Windows on Faith and Freedom: A Muslim Woman's Narrative

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Abstract

The West has typically constructed Muslim women as one of the most oppressed groups of women in the world. This article sheds light on a narrative inquiry into the experiences and perspectives of Fadwa, a young Muslim woman living in North America. Making use of deconstructionist and poststructuralist analytical lenses, Fadwa's stories are highlighted as an example of possible negotiations for gender construction in Arab Muslim societies. In addition, the impact of education in Canada on Fadwa's worldviews is explored and the struggles that Fadwa experienced as a result of living in different cultures are highlighted. It is hoped that Fadwa's stories will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of issues relating to the lives of Muslim women.

Introduction

The long-perpetuated images of Muslim women and the exaggerated negative perceptions derived from Orientalist writings, paintings, and Arabian Nights illustrations are particularly uninformative of the lives of ordinary Muslim women (Esposito, 1998; Minault, 1998; Said, 1978). In this article, I outline the life narrative of Fadwa, who is a young, professional, Canadian Muslim woman with an Arab heritage living in North America. Although Fadwa's narrative reveals the experiences of one Muslim woman in North America, her deep reflections on the values that she embraces as a Muslim woman are highly informative for understanding some of the complexities of the experiences of other Muslim women who are living in North America. Even though Fadwa argued that many aspects of Arab cultural traditions limited and restricted her, she also acknowledged that Islamic values gave her the comfort and strength to overcome every-day life struggles. As such, it is hoped that Fadwa's narratives will contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of issues relating to the lives of Muslim women while challenging negative portrayals of Arab Muslim women.

The texture and richness of an individual Muslim woman's life – the life of Fadwa in this context – are vividly conveyed by her testimony. Fadwa's account covers her personal challenges; her educational experiences; the paradox of culture and faith; her perception of marriage; and, finally, her dreams. The aim of this paper is to foster greater understanding of Arab Muslim women and to "create bridges of appreciation between Western women and Arab Muslim women" (Ali, 2000, p. 6). This will hopefully lead, in turn, to a greater appreciation of the fact that many Arab Muslim women lead their lives creatively and inventively.

Theoretical Framework

In my research, I use standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) as a starting point, since my aim in this research is to explore the gender discourses of Arab Muslim women who live between the discourses of the East and the West. I make use of the term *discourse* in alignment with Jen'nan Read and John Bartkowski's (2000) explanation that "discourses are not discrete ideologies; rather, they are culturally specific modes of understanding the world that intersect with competing viewpoints" (p. 398). For instance, my participant, Fadwa, did not only live the gender discourse as constructed within Arab Muslim society; she also engaged in "constructing gender identities in light of non-Muslim discourse of gender and ethnicity prevalent in the late twentieth century" (p. 398) of the West, since discourses are multiple and offer competing, potentially contradictory meaning to the world.

One of Butler's (1993) arguments is that norms may never be wholeheartedly embraced, always being imbued with force and constraint. This seems to be reflected in the Arab Muslim women interviewed, because they did not embrace Arab culture with regard to women's gender norms. Yet, I argue that this has to do largely with contradictions that exist between Islamic teaching to women and Arabic cultural traditions and practices embedded in societal norms. Also, Butler's point is arguable in light of Harding's perception of "individual's gender" that constructs the individual's identity along gender lines, "only imperfectly correlated with either the 'reality' or the perception of sex differences" (as cited in Deats & Lenker, 1994).

A theoretical strand of my research includes Deconstruction and Poststructuralist approaches in terms of the deconstruction of dominant power paradigms around issues of race, gender, and sexuality (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). One of the appealing features of poststructuralism is that it favors equity and the use of multifaceted lenses. Poststructuralism also explores the potential of opening new spaces for people to live in enlightened, diverse, and multiple realties with equality. In particular, this study is informed by feminist poststructuralist educational theories that challenge the idea of a unitary category of *women* and the idea that feminist pedagogy will lead to the discovery of a collective unity of experience for women and men (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). These theories are useful for exploring patriarchal discursive practices in order to deconstruct the *nurturing* argument that is used to justify many practices in Arab Muslim societies. Moreover, the emphasis in this inquiry is to examine discursive constructions and multiplicities of women (Modleski, 1991).

