

## **Reflexivity of Discomfort in Insider-Outsider Educational Research**

### **Réflexivité sur un inconfort d'observatrice-initiée dans le cadre d'une recherche en éducation**

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#### Article abstract

This paper discusses my position as an Arab Muslim woman researcher who is affiliated with a Western university, researching Arab Muslim Canadian women. I discuss how reflexivity has emerged as an element of my research endeavours. Various notions of reflexivity in educational research have been expressed in the literature, yet I focus on what it means to me as an insider-outsider researcher and how it characterizes my research endeavours. In this paper, I explore the complexity of occupying these multiple subjectivities.

# REFLEXIVITY OF DISCOMFORT IN INSIDER-OUTSIDER EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper discusses my position as an Arab Muslim woman researcher who is affiliated with a Western university, researching Arab Muslim Canadian women. I discuss how reflexivity has emerged as an element of my research endeavours. Various notions of reflexivity in educational research have been expressed in the literature, yet I focus on what it means to me as an insider-outsider researcher and how it characterizes my research endeavours. In this paper, I explore the complexity of occupying these multiple subjectivities.

## RÉFLEXIVITÉ SUR UN INCONFORT D'OBSERVATRICE-INITIÉE DANS LE CADRE D'UNE RECHERCHE EN ÉDUCATION

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article explore ma position comme chercheuse musulmane arabe affiliée à une université occidentale étudiant la vie des femmes canadiennes musulmanes arabes. J'y examine de quelle manière la réflexivité a émergé comme élément de mes projets de recherche. Bien que diverses notions de réflexivité aient été soulevées dans la littérature, je cible ce que cela signifie pour moi en tant que chercheuse initiée et observatrice ainsi que de quelle manière cela teinte mes recherches. J'y analyse la complexité d'incarner ces multiples subjectivités.

## INTRODUCTION

Insider-outsider research has become one of the most heated areas of debate among immigrant scholars researching their own communities. While insider-outsider research is an approach that is mostly used by ethnographers, it is nevertheless also being used by scholars from various other fields. There are many indications that being an insider-outsider can cause discomfort, especially when revealing negative aspects of one's own cultural group. However, crucial values emerge as a result of conducting insider-outsider research. Self-awareness is critical for success in conducting this kind of research. This self-awareness is closely associated with the concept of reflexivity.

Reflexivity is researching myself and reflecting on my personal beliefs and values both as a researcher and as a member of the researched group. As an insider-outsider researcher believing in the merit of reflexivity, I am aware of the fact that my reflexivity could be pushing me beyond my comfort zone as a researcher. By this I mean that reflexivity has exposed aspects of my identity that I did not reveal in my research endeavour. This is what I call “reflexivity of discomfort.” I believe that reflexivity of discomfort enriched my experience in insider-outsider research, made me more aware of the value in conducting this type of research, and confirmed the importance of encouraging other researchers to follow this approach. In this paper I argue that the integration of reflexivity of discomfort into insider-outsider research is indispensable for transcending the distortions introduced by the various lenses through which researchers and research subjects view the world in general and the matters being researched in particular. As my quest in reflexivity continued, many questions surfaced regarding my understanding of reflexivity and how it would enrich my research.

In this paper I discuss my positionality as an Arab Muslim woman researcher who is affiliated with a Western university researching Arab Muslim Canadian women. I discuss how reflexivity emerged as a central element of my research endeavours and how it is intrinsic to the continuum of my insider-outsider positionality. Various notions of reflexivity in educational research have been expressed in the literature (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Harding, 1991; Lynch, 2000; Reinharz, 1992, 1997; Usher, 1996; Wasserfall, 1997), yet I focus on what it means to me as an insider-outsider researcher and on how reflexivity influences my research endeavours. In this paper, I explore the complexity of what it entails to occupy multiple subjectivities. I closely examine the tension and the richness embedded in the many positions that I occupy. I review my past research experiences to understand why reflexivity is important in my present understanding of research and why it is important to integrate reflexivity, particularly the reflexivity of discomfort, into qualitative research. In this paper, I consider the limitations that I have encountered while conducting insider research, while also exploring how the positions that I occupy have considerably enriched my research. Throughout the discussion I highlight how reflexivity is a source of privilege because it provides the reader with the researcher’s unique perspectives on the research endeavour.

### *Reflexivity: What it is*

Over the past two or three decades, many articles have attempted to define reflexivity and how it is employed in qualitative research. My initial reading of this literature guided me towards an understanding of reflexivity and of how it applies in educational research. My initial definition of reflexivity is that it is a metaphysical analysis of the researcher’s account, one that examines the researcher’s own input into the research process. It involves the researcher

observing him or herself in the act of observing, researching him or herself in the act of researching.

