Silent Revolution of a Muslim-Arab-American Scholar-Activist

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Where Are You From?

After 35 years of living in the Unites States, every time I meet a new person, I am asked: "Where are you from?" My own personal, political and scholarly journey along with that of some of my cohorts engaged in search for answers to this and relevant questions have shaped my silent revolution. It is a revolution against the way Muslim-Arab girls have been raised unprepared to experience their identity autonomously; I is a revolution against the social systems that abuse and stereotype Muslim Arab women--be it the Muslim, the Arab or the American systems--chiefly because of their dress code. The goal of this revolution is to ignite the flames for social change, re-interpreting the Qur'an in order to retrieve its dynamics that originally intended to establish gender justice. Though the three and one half decades of my life in the US-- first as a foreign student, then as a permanent resident and a citizen--are marked by milestones distinctive dates and events, in my search for answers to different questions, I prefer to go back and forth between them.

In the late 1960s, I answered the above question in my usual honest straightforward manner: "I am from Syria." Yet, since more often than not, the questioner could not locate Syria on his or her "mental" map, I would add "from Damascus, the Biblical City that St. Paul and Peter passed

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by during their travel." Whether the questioner made the connection or not, his/her next question would be: "Is this your national costume?" [why did they ask this? were you wearing hijab/jilbab?] Yes, I was dressed modestly with a head cover My reply has always been: "No, I am a Muslim." By then, the questioner became confused enough to simply nod and move on to another subject. On a rare occasion, if the questioner happened to be a reader of the New York Times or the Washington Post, s/he would lament, "Oh, yes, isn't it sad that those women are suffering under illiteracy (1960s), polygamy and divorce (1970s), that they forced into seclusion (1980s), cannot drive (1990s), and that they are stoned and beaten in the streets (2000s). These different, pathetic descriptions changed chronologically along with the world events. With the eyes of a scholar-activist, I noticed that the majority of Muslim women friends and colleagues have not [discarded? This is not clear] experienced similar situations. Later, I started answering the same question sarcastically: " I am from Ithaca, New York," or "American." But the unconvinced questioner would persist, adding: "No, I mean originally, where do you come from?" I would still say: "I am a Muslim (with an 's' sound)!" and the questioner would add, "Oh, Moslem (with a 'z' sound).

So who am I, and why do I identify with Islam? Why do my fellow American citizens still insist on identifying me as an "outsider," and why do I still insist on identifying myself as a Muslim (with an 's') when this identity, and every expression related to Islam have been associated with many negative connotations?

When I left my native country, Syria, after finishing my formal university education in Islamic philosophy and ethics, and after the 1967 Middle East war, I was determined to be identified as a

Muslim first. Primarily, I chose Islam as a belief system and a worldview, the main goal of

which is social change and, in particular, enhancing gender justice. Being born and raised in an

Arabic/Muslim culture, and because Arabic is also the language of the Qur'an, I feel Arabism to

be part of my heritage. Ironically, these meanings of "Islamicity" and of "Arabism"

crystallized for me only after years of self-searching, self-learning, and self-identification while

living in the US. In this anthology, I reflect on my experience in the context of the uneven socio-

historical and political exchange between the Arab, the Muslim, and the American peoples, as

affected by the different governing bodies and world events, during the late 1960s through the

early 2000.

When I arrived to the US, I used to think that by adhering to the Islamic article of faith, "there is

no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the last Messenger," and by following what is known as the

"Islamic dress code," (erroneously called "hijab," an Arabic term meaning curtain, or a physical

divider `(Qur'an ,33:53)`, that has unfortunately also come to imply complete segregation

between the sexes) as Muslim elites began imposing more restrictions on women and reading

these restrictions back into the Qur'an.[1] I secured my Islamicity, defying the mindset of Madison

Avenue America. What I did not realize then was that in practice, a Muslim who self-identifies

with Islam as a way of life is one whose thoughts and actions are shaped by the dynamics of

Tawhid. That is, God (Allah in Arabic) is the only source of knowledge and value, in addition to

being the Creator. Although I was living by the basic ethics of Islam, such as honesty and

respect for others, these traits were overlooked, by both Muslims and non-Muslims, because of

the pre-occupation with the loaded words of hijab, seclusion, oppression, modernity, liberation,

etc.

