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Arab Women's Education and Gender Perceptions: An Insider Analysis

By Amani Hamdan¹

Abstract

Studies focusing exclusively on the connection between Arab Muslim women's educational pursuits and their gender perceptions, and how their gender perceptions may have changed as a result of living in two different cultures, are rarely conducted. Additionally, the factors that may influence an Arab Muslim woman's educational pursuits seem seldom investigated. This article is highlighting some factors that may influence Arab Muslim women's gender perceptions. In researching Arab Muslim women's experiences, I considered the diversity and multiplicity of their race, ethnicity, class, and experience. How Arab Muslim women construct the gender aspect of their identities and how these identities may have changed or shifted as a result of living in Canada and attending Canadian educational institutions is explored. The cultural and religious reproduction of gender socialization is a major part of the analysis in this article.

Keywords: Education and Gender, Muslim Women, Women and Education

Introduction

Studies focusing exclusively on the connection between Arab Muslim women's educational pursuits and their gender perceptions, and how their gender perceptions may have changed as a result of living in two different cultures, are rarely conducted. Additionally, the factors that may influence an Arab Muslim woman's educational pursuits seem seldom investigated. This article is highlights some factors that may influence Arab Muslim women's gender perceptions. In researching Arab Muslim women's experiences, I considered the diversity and multiplicity of their race, ethnicity, class, and experience. Thus, I am not trying to find ways to essentialize the characteristics of the women's lives or their gender perceptions, nor do I intend to generalize the experiences of the interviewees onto all other Arab Muslim women. I attempt to discuss them as a diverse group shaped by their particular histories and culture: their experiences and thoughts cannot be reduced to a set of certain simple characteristics. How Arab Muslim women construct the gender aspect of their identities and how these identities may have changed or shifted as a result of living in Canada and attending Canadian educational institutions is explored. The cultural and religious reproduction of gender socialization is a major part of the analysis in this article.

Arab Muslim women were invited to reflect on their education and gender perceptions at various periods before coming to Canada as well as after attending schools in Canada. In this article I discuss themes that were consistent across all narratives. This article may shed light on "how the world surrounding us is gendered and how it affects us, our identities, everyday activities, as well as all other products of human behaviours" (Javiluoma, Moisala & Vilkkko, 2003, pp. 6-7).

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In what follows first I introduce the research participants and then highlight some of the factors that influenced Arab Muslim women's gender perceptions, which emerged in their narratives. These factors influence women's lives at micro and macro levels (i.e., individual, societal, and state). However for the scope of this paper I will only focus my attention on some of the factors that influence their gender perceptions.

The Research Participants

Name ²	Date of Birth	Profession	Marital Status	Year of Coming to Canada	Number Children (if any)	Location of School	Description of School Before Coming to Canada	Level of Education
Yasmine	1961	Family Physician	Married	1984	7	Urban	Mixed and Single	M.D.
Nora	1968	Exercise Psychology	Married	1999	2	Urban	Mixed and Single	MSc
Morooj	1956	Photographer	Married	1999	4	Urban	Mixed and Single	B.A
Sahra	1973	Computer analysis Engineer	Married	1999	2	Urban	Mixed and Single	MSc
Ruba	* ³	Computer analysis Engineer	Single	1994	None	Urban	Mixed and Single	MSc
Fadwa	1979	Teacher	Single	1995	None	Rural and Urban	Mixed and single sex	M.A
Eman	1971	Teacher	Married	1996	3	Urban	Mixed and Single	B.A.
Wafaa		Teacher	Single		None	Rural and Urban	Mixed and Single	B.A.
Nahlaa	1985	Engineering	Single	2003	None	Urban		BSc

The nine women⁴ who participated in this study range in age from nineteen to fifty-five. They were all first generation Arab Muslims living in Canada. Some of these Arab Muslim women represented a certain rebellion against the cultural norms. For

² All names here are pseudonym

³ Ruba refused to declare her age as a condition for doing the interview.