Another aspect of my theortical framework is the Islamic perspective of gender. The denial of women's education, limitations on the roles of women as obedient wives, and the seclusion of them from public spheres that exist in some Muslim cultures originate in the post Islamic era rather than from the *Quran* and *Sunna*. Also, Islamic sacred texts have been interpreted to fit the tribal traditions that existed in the pre-Islamic period and reappeared after the introduction of Islam. Literal interpretations of the *Quran*ic verses, Prophetic narrations, and Islamic philosophical and theological literature have sometimes been taken out of context (Altorki, 1988). "Women have been taught that the law of God orders them to stay close to their homes and unreservedly to obey their husbands" (Al-Manea, 1984). Thus, mapping the conceptual framework of how women are portrayed and positioned in these sacred texts is a significant context for this research.

Methodology

This study was conducted following the incorporation of various traditions of narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2002; Kramp, 2004; Phinney, 2000). This article highlights the perspective of Fadwa, an articulate participant in a sample group of Muslim women whom I interviewed in 2004. I interviewed Fadwa on two occasions. Each interview was two hours in length, and all interviews were tape-recorded. My interviews with Fadwa involved open-ended questions that allowed her ideas to flow as freely as possible. I combined open-ended questions that invited narratives with questions that probed for specific details. My first interview began with a demographic questionnaire that asked about place and date of birth, education, profession, marital status, number of children, and family background.

After I had obtained a transcription of the interviews, I coded and sorted Fadwa's responses into categories. I looked for recurring themes and for contradictory and socially embedded gender discourses. My insider position as an Arab Muslim woman enabled me to have detailed insights when analyzing Fadwa's narratives. Moreover, I participated in an ongoing process of constant checking and cross-checking between raw data and interpretation (Cao, 1997). In the process of analysing the data, I read and re-read the content of the stories that Fadwa narrated.

Data Analysis and Discussion

In this section, I analyze and discuss Fadwa's experiences and perspectives as related to me via multiple interviews. Fadwa is a young Arab Muslim woman who, at age 26 at the time of the interview, was pursuing a Master of Arts degree in Canada. This was in addition to having earned a Bachelor of Science degree and a teaching certificate at a Canadian university. Fadwa's decision to complete her education in the West while her parents remained in the Middle East was an unusual choice for her as an Arab Muslim woman. This woman with village roots constructed her life around her professional achievements and attained her goals. In Fadwa's case, her dreams shifted from pursuing a medical degree to pursuing other paths. As in many Arab Muslim women's lives, there are discontinuities and interruptions in Fadwa's thoughts; dreams; homes; and career paths.

In particular, I discuss here Fadwa's experiences and thoughts in relation to her family; education; cultural norms versus the Islamic Essence; and marriage. I highlight through excerpts from interview transcriptions Fadwa's words that comment on these different topics. In this way, I indicate how Fadwa's experiential stories both challenge and conform to tradtions and cultural aspects that are seemingly prescribed to women in some Arab Muslim societies.

Family and Educational Background

Fadwa was able to negotiate traditional boundaries while maintaining her self-interest. This success was largely the product of her family background and ethos. Her parents encouraged her to pursue her studies, excused her from household chores, and valued her education. In fact, Fadwa's family has a long history of supporting women's education. Many years ago Fadwa's paternal grandfather raised the money to build the first women's school in the village, something unheard of in that region and generation. With a sense of pride in her grandfather, she observed that:

> There were people who threatened him, basically cursed him, because according to those people, my grandfather was spoiling the women in the village. And I grew up hearing those stories about my grandfather, and realizing that my father took from my grandfather these qualities, and that's why my father, as opposed to a lot of other men in our family, appreciates me learning and studying. . . .

Fadwa's parents accorded great significance to her schooling, no less than to her male siblings' schooling. Her father has a Ph.D. and her mother is soon to graduate with a college diploma. Her parents are both supportive of her endeavours:

> The extent to which my parents were interested in my schooling was that my father said that my education, my brothers' education… is the biggest investment to him, and my mom also really values my education, and they come from different angles. He has his doctorate in business management or accounting, and his education has helped him out… My mom has the opposite end where she just graduated from high school… One of my mother's regrets, lifetime regrets, is that she was not able to pursue her education.

For Fadwa's parents, "School came before and above everything else.… I was not allowed to watch television until I finished my homework." The message reinforced the notion that education was the way to please her parents. Her father in particular was helpful with school work. As she explained:

> My father was very helpful with math. Even though I loved math, word problems were a bit difficult for me, so we would sit and we'd discuss them and talk about them, and he made math very, very interesting. I really enjoyed school. I liked math and science and English and Arabic.… I loved Religious Studies.