How Did You Become Concerned With Muslim Women Status?

I realized that identifying with Islamic ideals only as a philosophy or a political ideology, and with Arabism as ethnic heritage or a nationalistic sentiment, did not take me far enough through the true test of being perceived as an "outsider" in the American society. Hence, I began my self-search that also shaped my scholarly-activist strategies. I delivered my first talk about Muslim women three months after arriving to New York City, armed with a meager knowledge of English("Yes", "No", and "Thank you", were my early companions. My husband had encouraged me to write my talk in Arabic. He translated it into English. Then I read the English with a "nice" Arabic accent.), because I thought that I needed to defend Islam I discovered later that I was neither convincing, nor convinced, because I did not really address the realities of Muslim women. Instead I was talking about the ideals of Islam and justifying the predominant male interpretations and practices of Islam. Not feeling comfortable with being continuously on the defensive, I reversed my course of action by becoming my own questioner. I moved from justifying my way of dress--claiming that it is not as oppressive as it may seem—to studying the Qur'an in order to understand the Islamic view on public appearance. Instead of explaining my cultural background--asserting that people in Damascus use shoes and do not walk bare-footed--I began reading about the history of a civilization that existed for an entire millennium before colonization. Rather than being nostalgic about the revival of this part of history through different authoritative governments and elites, I decided to participate in changing history. In the process, I realized that the above questions and the defensive replies were not unique to me, neither to Muslim women in general, but are common among many middle-class, "educated" people from the developing world awakening from the colonial and missionary confusion.

What makes my experience somewhat unique is that I chose to pursue my identity to the point where I became "an outsider" even to my Arab and Muslim cohorts, males and females. By departing from the usual road to activism--protesting, petitioning, rallying, etc-- I was going through my silent revolution alone. After joining many Muslim and Arab organizations, mainly preparing and serving food in holiday gatherings, teaching their children Arabic and some basics of Islam, and listening to the predominantly male rhetoric about the 'Western, secular immoral,' or 'the imperial, capitalist injustice, ' I decided to start my own activism by changing myself first. Studying and learning about the Western education system, and in the process, searching for what "Islamic" and "Arabic" mean in practice, and why Muslims and Arabs lost their civilization despite the Madrasa system that preceded and helped form the creation of residential colleges of Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and so on. Having studied, at the University of Damascus, the Islamic philosophy of thinkers such as Al-Kindi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Miskawayh, Ibn Al Arabi, and Ibn Khaldun, OK side by side with Ancient Greek and contemporary European philosophers, helped me see how the action-oriented Islamic thinkers were in dialogue with others. Hence, my action research approach, seeking collaboration with Muslim women's co-researchers to further their grass-roots movements, as well as my collegiate feminist educators, has been an attempt to revive this lost dynamism of Islamic philosophy, ethics, pedagogy, and activism. I observed how these Muslim women co-researchers developed their own research questions, while seeking to solve some of their local problems and not stopping until they made sure that others benefited. OK

Who Is Your Mentor Or Role Model?