⁴ All the women who participated in the study were Sunni Muslims. Sunni and Shii are two major branches of Islam. The majority of Muslims practice Sunni Islam (Esposito, 1988).

instance, Fadwa's decision to stay in Canada and pursue her education while her parents are in the Middle East was an outstanding example. A woman with roots in the village, constructed her life around her professional achievement and attained her goals, undistracted by the negative gossip she faces.

The 'Banking System of Education'

The 'Banking System of Education' is a phrase that was first used by Paulo Freire (1970; 2003). It is an approach to teaching that resembles "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p. 53; p. 72). The 'Banking System of Education' is the opposite of what Freire advocates: an education that announces the importance of dialogue, engagement, and equality and denounces silence, and deplors oppression.

The education systems in Arab Muslim societies are reflective of Freire's 'Banking System of Education.' The 'Banking System of Education' is a way of learning that is rooted in the notion that all students need to consume information fed to them by a teacher, and be able to memorize and store it (as cited in hooks, 1994, p.14). As a result, teachers do not engage in dialogue with students during the learning process, rather they are imposing information that could be irrelevant to students. On standardized tests, students are expected to write answers that may have no connections to their background or individual location. This was the norm in the Saudi schools when I was a student and a teacher there. It is also the case in most Arab Muslim schools according to the participants. Teacher and student are expected to perform to these norms.

The notion of the 'Banking System of Education' is a significant aspect of the participants' narratives. Although the Arab Muslim women interviewed did not use that specific term, Fadwa implicitly emphasized that a woman's role in Arab Muslim societies is prescribed by social dictates that should be followed by the 'book,' meaning according to the social norms. I argue that the emphasis on 'memorization' rather than critical thinking and creativity in the education systems there is contributing indirectly to the prevalent gender discourses. In other words, uncritically following the molded positions and roles for men and women is influenced by the politics of education (based on memorization and authoritarianism) in Arab Muslim societies.

From my experience, as a student and as a teacher in the Saudi education system, critical thinking was neither encouraged nor preferred. Teachers were expected to teach to the test, and students were expected to memorize course content and reiterate it for exams. There is no critical thinking⁵ involved in the learning process.

The school system I experienced also reinforces the notion that any knowledge is given as fact, and 'truth' is fixed; this knowledge, which is nonnegotiable and sacred, is selected and chosen by powerful elites within religious realms. Additionally, religious texts (i.e., the Quran and the Prophet's narration) are taught with the same philosophy. A student is prohibited from asking questions related to religion or cultural traditions.

⁵ By critical thinking, I refer to two aspects: First is the deeper understanding of issues and problems; second is the ability to analyze, evaluate, and examine an argument from different points of views (Hinchey, 2004; McPeck, 1981; Schafersman, 1991). According to Schafersman (1991) critical thinking enables an individual to be a responsible citizen who contributes to society, and not merely a consumer of society's distractions.

Everything in that regard is taught as 'The Best and Only.' Since school knowledge is dominated by men then it does not "challenge the gender division of labor or the social constructs of what is legitimate and proper for men and women" (Stromquist, 1989, p.175 Coulter, 1995; Stromquist, 1990).

Therefore, the education system and teachers play a significant role in reinforcing rather than challenging prevalent gender ideologies. El-Sadawi's theoretical views of Arab Muslim countries' education systems are useful in exploring how the education system and its politics may play a role in maintaining and perpetuating the status quo. Showing how they are both connected to gender discourses. She contends,

Many of the regimes in the Arab countries are still very far from being progressive...The content of educational curricula has remained rigid, unimaginative, and incapable of responding to the needs of the children and adolescents growing up in a fast changing society. Here again the attempt is to breed conformist, confused, and obedient citizens to ensure that they will not become agents of change. ... there is no attempt to build up a comprehensive understanding of the world, of society and history, and no real effort to show the real causes that lie behind the problems faced in life. Independent thinking, broadmindedness, tolerance, and initiative are not encouraged. On the contrary the aim is to train an army of passive, mediocre citizens, well suited to become bureaucrats in an administrative system, punctual executors of decisions taken by others, and submissive to authority, rulers and leaders. (p. 189)