Put another way, employing reflexivity throughout the research process entails the researcher paying close attention to his or her involvement in all aspects of the process and being prepared to assess the impact of that involvement on the research. I agree with Lather's (1991a; 1991b) notion of reflexivity as mandating a sincere attempt to deconstruct one's own work and the motives behind it. The researcher must closely monitor him or herself in the process of determining the research problem and theoretical framework and of creating the research design. This process is governed by the researcher's values and, reciprocally, these choices help to expose the values of the researcher. For example, the researcher's decision to include or exclude certain participants or questions reveals the researcher's values, background and subjectivity. Indeed,

One needs to document these reflexive processes, not just in general terms such as our class, gender, and ethnic background; but in a more concrete and nitty-gritty way in terms of where, how and why particular decisions are made at particular stages of conducting the research. (Mathner & Doucet, 1997, p. 138)

Gadamer (1975) argues that researchers should acknowledge their values and prejudices as a first step, being aware that they are embedded in their experience of knowledge formation and also in their epistemological values. I assert the necessity to do so in all qualitative research. This entails including the researcher's background or personal story in the analysis wherever possible.

Situating oneself in the social space from which one comes and considering the lenses through which one views one's position, as well as considering how the research topic relates to one's self, are all channeled into my understanding of reflexivity. I encourage qualitative researchers to employ this approach in order to produce research that questions its own interpretations and is reflexive about its own knowledge production. The goal of this approach is to produce improved, and less distorted, research accounts (Hertz, 1997).

According to Nixon, Walker & Clough (2003),

Neither we nor the subjects we seek to understand are blank social slates – we are embedded within particular biographies and the communities from which we take our identities. This requires of us a deep and vigilant reflexivity in our research that is attentive to the effects of our own peripheral vision. We might begin with standpoint experiences and voices – both our own and those of others. (p. 102)

Furthermore, Leistyna (2004) argues that

People need to use their historical location as the place to begin to reflect upon the object of knowledge and to create meaning.... My locality necessarily conditions me to ask certain questions.... However, even within the limits of my position, and under historical and cultural influences, my job as a learner is to connect it to the rest of the world. (p. 21)

The ultimate goal of reflexivity, according to Guillemin and Gillam (2004), has to do with improving the quality and validity of the research and recognizing the limitations of the knowledge that is produced which leads to more rigorous research. Self-reflexive in this sense, a researcher would be alert not only to issues related to knowledge creation *but also ethical issues in research*. (p. 275; emphasis added)

Many other writers, including McGraw, Zvonkovic, and Walker (2000), also relate reflexivity to ethics. They point out that “Reflexivity is a process whereby researchers place themselves and their practice under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process and impinge on the creation of knowledge” (p. 68). Gadamer (1975) argues that, as researchers, we are always interpreting and understanding in the light of our own prejudices and that these evolve over time. He acknowledges the critical importance of a researcher’s cultural and sociological position, which is a central aspect of my understanding of reflexivity. Gadamer’s (1975) perception closely reflects my understanding of reflexivity as being not merely a single or universal entity but in fact as being an active process that permeates every stage of the research.

When I practice reflexivity in my research, I envision Harding’s (1991) definition of strong reflexivity:

That the objects of inquiry be conceptualized as gazing back in all their cultural particularity and that the researcher, through theory and methods, stands behind them, gazing back at his [or her] own socially situated research project in all its cultural particularity and its relationships to other projects of his [or her] culture. (p. 163)

In my doctoral research, I practiced reflexivity by continuously questioning every step that I took and every question that I designed to elicit the narratives of the interviewees. In my Master’s studies, my intention was to deconstruct and reframe stereotypical Western images and myths related to Muslim women using Merryfield’s (2001a & 2001b) global education principles. The development of the research themes was based on my insider-outsider perspective. In the following sections I will elaborate on my approach in using reflexivity in my qualitative work.

### *General information on insider-outsider research*

Insider-outsider research is becoming one of the most highly debated approaches to research. It involves a researcher occupying double positions, meaning that he or she is both a member of the researched group *and* an outsider relative to that group. Anthropologists usually occupy insider-outsider positions when they choose to conduct research on their communities (such as Abu-Lughod [1990, 1998] and Subedi [2006]). Insider-outsider researcher positions are usually seen to cause some form of discomfort for the researcher: “This sense of comfort or the belonging one feels can be problematic considering how

one may be viewed as an outsider and/or an insider when one is conducting 'home' research" (Subedi, 2006, p. 546).