Less than a week after arriving in New York City, I discarded my *jilbab*, the heavy coat, and *khimar*, the heavy head cover that I chose to wear at the airport while leaving Damascus, persuaded--but not convinced--by certain interpretation of "Islamic" dress codes as represented only by the heavy coat and the head cover that looks like the nun head-gear or black Abaya or Chadoor I originally wore the Jilbab as a revolt against my mother who wanted a moderate perspective. Despite her practice of modest clothes and wearing of a headscarf, she did not want me to practice the heavy coat, as—in her opinion, and, in retrospect, rightly so—it represented an extreme interpretation of "jilbab." My instincts for surviving the cultural shock of New York, along with some convincing evidence (this evidence lead me to a long search about the meaning of Muslim woman's modest dress that I report in my forthcoming book) [could you say what this was, this is very mysterious and provocative] provided by my husband and a few Arab and Muslim friends, made me decide to face the new culture by immersing into it. I reverted to my modest clothes [so you took off headscarf?] yes that I used to wear for twenty-four years in Damascus, those of the average "modern" woman on the streets of Damascus or the streets of New York in the 60s, but I revolted against the traditional role of the Muslim Arab woman who joins her husband on his study abroad to develop himself. I took many voluntary and low-paying jobs (secretarial work and baby-sitting) to improve my English. A year later, I took up a job at Columbia University that would help me both supplement my husband's graduate fellowship and gain free tuition to further my formal education. After two years, I was admitted to the Masters program at Columbia's Teachers College. By earning a Masters in Educational Psychology and Early Childhood Education, I thought that I had fulfilled my intellectual needs, and that I was ready to fulfill my maternal desires and duties by having my first and only child. The real challenge started with the arrival of my lovely daughter in 1973. She drew me back to my early

days in the United States. I realized again that I still did OK not know what identity to instill in her. "How could I teach her Arabic in an English environment? Would I be able to shape her character Islamically in a society that was biased against both Islam and Arabism?" I used to ask myself.

The rationale that persuaded me to take off my jilbab during my early days in the States was that I would lose many opportunities if I remained confined by the long coat and the heavy head cover. (this is an important footnote, hence, let us could insert in the text. It is important because it shows how women, and I was one of them, often follow an interpretation without understanding its Qur'anic bases nor its implications. See the changes that I made in the footnote. Please insert in the text after cleaning these explanatory notes) So, after receiving a degree in higher education, paralleled with my self-study of Islam, I thought I could answer any question and respond to cultural misunderstandings. Not realizing that crossing the road over again was more difficult than before, as I was not only questioning my own identity, but also the would-be identity of my daughter. Apparently, my intellectual growth further flamed my curiosity and dissatisfaction, especially at the time when the feminist movement and women's studies program on university campuses were at their peak. I wondered then as to why feminists were revolting against the traditional Western family that did not grant women minimum civil rights, such as voting, while bashing the "oppressive" Islamic religion that gave women the right to vote more than fourteen centuries ago. Meanwhile, I also wondered about the unjust practices that were, and still are taking place in the Muslim and the Arab world against women's rights to vote and the right be elected to public office. Thus, another phase of my scholarly-activist revolution began.

While looking for resources to study bilingualism and language acquisition for the sake of safeguarding my daughter's Arabic language and Islamic development, I accepted a research position at Cornell University in cross-psycholinguistics, with Arabic as one of the languages under study. I volunteered, paying my own expenses, to travel twice to my native Damascus, in order to collect data among preschool children between 1974-1978. These trips put me back in contact with the Syrian women's study group that I discuss in notes 6 and 7. These women were ordinary housewives, nursery school teachers and administrators, M.D.'s and Ph.D's who decided to study the Qur'an and apply this learning in their daily lives. They were also attempting to regain their liberation not by joining women's organizations, but by searching for their own identity. I did not believe then that it was possible for these women to be liberated from the local social customs, considering both the political conditions and my own perceptions that the women were "indoctrinated" by their male relatives. But, when I saw the results of their silent activism and the changes that they have enacted in their private lives and those who were in their social circle, I was convinced that if those women were able to maintain such a strong identity under a socialist one-party government, then I could do the same under a democratic multi-party government!

How Could You Move Between The Multiple Identities?

Being convinced that I could exercise my self-identity without losing many opportunities, as I was warned in the 1960s, I decided to test the American democratic system in the early 1980s. Dressed in modest, loose, long clothes and a headscarf, I thought that I would be accepted and understood, now that I proved that I was not the "illiterate, oppressed" Middle Eastern woman.

