who live in the West, and listening to the statements and comments made to me by the American multicultural community during my years of research, I agree with scholars who question

whether it is possible to do scholarly work about Muslim women that goes beyond existing stereotypes. I also agree with scholars who state that the study of Muslim women poses a challenge filled with mine fields and uncertainties. I did not comprehend this when I originally read it, but as I approach the end of my journey, I am saddened to acknowledge that I do now. As I step ever so carefully across this mine field that I envisioned as a green field, I dream of the future. Should I reach safe ground, I plan on continuing research on a subject that I originally thought would be interesting at best, but that I never imagined could be so explosive. I never dreamed that women wearing a piece of cloth upon their head could be so controversial, so puzzling, or such a subject for greatly heated debate.

In my introduction, I said Muslim women have long been at the center of conflict between East and West. In the past, this was done by others. In more recent times, I agree with Lawrence (1998, p. xiv), who states that women have emerged at the core of politics in Muslim societies because they have been invested, or have invested themselves, with the representation of Islam. They have become the bearers of the faith and purity of the community. I would argue that contemporary Muslim women, living in Western societies, in the spirit of the ancient Aisha, have strategically placed themselves at the front of the battle lines by choosing to veil in ever-increasing numbers.

I also said in my introduction that Orientalism is how the West perceived the Middle East to be. The knowledge I acquired during my years of research was beyond or perhaps counter to existing stereotypes. What I learned did not fit neat similarities. I realized I was building new knowledge born of personal experience, a new awareness, a new connection between peoples, or what Agar (1996, p. 107) might call building culture

or, perhaps, I was doing what Cook (2001, p. 150) might call building scholarship in the multicultural academy to acknowledge other perspectives, see oneself through it, and even be transformed by it.

Cook (2001, p. 150) also said that the project of examining, rethinking, and redefining oneself, as well as the object of study, can strengthen those moving in from the margins, even as it threatens others previously located closer to the center of the knowledge producing industry. That I live on the margins I acknowledge. But I do not believe I have been strengthened by this scholarship, quite the contrary, nor have I moved towards the center. But, perhaps Salman Rushdie, when he says that the best research or writing is always done on the margins, is correct.

More than a century ago, some European women travelers who were permitted access to the female quarters of Middle Eastern houses published an alternative view about the lives of Muslim women but were unsuccessful in combating the stereotypical images of male writers of that era. Hopefully, this European woman, a century later, who was permitted access to the female quarters of Muslim women living in California's Silicon Valley, will be slightly more successful in confronting stereotypical images about Muslim women in present-day North America.

Proposal for Future Research

Muslim Diaspora Studies

The impending confrontation between Islam and the West is often presented as part of an historical pattern of Muslim belligerency and aggression that is now viewed as a potential domestic threat given the significant presence and growth of Muslim communities in Western countries. Recent events in the West reinforce the perspective

of an impending demographic threat. The impact of the assimilation of Muslims is a particularly contentious issue in countries such as Great Britain and France, where the presence of significant Muslim minority populations puts strains on the social fabric of these European societies (Esposito, 1992, p. 209).

The challenge Western societies face is to understand Muslim societies' patterns of living and the range of adaptation Muslims make as they create lives and communities within Western societies. In reading the women's stories, it seems their pattern of adaptation resembles patterns reported elsewhere (Esposito, 1992; Roy, 1996).

For my future research, I propose what Marcus (1998, pp. 91-97) calls diaspora studies, following the people in order to find out what happens to them in other sites. The purpose of my proposed study is to gain a sense of the system of connection between sites, to find out the fates of informants in other locations. Since my English is better than my French, and one of my key informants has, since the conclusion of my research, married and moved to London, and I love London and have witnessed a large number of veiled women walking its streets, I propose to study the Muslims of London.

In this future research, I will conduct a study similar to the one I describe here. I believe this future research will enable us to compare what the Muslim women living in London and Silicon Valley say about their community, their family, Islam, the veil, and the outside community. Second, and perhaps most significant for the West in these difficult post-September 11 times, it will allow us to compare the patterns of adaptation between these two locales.

Muslims, and specifically Muslim women, are not going to go away from Western societies. Their presence is in fact increasing, especially in metropolitan areas.

The past that is present in any site, the domain of social life, is built up from memory (Marcus, 1998, pp. 64-65). Muslim women living in the Western diaspora are aware of the historical colonial influence in their homelands. These Muslim societies, and Muslim women specifically, are not going to automatically and unselectively integrate into Western societies. It is for this significant reason that I propose that we study the patterns of adaptation of Muslims in Western society in order to prepare for their increasing presence.

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