El-Sadawi's (1980) account clearly connects the 'Banking System of Education' and gender constructs to political hierarchy. As a matter of fact, El Sadawi's (1980) framework does not overlook the position of women in that system. While referring to the education system in Arab countries, she rightly suggests that,

In this regimented effort, the place assigned to women is that of a continued subservient role, whether at work or in the family, in both of which she is supposed to bend herself to the will and dominion of men... [For instance] the laws⁶ related to marriage and civil rights still [today] give the husband an absolute right to prevent his wife from taking on a job, traveling abroad, or even going out of her home whenever she desires. (p. 189)

El-Sadawi (1980) uniquely pinpoints what both I and the Arab Muslim women interviewed have experienced. Stromquist (1980) argues that "the evidence from the school textbooks in developing countries shows that they contain very restrictive and limiting messages for female identity" (p. 175). Yet, Zine (2003) contends that our identities, in any given school system, culture, and society, as women and men, are scripted within these socially constructed categories, and we either accommodate them or challenge, subvert, and redefine them.

Although the education system in Canada does not seem to challenge the socially constructed gender divisions it seems to deemphasize the authoritarian role of the

⁶ Brief discussion of family laws is provided shortly.

teacher⁷ while promoting an informal social relationship between teacher and students (Pai, 1990) and placing a greater emphasis on students' assertiveness, involvement, and interdependence, and by From my experience, the Saudi education system is in contrast to the Canadian education system in that it is authoritarian. Also, like that of other Arab countries, the Saudi education system is influenced by the Egyptian and the British education systems which are authoritarian and emphasize the role of teacher as a 'knowledge transmitter' and text as 'The Knowledge.' In such a system, the student is to be a passive recipient.

Like Apple (1999), and Whyte, Deem, Kant, Cruickshank (1985), and Hinchey (2004) I agree with hooks (1994) that boys and girls develop firm ideas about their prospective lives and roles at a very early age, but there is no reason to suppose that schools cannot effect some change in attitudes and aspirations (p. 19). As a result, I contend that gender discourses and prevalent gender ideologies are manifested in the classroom. The progressive classroom is the core site for individuals to practice, experience, and acquire critical thinking and consciousness, and to take up a commitment to end domination and inequity in all its forms.

In contrast, the 'Banking System of Education' in schools and education systems in general were and are used to perpetuate and reinforce certain ideologies about women's 'nature' and roles. The education system in most Arab Muslim societies fosters a power hierarchy in which males dominate women. Decision-making positions at the board level are restricted to males and all top positions are assigned to men. Male perspectives prevail in textbooks, especially religious ones. Although the school administration which is female may not seek to oppress women and girls, it makes no efforts to change the status quo. Gender ideologies perpetuated for so long have convinced many Arab Muslim women and men that women's nature is different from that of men's and that women's education should be limited to what is helpful to women's 'primary' role as wives and mothers. Therefore, women do not have access to the same jobs as men. This explains why only certain jobs (i.e., teaching and nursing as opposed to engineering) are available to women.

As an academic Arab Muslim woman, I advocate progressive education where students are encouraged to examine, discover, question, and analyze instead of taking things at 'face value':

In progressive education, freedom is the rule, with students being relatively unconstrained by the educator. The problem with progressive education, said Dewey, is that freedom alone is no solution. Learning needs a structure and order, and must be based on a clear theory of experience, not simply the whim of teachers or students. (Neill, 2005, para.1)

What I found intriguing in Dewey's progressive philosophy of education is his rejection of authoritarian teaching methods, which I employ to understand the education system in Arab Muslim societies. Dewey's resentment of authoritarian teaching was based on the notion that a student should react and interact with his/her environment in the process of learning instead of being a listener and receiver to the changing world around him/her.

⁷ Some Canadian students' experience indicates that Canadian teachers accept critiques that agree with their ideologies and thus many are authoritarian yet less openly.