Personally, I was convinced that I could no longer live as a hypocrite--dressed in Western clothes in the classroom and the lecture halls, while changing into my jilbab and head gear to go to Friday prayers and Muslim gathering. Hence, I changed into practical modest long-skirt suit and a headscarf that would also meet the criteria for the prayer. Given my political stance during those testing times for Muslims and Arabs (attempting to demystify Islam in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution), I found myself once again questioned, this time by the research group that I was working with for five years. This questioning period intensified during the year when I enrolled once again as a graduate student, this time to pursue a Ph.D. By the end of that year, I was denied a renewal of my graduate research assistantship, and the qualification to continue my Ph.D. program by the same professor who highly recommended my admission to the program earlier. This same professor with whom I worked as a research specialist, and who awarded me the graduate research assistantship told me that my "English was not strong enough to qualify me for writing a dissertation." I had to take a one-year leave from the graduate school, fighting my case through the University Ombudsman. I was able to retain my status as a graduate student, but I decided to change my major. I was dismayed with Muslim parents' lack of enthusiasm about their children learning Islam and Arabic in the Sunday school that I voluntarily ran, so I decided that my dissertation project would be about the Muslims of America. I wanted to understand their perception of Islam, and their view of passing the Islamic identity to their children, in order to use the results as a foundation for building a multicultural multilingual curriculum.

Prior to enrolling in the Ph.D. program at Cornell University, I took a lecturer position in 1979-80 teaching at King Abdul Aziz University Girls College in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, while maintaining my relations with the research group and collecting data about Arab children

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cognitive development. During these two years I had the opportunity to reexamine, through discussion with a number of religious scholars and educators, the Islamic belief system and its stance on women's identity. Meanwhile, I was observing the discrepant practices of sex segregation, the differentiated curriculum of girls and boys, and women's identification with Islam (insert footnote 8 here: "It is worth noting that ...."). I realized then that the only way for Muslim women's emancipation is through reeducating herself in Islam, in order to defy the social customs behind those discrepant practices. (again, this is an important footnote. Since you have already inserted part of it in the next paragraph, please insert the listing of the 2 other historical events at the end of the previous sentence) Hence, I began deconstructing the "Islam" that was practiced by Muslim societies, and was studied in Western universities, with the goal of self-learning of Islam whose guidance is in the Arabic Qur'an.

I remember vividly a conversation that took place in my office at the Girls College with two young Saudi seniors who were deeply convinced that Islam had a lot to offer. They were well versed both in the Islamic traditional sciences and the modern Western education, more so than average Muslim women I met in the States. Their families, and other families of close Saudi colleagues were learned, they valued education, and were willing to send their daughters abroad for higher education. The only obstacle, as I learned, was that the authorities did not allow women to travel alone without a male relative as a companion (Muhram), stretching the meaning of Muhram to mean a "moral guardian."[2] This conversation and similar ones with Saudi females highly-learned in the Islamic knowledge, encouraged me to interview some Saudi authorities for my articles on women's and children's education that I was writing for the English edition of the Saudi Gazette. I learned then that there was no law prohibiting women's travel or driving, but

that social customs dictated such practices. Whether we were American or Saudi citizens, we were to abide by these customs, despite the fact that these customs had no basis in Islam. When the Saudi government reversed its policy that allowed girls to continue their higher education in Western countries, even when they were accompanied by a Muhram, I and other Saudi Women faculty members, led by a Professor of Sociology and a graduate of Purdue University, Fatina Shaker, organized a panel to discuss it with the authorities before passing the ruling, but then the entire event was canceled at the last minute by the Ministry of Girls' Education. [is this still the policy?] Yes, women are allowed to earn higher degrees only by correspondence.