Fadwa displayed the influence of her father in expressing the view that higher education should not be considered a luxury for women. According to Fadwa:

> Higher education [in Sudan] is very regarded. It's been told to us that girls or boys, should go to university and get an education because you don't want to live life without an education. It's just not an option. We all knew we were going to go to university. The other thing is, my father tended to make the comparison between educated people and influential people, so he would say to me as a kid… 'Margaret Thatcher, Fadwa? I want you to be like her. She is a powerful, strong woman.'

Fadwa's immediate family did not see female education as being just an intellectual exercise or a goal in and of itself. A degree was not viewed as a glorified female accomplishment along the lines of piano playing and porcelain painting in nineteenth-century Europe. Her parents firmly believed her education to be indispensable for a career. This perspective was exemplified by the reaction of Fadwa's parents, and of her mother in particular, when she announced her interest in becoming a teacher:

> My mother panicked. She said, 'No, what kind of work is this, being a teacher? Teacher! What kind of a job are you gonna get? They're not very well-respected! You're not gonna get enough money!' My father said, 'Fadwa, years ago when I was a kid, teachers were the most important people in our community. They were well-respected, they were revered, but these days, teachers apparently don't have the same level of respect.' So I said to him, 'Well, I could be a lawyer or someone in business, but I really, really want to be a teacher.' He's like, 'Well, I don't want to force you to be something that you're not, but maybe a teacher at a university level.'

An analysis of the data highlights that Fadwa's explanation of the importance of education for both genders might largely be a function of social class. Statistics with regard to education and gender in Sudan, Fadwa's country of origin, show that there is some gender disparity. For example, the Gender Parity Index[1] for Sudan in 1999/ 2000 is 0.09 (UNESCO, 2005). The Gross Enrolment Ratio[2] for tertiary education in Sudan in 1999/ 2000 is approximately 6 for males and 7 for females. The UNESCO report (2005) also indicates that "Sudan is one of the countries where gender parity has been achieved in access to secondary education, but this country will face a trend towards greater gender disparity" (UNESCO, 2005, p. 28). While education is marked by differences for male and female students in Fadwa's home country, Fadwa's narratives highlight that alternate possibilities are extant for Muslim women, even within cultural contexts that display high rates of gender inequity. At the same time, Fadwa's narratives exemplify the connection between class, gender, race, and ethnicity (Proweller, 1998, p. 69). While higher levels of education for women might not be typical in Sudan, Fadwa's family narrative of education, and possibly of class, helped to shape stories of educational possibilities for Fadwa.

Cultural Norms versus the Islamic Essence

Despite the strong support from her immediate family for her education, Fadwa endured a great deal of criticism from her grandmother and some members in her extended family. This is an important aspect of Fadwa's life, where faith and cultural traditions are seemingly paradoxical. As she explained:

> Cultural traditions didn't hinder me, but some of these things leave a bad taste in your mouth.… My dad looked into the Sister School,[3] the Unity School,[4] or public school. And my father

> decided to put me in the Catholic school because it had the traditional aspect, but it also was known for having for several decades taught girls a very high-level education. I learned. Probably some of the best math education I got was in that school. We were doing logic and reasoning and proving in Grade 7 and Grade 8, which is very fascinating now to look back on it. My grandmother resented that, even though she had more education than her peers.… The fact that my father paid so much money for me to get a private education.… She was appalled.…

What created a worse reaction from her grandmother, according to Fadwa, was her father's decision to come to Canada so that Fadwa could begin a new phase of her education. But it was Fadwa's decision to stay in Canada on her own to study that outraged everyone in the village, not just her grandmother. While Fadwa bitterly narrated these memories, she emphasized that her deep understanding of her Muslim faith helped keep everything in perspective:

> Religious beliefs have supported my educational pursuits. Looking at the amount of strength and courage it took for Aisha, the beloved wife of the Prophet, to lead a battle, given that she was born in a generation of women who were buried alive as one of the misogynistic things that happened to the girls, she was the kind of character that she has as a woman. The strength of that character that illuminates throughout the ages…They [religious beliefs] have totally supported my educational pursuits. From a personal perspective, having lived on my own for five and a half years, if I did not have my religious beliefs to ground me, I would have easily…delved into different lifestyles that are valid for other people, but might have distracted me from my educational pursuits, be it drinking alcohol or other aspects that are not considered Muslim.…