Debora Court (1991), influenced by Dewey's philosophy, argues that teaching can and should be less authoritarian and less examination driven, while still providing guidance and accountability. This speaks for Wafaa's experience. She narrated that her education in Canada relieved her from worrying about the final national exams. The fact that the Canadian education system is not based on memorization but is based on interactive engagement gave Wafaa confidence by strengthening her presentation abilities.

Additionally, one of Dewey's educational theses states, "Education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform" (as cited in Bruner, 1962, p. 114). This is noticeable from the women's narratives. Yet, only progressive education leads to social progress and reform. Contemporary scholars such as Barbara Bailey (2000; 2003) and Jane Gaskell and McLaren (1991). Moreover, historically Bruner (1962) elaborates some elements of education that lead to progress:

Educational process transmits to the individual some part of the accumulation of knowledge, style, and values that constitutes the culture of a people.... education must also seek to develop the processes of intelligence so that the individual is capable of going beyond the cultural ways of his [her] social world, able to innovate in however modest a way so that he [she] can create an interior culture of his [her] own... Education must not confuse the child with the adult and must recognize that the transition to adulthood involves an introduction to new realms of experience. (p. 116)

Nevertheless, my analysis of what I was taught in elementary school about child custody in cases of divorce shows how school may transmit patriarchal ideologies. Teachers' practices and ideologies affect girl's views of themselves. Sexist stereotyping and restrictive gender ideologies limit and constrain girls. Thus, I argue that progressive education is the way to question gender ideologies and discourses in Arab Muslim societies which are perpetuated in the name of Islamic teaching.

The above mentioned argument precipitates the following questions: Does exposure to Western culture, particularly culture in this research, influence women's gender perceptions? Does education in Canada affect the perceptions of the women interviewed towards themselves and their sons and daughters' education and gender roles? In other words, would Arab Muslim mothers' attitudes regarding the importance of their daughters' domestic roles be affected by being in Canadian society?

Fadwa indicated that being self-sufficient which was encouraged by her parents was a central impetus behind her pursuit of higher education. Fadwa's father, who has a PhD from a British university, is emotionally and financially supportive of her decision to live in Canada on her own and obtain her Master's degree. I understood from Fadwa's narratives that there is some pressure from her parents, especially her mother, to consider marriage. Some studies show that girls whose parents are well educated have a higher chance of being educated. Stromquist (1989) asks, "Does this occur because educated parents are less patriarchal or because the more educated tend to be wealthier and thus these parents are simply more able to engage in "risky" or "unprofitable" investments in education for their daughters?" (p. 160). Also, I ask: to what extent are parental attitudes towards gender roles, affected the women's gender perception? How are these women influenced by their parents' education, father's education, or the parents' exposure to

Western ideologies⁸? Or is it mainly to do with the class system? Stromquist (1989) answers some of the questions:

Economic conditions, cultural norms, and religious beliefs affect the participation of females. These forces are mediated by parental education and economic status, mainly that of the father. As a result, there is a tendency for parents to allow girls to attend schools when they can be replaced at home by other persons or means and to let them attend higher education when the parents are educated and financially comfortable. Girls' aspirations for further education lead them to seek professional roles for themselves. (p. 160)

With regard to education, some of the women felt indebted, at least partly, to their education in Canada for learning to be outspoken. For instance, Wafaa claims to previously have had no confidence in presenting her ideas in public. Morooj who went back to school as a senior student found in the Canadian education system encouragement of her enthusiasm. Other Arab Muslim women were indebted to the Canadian education system for having the ability to question the ascribed gender roles. Fadwa, for instance, claimed that because of the education system here she is able to challenge cultural and traditional ideas. Although she was silenced as a child and her curious questions were not appreciated,

...My education here gave me the sense of confidence and the ability to argue, articulate, and reason....The critical thinking a lot of it has to do with education system here... When I became a teenager the same thing if I tried to talk or articulate certain things or question them I would probably get in trouble for asking certain things or saying this does not make sense...the critical thinking might have come from the process of education here but the courage to actually continue to question and to reason and say and get myself into a point where I say I disagree instead of just retreating that comes ...came from interaction from the girls that I know strong women [Arab Muslim women colleagues] in Canada.