Fueled by these findings, that many social customs have no basis in Islam, I re-charted my course of action to re-affirm my chosen identity, and that of my colleagues, as Muslim-Arab women who identified with the Qur'an. I began defying some of these customs, such as refusing to wear the black ᶜAbaya (silk cloak), because black clothes were --according to a Prophetic tradition--the most repugnant to Islam. I even ended up arguing with a Mutawaᶜa (erroneously being employed as a religious police, an idea that contradicts one of Islam's basic tenants that there is no coercion in religion (Qur'an, 2:256)ʾ OK, who tried to prevent me from entering the Prophet's mosque because I refused to use the ᶜAbaya. Sadly, the Muatawaᶜa chastised my husband, who affirmed that my long, wide dress and head scarf were enough for me to enter the mosque, by telling him that he (my husband) would be accountable for my behavior in the Hereafter. Such pronouncements made me more revolted, because they implied that I was neither a spiritual, nor a religious, nor a legal entity responsible for my own behavior.

As I searched the Qur'an and early Islamic sources, not readily available in libraries, I became more convinced that I should further my formal education and informal Islamic higher learning

in Islam (`Islamic Higher learning means deeper knowledge of Islam, not attaining higher degree in Islamic studies`). Ok I thought then that by going back to the States I could both pursue my formal higher education and live freely in the "democratic pluralistic" society of America, where there was no "religious police," and no pressure of the local customs. My thoughts were true to a certain extent. Without any doubt, I had more freedom of movement than when I was in Saudi Arabia, more leverage in defying social customs than when I lived in Syria, and more access to Islamic literary sources than what was available in both countries. Yet, in reality, I had less freedom in asserting my identity, not only because of my different physical appearance but mainly because I lacked the deep knowledge of the Qur'an. This realization triggered the "Self-Identity With The Qur'an" project that eventually led me to work with two groups of Muslim women scholar-activists. One group is in Damascus, Syria; the other is in North America.

As I became more outspoken, publicly expressing my intellectual and political views, making critical statements about intellectual and political double-standard practices within both the Muslim-Arab and the American systems, I found myself lacking knowledge of the evidence that would support my intuitive feeling that those practices must be contradicting the Qur'an. Both in the fields of education and women's liberation, I could expose the contradictions to the constitutional amendments of equal access and equal opportunity, but I did not have the basis to expose the patriarchal Muslim/Arab elites' claims to the exclusive authority on Islam. I was able to convince the Ithaca school district authorities, for example, with my argument analyzing how to comply with Title Nine and the 14th Amendment, allowing women equal participation in sports, along with the affirmative action for equal access to education. The school administration,

after more than a year of my research, lecturing, and negotiation, provided separate space and time for Muslim girls swimming activity. Yet, some Muslim community leaders and some families refused to allow their daughters this privilege, because it was foreign to their social customs. Since swimming was a required course for safety instruction in Ithaca public schools, I explained that Muslim parents should allow their daughters equal access, as they did to their sons, instead of withdrawing them from sports classes, but to no avail. Hence, I intensified my undeclared revolution against the gender bias in these Muslim communities by responding to several invitations to become active member of different Muslim organizations and committees.

Despite the claim to the Islamization of knowledge that was charted by the late Isma'il al Faruqi in the early 1980's, some American Muslim elites were authoritarian and gender-biased to the point of making me more convinced that I had to resume my journey alone. I was one of the early female members and lecturer about Muslim women education at ISNA Women's Committee that was chaired by Khadija Haffajee, a current member of ISNA *Majlis al Shura* (consultative Council). In 1988 (after finishing my Ph.D. dissertation "perceptions of the Islamic Belief System: Muslims in North America) I was also invited to become a member (the only woman) of the ISNA Education Committee on which I served for three years, concluding with the First Islamic Education Conference and, later, the formation of the council of Islamic Schools. In 1978 the late Isma'il Al Faruqi invited me to give my first lecture at the newly founded Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) on early childhood Islamic Education: Implications for women's education (*Al-Ittihad* Journal of Islamic Studies, 17, 1, January-March 1980). He later on accepted to be an Ad Hoc member of my Ph.D. dissertation committee, but sadly was assassinated only few months before I submitted my full draft of the thesis. I

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continued to be actively involved, for few years after the passing of al Faruqi, with AMSS and

the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) that was also founded by him, as a member

at large (AMSS) a contributor, and a reviewers of papers for the American Journal of Islamic

Social Sciences, and as an occasional participant in and contributor to the monthly seminars and

annual conferences.