The essence of Islamic teaching in the Holy *Quran* and *Sunna* make clear that women and men are commanded by God to fulfill their social responsibilities, to uphold morality, and combat vice, as the following verse states: "Believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil."[5] The command here and in many other verses indicates that women should acquire the knowledge necessary to be eligible for such active leadership. In the time of the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, women were free to go to the mosques to pray, to listen to preaching, and to receive lectures. These practices meant that women stayed connected to the sources of education because, at that time, the mosques functioned not only as places of worship but also as sites for education (Al-Manea, 1984). Moreover, in the early Islamic period, women significantly contributed to the advancement of their societies. Yet, despite this well-documented history, some Arab Muslim traditions claim that women's social participation outside the domestic sphere is a violation of Islamic tenets, and that higher education corrupts women's morality. These attitudes took hold in the centuries that followed the advent of Islam, and they might be considered a reassertion of much older, pre-Islamic norms and traditions.

I explored with Fadwa how she views women's societal contribution. I asked her specifically whether she believes that women should have a role in the public sphere. Her responses within our open-ended interview discussions revealed that Fadwa does indeed advocate for women contributing to the broader society alongside men in addition to discharging the responsibilities associated with being a good mother. As Fadwa explained:

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

Even though Fadwa acknowledges that her pursuit of a Master's degree is mainly to please her parents, she emphasizes that it is also to help equip her to contribute to society. She believes that a woman who is backed by a powerful sense of Islamic support and who obtains a higher education is a catalyst for social progress. Fadwa wants to think that women and men are equal, a thought that was supported by her references to the teachings of the *Quran*. Yet, she also continued attempting to convince herself that women and men are different. Her statements reflect an acceptance of the inevitability of women's social

inferiority. She knew it to be an ambivalent position, but she was unable to resolve the inherent contradictions:

> Society-wise, though, men can get away with way more than women can. Men can do things that if women do them they would be inappropriate, like me living here on my own without my family….My extended family has known me since I was a young child….A female living alone would be considered immorally [and] ethically impaired as opposed to a male who's pursuing what's best for him so he can provide for his family….A girl, what is a girl doing alone in North America? So, you see where the culture comes into play. Yes, mentally we might be equal [and] actions might be the same but the way society evaluates us is not the same…as the way (God) evaluates us. And that's what we have to deal with….If someone lives in a context where her reputation and her honour are very important, she might have to adhere to society's norms just to make sure that society doesn't outcast her, or ostracize her.

This part of Fadwa's narrative is especially powerful. She is pinpointing the reason for that mentality, which is the concept of female *honour*. Fadwa's comments reflect the social construction of gender in Arab Muslim societies. The gap between what women and men are permitted to do is profound. In Arab culture, if a man decides to live on his own, there would be no concern about his desire to be independent. A woman, on the other hand, cannot leave her parents' home to live on her own unless she is married and, if she divorces, she will have to return to her parents' home. Thus, it is deeply embedded in the minds of Arab Muslim people that a woman cannot live alone, perhaps because she is thought to be less capable; less competent; and less moral, and therefore, she would not be able to conduct herself appropriately.

Marriage

An important aspect of gender construction for an Arab Muslim woman like Fadwa is marriage. While mainstream cultural norms expect boys to go to college or university after graduating from high school, it is culturally expected that girls will get married immediately after graduating or while still attending high school. Parents typically prefer that a girl obtain a husband rather than an educational degree (Al Sari, 2003). Women in many Arab families were and still are convinced or forced to leave school early and start a family.[6]

Many writings by traditionalist scholars, both religious and secular, affirm that only the roles of wife and mother provide a woman's true identity: all other aspects of a woman's intellectual and social life are to be directed toward these dual roles. Certain alleged female characteristics are publicly emphasized. These views claim that "Women are inferior, less intelligent, incapable of coping with high mental tasks and thus the only tasks fit for women are bearing children and maintaining homes" (Al-Manea, 1984, p. 28). Fadwa's narratives show how this view might negate the value of a wife and a mother and also contradicts Islamic teaching with regard to education.[7] During our interviews, she described to me her experience of receiving an arranged proposal. Fadwa mused that "I have a bit of the traditional in me when it comes to marriage…." As she continued, "I'm not looking for a big romance novel… If that person loves me… logically, rationally, and it makes sense to me that this person is someone I can [spend] the rest of my life with." Fadwa admitted that, if she had had the options of getting married and starting a family on the one hand and of pursuing her dream of obtaining a doctorate on the other hand, she would have chosen marriage and family because of the importance of the kind of partnership that is not religiously or culturally permitted outside marriage. For Fadwa, a degree would not make her smarter, nor would marriage prevent her from studying. It appears that her struggle was not with "who does what" but, rather, with the cultural expectations of a woman's behaviour and attitude, regardless of her level of education. Fadwa's interpretation of marriage and women's roles is important for understanding how gender roles might be culturally structured.