Thus, I argue that questioning and analyzing, which I refer to as a central part of critical thinking, is a key component in education. The critical thinking definition I support with respect to critical education is one provided by Facione (1998):

Critical education is a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one's *personal and civic life* [italics added]. While not synonymous with good thinking, CT is a pervasive and self-rectifying human phenomenon. The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful for a reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selections of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permits. (p. 14)

⁸ Yet, some of these ideologies are subject to question in terms of their progressiveness.

The reason I emphasized the *personal and civic life* is to highlight the fact that critical thinking is not only relevant to school knowledge but to everyday matters. Some of the answers given by the interviewees related to the woman's role reflected the ideologies of the Arab culture while other answers may have reflected some modifications brought about by their education, especially in Canada. In sum, I contend that education in Canada is a significant factor, yet not a sole factor, that cannot be discounted, in the interviewees' perceptions of gender discourses. This is similar, to a degree to, Mukudi's (2002) finding. She suggests that "the African woman who is a product of Western schooling is unique in character, is more reconciliatory and appears more yielding to patriarchal and lineage issues" (p. 239).

Cultural Traditions versus Religion

In Islam, men and women have the same religious, moral duties, and responsibilities. Yet, I argue that cultural traditions governing Arab Muslim societies subordinate women. In this section I highlight some conflicting aspects between cultural traditions on one hand and religion on the other. While I do not intend to cover all aspects of that conflict, I discuss the ones that have appeared in the interviewees' narratives.

Although many Muslims argue that Islam defines gender roles and responsibilities (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004), gender roles seem to be constructed more by cultural practices than by the *Quran* and *Hadith*. Over the years, however, certain pre-Islamic customs have reappeared and gained a foothold (Jawad, 1998). Cultural customs that deny women equality have become entrenched in the Arab Muslim culture to the point where they are often accepted as Islamic rules. Yet, many of the customs or rules adhered to today cannot be found in Islamic texts.

Islamic teaching, as mentioned earlier, in the *Quran* and the authentic *Hadith* greatly emphasizes the importance of education and encourages women's participation in all public spheres. The narrow rigid interpretations of the *Quran*, rendered by male scholars, with regard to women are patriarchal, misogynist, and have had a negative impact on women in terms of Arab Muslim practices.

Personally, I have wrestled with how to interpret and construct my environment at different points in my life, particularly in times of transition or change (i.e., moving to Canada). I draw from my personal experiences as a Muslim Saudi woman who grew up and completed undergraduate studies in a conservative, patriarchal society. My gender has been constructed by my Islamic faith and the Arab culture of Saudi Arabia. I read and memorized the Holy *Quran* from a very young age. The *Quranic* text does not contradict scientific discourse, which I found fascinating; indeed the *Quran's* teaching to women contradicts the cultural traditions and practices I have experienced and observed. For instance, while I found the *Quran* supports women's leadership, powerful male elites in most Arab Muslim societies prevent women from practicing that right.

In Saudi Arabia, I questioned the contradictions I perceived between the *Quran* and the actual cultural traditions I experienced. These cultural traditions and practices were imposed, justified, and carried on in Saudi society and still prevail today, due to the hegemony of male power. Some cultural traditions and practices have prevailed by keeping women illiterate.⁹ Morooj alleged that women might tend to be passive if they do

⁹ Official schooling for women in Saudi Arabia initiated forty years after men's education.

not know their rights and responsibilities in light of Islamic teachings. "If Islam gives rights to women, it remains that they [women] need to know these rights in order to defend them" (Ramadan, 2001, p. 55). This puts a great emphasis on education and the ability to think critically.