Unfortunately, after several attempts to sensitize some of those leaders to gender issues, I

became convinced that women's participation in the decision-making process in such

organizations was still a foreign concept to most of those who were domineering. The situation

improved in American Muslim Council (AMC) and Center for the Study of Islam and

Democracy (CSID). In 1997, I was nominated and elected to serve as a member of the (AMC)

for three years, during which I participated in few important events, including lobbying Congress

and the First National Muslim-Christian Interfaith Conference at the National Cathedral (1998),

and conducting a workshop on Muslim women's self-identity. In 2001, I was nominated and

elected as a member of the Board of Directors of the CSID and I was able to place the topic "The

Role of Women and Gender in the Governance of Muslim States: Participation in religious and

secular Ijtihad and decision-making, and in the political discourse to secure human dignity and

religiosity" on the agenda for the CSID forthcoming annual conference (May, 2003).

How Was The Ideal Islam Transformed By Muslim Arab Practices?

Arabs and Muslims take it for granted that their children will learn the Arabic language of the

Qur'an, or their Arabic and Islamic heritage through emulating their parents, by hearing the

spoken language, or by eating "*Halal*" food and following Arabic/Muslim customs. Ok

Realizing that a language may not become enriching to one's identity unless the individual is able to read and write it, I was interested in studying language acquisition to secure my daughter's upbringing in Arabic first, while pursuing a professional training in psycholinguistics. In addition to my interest in language acquisition, I felt that without the knowledge of Arabic, my daughter may despise Islam, particularly because the translation of the meanings of the Qur'an is very much compromised by the English language, especially with respect to gender-laden expressions (for example, the Arabic "Ya ayuha al Naas" "O People" is translated as "O mankind". OK Also, without reading and understanding Arabic poetry and prose, I thought, my daughter might be deprived of a meaningful appreciation of the Arabo-Islamic cultural and literary products. Personally, I embraced Arabism, as it is the cradle of Islam and the rich environment in which the Islamic civilization and its people were nurtured from early on and for many centuries up to this date. I am, nevertheless, concerned about Arabism as a manifestation of nationalistic aspects, because it is an imported and an alien concept to Arabs and Muslims. Despite its many proponents, I believe that the concept of nation-state is one of the plagues inflicted on the Arabs and on Muslims in general, failing to liberate Arabs and Muslims from the colonizing cultures, but creating instead an ever-lasting division and confusion of identity among Arabs and among Muslims as well.

My activism further intensified while facing the exploded stereotyping of Islam, Muslims and particularly Muslim women after the Iran revolution. Having been involved in Islamic and Arabic studies and education, as well as in Cornell interfaith dialogue through the Campus United Religious Work, I responded to several invitations to lecture on these subjects. When my Muslim colleagues and I suggested in 1986 that a conference be held about the concept of justice

in Islam, several departments supported and sponsored the conference. After a university press expressed interest in the subject, I ended up developing the conference proceedings into an edited volume. Although, given its defiance to the geo-political rhetoric, it took several years to get the book published, I continued to pursue the project, giving it priority over the publication of my dissertation, OK because, in addition to its educational timing, it contained two unique essays and my first essay on gender justice. OK

Although I graduated with a distinction, receiving the Glock Award for my Ph.D. dissertation, I realized that my age would be a barrier in my search for an academic position, but I never thought that my being a Muslim woman who wears the head-cover would be an obstacle. I have no doubts that my headscarf diminished my chances, because potential job offers diminished every time after I went for interview. Therefore, I decided to focus on my research and accept a courtesy academic appointment. In my forthcoming book on Muslim women's self-identity and the Qur'an, I explain how the predominantly male interpretations of a modest public appearance transformed the Islamic ideals of gender justice into the unjust use of Muslim women's dress.