In some Arab Muslim societies, a woman's gender is constructed so that she is prepared to be subordinate and to play a role of inferior value, both in marriage and in virtually every other aspect of life. Some women grow up believing that this is necessary in order to have a peaceful life and a successful marriage.

In Arab Muslim societies, it is unusual to hear of a marriage in which the woman and her husband have stepped outside of their traditional roles, or of a married couple in which the husband does not have an education; is less educated than his wife; or who chooses to stay at home and look after the children. If they do, some people are inspired while others pity the man.

After Fadwa described her first rejected marriage proposal, she stated that "People who have not been exposed to different, multiple models of reality will have difficulty understanding my position.… And I've seen that even within our family…." Her views might be reflective of gender discourses that persistently reinforce patriarchy while indicating the potential influence of prevailing gender discourses in multitudinous and indirect ways. With regard to the relative levels of education achieved by the wife and the husband and what this might imply for the marriage, Fadwa opined that: "There are drawbacks to being very, very well-educated as a woman, because as much as they want you to be educated and have that status, when it comes to issues of getting married and playing a certain gender role there were certain expectations." As she continued, "Men tend to be threatened by it [woman's higher education]." She added that some men favour less educated women. According to Fadwa, a good wife – culturally speaking – is the one who "Cooks, cleans, raises the kids and leaves [her] husband to do his stuff, it's not about your effort, it's not about your thoughts or how you interact…." She asserted that "The drawback of having this education for me is if I were to go back home and marry someone who's living back home, and then it is an issue." Consequently, Fadwa's narratives display how some Muslim men might feel threatened if they have a professional wife while shedding light on the possibility for patriarchal societal norms to emphasize men's education and success over the interests of women.

<div align="center">Educational Significance</div>

Arab Muslim women have rarely been studied as subjects with their own voices and choices, or as agents having critical perspectives on their own lives and having reasonable lenses through which to view the world (Cayer, 1996; Mohanty, 1991). In addition, they have not had the opportunity to "...encounter the dominant discourses that speak to their lives" (Toress, 1991). This article is important, because it voices the gendered experiences of Fadwa, a Muslim woman living in North America.

Fadwa's narratives delineate how she was raised and educated to be an independent thinker. Additionally, the discussion of her stories here outline how she forged her path courageously and was able to ignore many social norms. She has demonstrated a capacity and a willingness to make independent decisions, whether in terms of choosing teaching as a profession or in terms of living in Canada alone. Her comments draw attention to many interesting points where cultural traditions; religious viewpoints; and practices intersect, especially those related to gender discourses. Fadwa's stories weave together complex and contradictory meanings that reflect some aspects of women's socialization processes at home, in school, and in the broader society.

This paper explores how Fadwa's upbringing and education have affected the way in which she perceives her gender roles. Fadwa's stories offer an alternative narrative to potential media representations of Muslim Arab women, who are often characterized as passive-submissive women unable to contribute to their societies. Therefore, this article will enrich the scholarly literature about Muslim women in the diaspora. This paper will also assist Muslim and Western scholars interested in researching *real* Arab Muslim women, who might contrast significantly from negative or old-fashioned stereotypes and media-fuelled images of Arab Muslim women.

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Notes

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[1] This refers to the ratio of female-to-male values for a given indicator.

[2] This shows the general level of participation in a given level of education.

[3] The Sisters' School is a Catholic all-girls school that used to be run by Nuns from Italy.

[4] The Unity School is an American secular international school.

[5] *Quran* Sura IX, 71, p. 461, translated by Abdallah Yousef Ali.

[6] This is more common in rural areas than in modern, urban families.

[7] God and his Messenger had emphasized in many verses in the *Quran* and the *Hadith* that knowledge is a requirement for all Muslim men and women.