Morooj, Eman, Yasmine, and Nora, and some other women interviewed for this research are aware of the differences between the actual Islamic teachings to women and cultural traditions values. All of my interviewees are Canadian immigrants, born and raised in Arab Muslim societies. I noted that all of them stressed Islam as reconciliation. In looking at Arab Muslim women's perceptions of their gender roles, one should bear in mind that "beyond all social norms stands Islam, the tenets of which are ultimately the arbiter of all community standards" (Harris, 2004, p. 24). Islam in their view gave them power and authority to bring equitable social order within their communities as well as in Canadian society where they can discuss all issues of inequality including racial biases.

Interestingly, these women presented Islam as a counter perspective to the prevalent gender discourses in the Arab culture and practices in Arab Muslim societies. They also offered alternative perspectives to many dominant Western notions of Muslim women. The women are constantly negotiating gender discourses and gender social relations, as well as re-evaluating gender ideologies perpetuated in the name of Islam, to pursue their own interests, which is to reinstate the status granted to women in Islamic texts. They are exerting and creating new social and cultural ideas for inclusion, "as participants and as producers of new cultural ideologies rather than passive recipients" (Limon, 1989, p. 476) who merely reflect and transmit cultural norms of gender.

Through the women's narratives, the interviewees made a great effort to separate Islamic teachings from cultural traditions values. They highlighted the tension and the contradictions between the two, especially with respect to gender discourses. The women distinguished between Islamic teaching and cultural practices. Indeed, some of the women referred to the traditional and cultural practices as merely 'sexist traditions.'¹⁰ Also, the women developed cognitive strategies to deal with contradictory cultural norms and Islamic values to avoid and/or reconcile contradictions. Moreover, they rejected certain elements of traditions, especially with regard to gender, and used their knowledge of Islam to denounce unfavourable traditions.

Also, while all the participants saw themselves as capable intellectually as men, some of them stressed that there are differences between males and females when it came to performing certain skills. They attributed those differences to biological distinctions. Most of the participants conveyed a belief in the separateness of men and women, particularly in terms of employment. In contrast, to support their views of men's and women's equality they all cited *Quranic* verses that a woman and a man are equal and created from the same soul (i.e., the *Quran* presents God as saying, "Your Lord who created you from one soul.") Yet the women did not cite any religious texts when referring to the distinction between men's and women's spheres. This, according to Nahlaa, was a matter of personal observation.

Fadwa expressed her struggle in living alone in Canada in order to obtain a better education. She resisted the rigid oppression and harsh discipline of the patriarchal system in which she was embedded, a system that treats her differently based on the fact that she is a woman. Yet, Fadwa's decision to remain in Canada to study and her confidence in

¹⁰ These are Yasmine's exact words.

being able to challenge the system of patriarchy was in contradiction to her assertion of the biological differences between a male and female. Also, other participants believed that women are not objective enough to hold political positions and that women are too 'emotional.'

This is an example of how Islamic teaching contradicts the cultural traditions norms. In the history of Islam there are many examples of strong, female political leaders. Yet, it is not the case in most modern Arab Muslim societies. This is giving the public the impression that it is neither expected nor desired for women to occupy leadership roles. These contradictions between religious and cultural values greatly influenced the participants' perceptions. Some double standards the women held became evident in attitudes towards the value of education for sons and daughters, as mentioned earlier.

For instance, when Nahlaa asserted that a man's education is of more value than a woman's, she was strongly held by tradition. It is troubling to watch "women ... internalize these negative beliefs leading them to lack confidence in their ability to perform challenging tasks. Research suggests that women may lack confidence in their ability to successfully complete nontraditional tasks"(Betz & Hackett, 1981, as cited in Dickerson & Taylor, 2000, p. 192).

In addition, when answering the questions regarding who is an 'ideal woman,' almost all of the Arab Muslim women commented that Arab Muslim culture defines who an ideal woman is; they claimed that 'it is the culture and not the religion which is our problem.' Ironically, when I asked the Arab Muslim women about their views of an 'ideal woman' almost all of them focused first on the *cultural expectation*. According to them, the cultural perception of an 'ideal woman' is one who occupies the margins of society in relation to a man both in and outside the home, but particularly in the public sphere.