Who Do You See Yourself Being Accountable To In Your Scholarly And Political Work?
I am often asked how I could be a responsible American citizen if I believe in a divine source as my primary guide. Approaching the question from the perspective of a self-identified Muslim Arab woman, I see the clarity of my identification with Islam and my political accountability dependent on my perception of Islam's central concepts of Tawhid and Taqwa.[3] Because many Muslims may not realize this self-identity, and since neither all Muslims are of Arab descent, nor do all Arabs adhere to the faith of Islam, I examine my compounded identity at the level of

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various underlying assumptions, and consider my political accountability from within the Islamic principles, instead of it being part of the Muslim-Arab social milieu. These Islamic principles include, in part, some of the basic tenets of the American constitution, such as conscientious choice and religious liberty. As a matter of fact, the Islamic social structure included something that would not become one of the American constitutional civil rights until the 20th Century— women's right to vote and to freedom of choice.

Within the framework of the Islamic worldview, I proceeded by asking what in a particular practice contradicts the Qur'anic guidelines, and what in the Muslim intellectual psyche led to the stagnation of Islamic dynamism, and then by seeking an alternative course of action and determining the skills that could bring my curriculum closer to Taqwa. As a scholar- activist Muslim-Arab woman wanting to bring a lasting change in the Arabo-Islamic cultural view of women through education, I began working with other women's activists and scholars to bring further awareness to the issue of self-identity with Islam. The First Conference to establish the North American Council for Muslim Women (NACMW) in 1992 set the stage for my contact with about 150 Muslim women activist leaders in different communities, some of whom I had already worked with during my dissertation field research. I conducted an informal survey to record their interests and aspirations. OK As a founding member, and having been elected a member of the Advisory Board, I maintained a close working relationship with a good number of these women, particularly with NACMW's first President, Sharifa Alkhateeb, a very close friend and highly respected nationally renowned activist, interfaith and intercultural educator, and a political advocate for Muslim women and against domestic violence.

In 1993-4, I was awarded a Visiting Fellowship from Oxford University Centre for Islamic Studies, based on my research on Islamic education and the education of Muslim women. Arguing my model of women's trusteeship (*Khilafah*), as the Qur'an intended (30:2), I explained how extreme stances on the status of Muslim women, resulting from the endless interpretations of verse 4:24 in the Qur'an--usually translated as "men are responsible for women because God made the ones excel the others..."--contradicted the basic premise of Khilafah. Khilafah means that (a) no human being is superior to another, except as different individuals fulfill the meaning of Taqwa (Qur'an, 49:13 and 3: 73) and (b) God's intent is to create variation and not sameness among human beings (Qur'an, 16:17), where equality does not require sameness. My experience at Oxford--meeting different Muslim scholars, communities, and encountering different perspectives on Muslim women's development--also made me more persistent in arguing for understanding Muslim women's issues from the Qur`anic perspective. During the same year, pressure to adopt an universalistic version of feminism mounted in preparation for the Beijing Conference (the Fourth World Conference on Women), which hoped to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) document (The U.N., 1996).

In September 1994, the Sisterhood Is Global Institute held a conference "Religion, culture, and Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World." When I read the preliminary program, realizing that there was no representation of the American Muslim women's grassroots groups, I contacted Sharifa Alkhateeb, Maysam al Faruqi, a professor of Islamic and religious studies at Georgetown University, and Aziza al-Hibri, a Professor of Law at the University of Richmond to mobilize a representative attendant of the conference. As the high representation of Muslim women's speaking from the Islamic perspective mounted by the end of the first day of

the conference, the conference organizers responded by changing the program to open the discussion for a town hall meeting, getting input from all groups. Only few weeks later, Myasam al Faruqi, joined efforts with Sharifa Alkhateeb and NACMW to launch the Muslim Women's Georgetown Study Project to discuss the Islamic perspective on women's human rights visa-`a-vise the Western position. We began with the intent that we would interpret Qur'anic perspective on Muslim women's human rights. I focused on Muslim women's higher Islamic learning as a human right, asserting that without such learning, women may not be able to consciously identify with Islam. Kareema Altomare, a liaison from the American Muslim Council, who was coordinating AMC support of NACMW's efforts toward sending a delegate to Beijing, also helped in communication and administration. In 1998, Sharifa Alkhateeb and I responded to the First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton's invitation to the White House Eid celebration among the forty Muslim women's scholar-activists and their families.

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Feeling uneasy about the evolution in my ideas, and my simultaneous inability to affect a broad social change, due to the forces of conservatism and secularism, I expanded my search to the Middle East. After receiving a grant from the International Council for Adult Education, I conducted a collaborative action research with Pakistani and US adult women literacy groups. Having also received a 3-year Fulbright scholarship to Syria to develop a computerized curriculum in the Arabic environment, I revived my working relations with the Syrian women group I had left in the late 60s, while pursuing political empowerment of Muslim Arab women. Although, by then I had broken away from the sentimental Islam (my memories of a Muslim

society), I worked from within the Islamic framework toward a change in both my own attitude and the negative outlooks on Muslim Arab feminism, all in accordance with my scholarly findings about the rights of women in Islam. Numerous other activities followed, one among them was the 1995 Middle East Studies panel on Muslim women's self-identity. Well-received by the audience, we were encouraged to publish those papers that addressed both the Islamic view, and practical solutions to re-instating women's human rights through re-interpreting the Qur'an. Gisela Webb who moderated the panel accepted the challenge to edit these papers, would later become part of *Windows of Faith*. In 1999 I wanted to further the collaborative work with the same contributors and other North American Muslim women scholar-activists, but the dominant trends of religious conservatism in North American did not relent. On the other hand, I was able to expand my work with the Syrian women group during my tenure as a United Nations Development Program Scholar in 1999 and 2002. OK

Epilogue

Muslim Arab women's political assertion and accountability need to be discussed on two levels before assessing their various manifestations. On the philosophical and policy-making level, it is a question of who legislates and who applies the legislation, not merely a question of the ideal and the practice. This level is basic to understanding the Islamic principles of religious identification and worth for both men and women, wherein neither may legislate for the other, but has the right and responsibility to interpret and apply the Qur'anic guidance according to his/her disposition of free reasoning, *Ijtihad*, and within the procedural framework stated in the Qur'an (33:36).

On the psychological and pedagogical level, it is a question of how new ideas and procedures foreign to the Islamic worldview can be introduced, without distorting or changing the ontology and epistemology of Islam. These ideas and procedures could be introduced to Muslims and Arabs in a way that enables them to modify their perception and attitude about the role of women, while maintaining their identity with Islam and Arabism. This level helped me determine which skills I, and perhaps each individual Muslim, need to be a qualified interpreter of the Qur'an, i.e. a creator of new meanings in time and place. The Qur'an provides the criteria as well as the method both for determining the right to knowledge, and the responsibility for understanding the Qur'anic guidelines (6:50, 34:6, 96:3). My personal accountability lies in questioning those who claim their authority approaches the level of God's authority, be they male or female.

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1 Abu Al Ala Al Mawdudi (*Hijab , 1967*) and H. Al Banna (*Al Mar'a al Muslimah*, 1983), extended this meaning to the form of modest cloths for all Muslim women, resulting in two misconceptions: First, referencing to the woman's head-cover (khimar) as' hijab,' and confusing the word 'jilbab' (Qur`an 33:59) in reference to women's outer garment or cloak, with hijab. Second, extending the use of 'hijab' from mere respect for women's privacy to implying complete segregation between the sexes.

[2] Muhram (from Arabic) means the person who is not of a marriageable category, such as father, brother, uncle, specified in the Qur`an (24:31).

[3] *Taqwa* (from Arabic), often translated as piety, means the individual's conscientious balance of her autonomy with social heteronomy/hegemony and her interaction with natural and divine laws. It is also the only criterion that distinguishes individuals from one another (Qur'an, 49:13).