Although some of the interviewees expressed the extent to which the culture affected their choices, these women did not passively agree with some traditions especially the ones that contradicted Islamic tenets. The women interviewed are aware of the conflicts between cultural traditions and Islamic teaching to women. Yet, they have a sense of comfort and confidence by being religious, reading the texts constantly and staying close to the *Quran* and the authentic Islamic texts. Yasmine emphasized, "Only religion makes someone good or bad, no matter what the religion be."

As much as they are influenced by their traditions they are working to resist and change them. In this I follow Buitelaar, Ketner, and Bosma (2004): "The [women] are not only influenced by their tradition and religion; they have an influence on these ideologies as well" (p.166). They are giving the traditions a new face that is Islamically authentic.

Summary and Conclusion

In this article, I have explored common themes in the Arab Muslim women's gender perceptions. Arab Muslim women face many of the same challenges, but we also have differing perceptions and measures to negotiate the challenges. In this article, I have focused on three significant and constant premises throughout the interviewees' perceptions:

- the connection made to the Islamic teaching about women as ‘The Authentic’ source of guidance in Arab Muslim lives and more specifically to their gender perceptions;
- the cultural construction of what it means to be a woman; and
- the way we, as Arab Muslim women value our education and are enabled to negotiate gender discourses as a result of our education.

I highlight these premises since they appeared and reappeared as threads throughout the narratives. In addition, the points of discussion are connected to one another. For instance, there is a connection between ‘Classical Patriarchy’ and ‘Women’s Sexuality and Gender Roles’ which is evident in the discussion of each of these two themes. Another connection also exists between the ‘Woman as the Nurturer’ and the ‘Cultural Traditions versus Religion’ themes. I view these themes as connected entities that do not exist in a vacuum; they are interrelated and interconnected to one another. They differ in priority for Arab Muslim women according to race, class, and educational level: “Women have been specifically impacted by virtue of their locations in various classes, nationalities, ethnicities and races” (Hirschmann, 1998, p. 347).

Deborah Cameron (1985) suggests that gender should not be used as an explanation of issues, because it is, itself, a social construction in need of an explanation. I did not use the women’s gender roles and perceptions to explain social and cultural expectations; rather, I used the social, cultural, and traditional expectations of women to explore the gender perceptions some of my participants shared. Javiluoma, Moisala and Vilkkko (2003) agree that “in addition to examining gender roles, we should ask what the mechanisms are which create/construct [and re-produce] such roles” (p. 2); I dealt with this question as a pillar and mainstay of my analysis in this research. The mechanisms that create and construct gender roles manifest the significance of answering a few other questions¹¹: How are the categories of women/men and masculine/feminine socially constructed in Arab Muslim societies? What ideas and judgments are attached to them? What are the mechanisms that maintain, support, or challenge the prevailing gender discourse in Arab Muslim societies? How is power negotiated in gender constructions?

The experiences and perceptions of Arab Muslim women presented in this research that articulate their faith and “grapple with the complexity of claiming Muslim identities in different contexts” (Chaudhry, 1997, p. 444) and contribute a meaningful and relevant context to this research. They have successfully “enacted resistance to dominant moods of thoughts” (Chaudhry, 1997, p. 443), and because of their education they were able both to engage in the ‘Islam and women’ debate and to benefit from it. Like Mukudi (2002), I feel that the Arab Muslim women interviewed “do not visualize themselves challenging their culturally defined positions. Instead, they seek opportunities that would make their experiences better ones through education” (p. 239).

The overlapping themes and crossing similarities among the perceptions of Arab Muslim women do not negate the diversity of the women interviewed. Neither my study nor the analyses are meant to essentialize Arab Muslim women’s experiences. The participants, who lived their lives in Arab Muslim societies in a particular sociohistorical context and then moved to Canada, have powerfully “exercised their agency in crafting their gender identity” (Read & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 114).

¹¹ Some of these questions are mentioned by other gender theorists Javiluoma et al. (2003).

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