Hamnett, Porter, Singh and Kumar (1984) assess the advantages of providing both insider and outsider perspectives on the research endeavour, wherever possible. They believe that "Insider's research can provide insights, inner meanings, and subjective dimensions that are likely to be overlooked by outsiders. The outsider can bring comparably detached perceptions to the problem he [sic] investigates" (as cited in Ghazalla & Sabagh, 1986, p. 374). Hirschmann (1998) argues that "It is often difficult to gain critical purchase on a context from within the context itself; one must be often outside it at the same time that one is 'inside' it" (p. 362). This is why an insider researcher should be vigilant for "the constant need for reflexivity... insider researchers have to have ways of thinking critically about their processes, their relationships, and the quality and richness of their data and analysis" (Smith, 1999, p. 137).

In order to gain a more complete view and understand the context surrounding the "inside," one needs to step out of one's comfort zone to experience the associated and inevitable discomfort. Only by persevering in the face of discomfort can one hope to properly appreciate the insider perspective. This is an approach that I have diligently worked to apply in my research endeavours.

*General discussion of how to minimize/mitigate the risks associated with insider-outsider research by using reflexivity of discomfort*

"All too often, the insider/outsider question is posed too simplistically as a dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity" (Shami, 1988, p. 115). The uncomfortable reflexivity of the insider-outsider continuum is not merely a dichotomy between two positions. Reflexivity "seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous.... this form of exceeding the selves enacts something far less comforting" (Pillow, 2003, p. 187).

I believe that my research raises further questions regarding gender discourses in different contexts while pushing toward the unfamiliar. I argue that important learning occurs when researchers discuss how they experience reflexivity while conducting qualitative research. The reflexivity I practice, while uncomfortable, entails responding to the text and questioning the premise of the research, which is different from reflecting on a "simple confessional-tale" (Pillow, 2003, p. 187).

Pillow (2003) emphasizes the need to practice reflexivity that pushes toward an unfamiliar or uncomfortable subject. In this view, reflexivity cannot be a simple story of subjects, subjectivity, and transcendence, nor should it entail self-indulgence. A tracing of the problematics of reflexivity calls for "a positioning of reflexivity not as clarity, honesty, or humility, but as practice of confounding disruptions" (p. 192). From the narrative presented above, I

draw an analysis of my understanding of the reflexivity of discomfort, which has multiple and intersecting facets.

As Pillow (2003) suggests, “some researchers use reflexivity as a methodological tool to better present, legitimize, or call into question the research data” (p. 176). My use of reflexivity is to better “represent *difference* and establish ethnographic authority” (p. 176; emphasis in the original). However, the critical<sup>1</sup> usage of reflexivity is aided by the suspicion which appears in every step of the research, which can lead one to “question the too easily and too closely to the familiar” (Amal Amireh as cited in Abdo, 2002, p. 229). Thus, reflexivity should “go beyond being a methodological exercise... it is rendering the knowing of the self or the research subjects as uncomfortable and uncontainable” (p. 187).

While there has been a tendency in research to list a researcher’s identity (i.e., race, class and sexuality), I do not think that this measure is necessary in each and every research project. However, in feminist research, the researcher’s identity becomes a necessary component (Hurd, 1998; Morawski, 1994). Indeed, many feminists criticize traditional research methodologies in which method and results are conceptualized as separate entities (Hurd, 1998, p. 196). Thus, the reason for the strong role of reflexivity in feminist research is that feminists refuse to put aside their experiences as women when conducting research (Morawski, 1994). Like many feminist researchers, I tackle questions that are of personal, political, and academic significance to me. There are many ways in which my personal experiences frame the politics of my chosen research topics.

Many feminist researchers (i.e., Harding, 1991; Naples, 2003; Smith, 1987; Lather, 1996; Wasserfall, 1997) are particularly interested in researcher reflexivity and the reality of the female researcher. Feminist research and critical approaches to research practice have considered reflexivity as a methodological tool that is not only acceptable, but also desirable. Nevertheless, most feminist researchers do not employ the reflexivity of discomfort as a lens in their research practices. Instead, some feminist researchers cultivate the misconception of “know-it-all” research. I encourage feminist researchers to introduce reflexivity as a methodological tool that not only brings to light the researcher’s subjectivities but also challenges the researcher. This form of reflexivity is needed in all research because it enriches the research and hence the field of knowledge. It highlights the tensions, contradictions, power imbalances and limits in the research. I agree with Pillow (2003) that qualitative researchers and feminist researchers would benefit more from “messy examples... examples that may not always be successful, examples that do not seek a comfortable, transcendent end-point but leave us in the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research” (p. 193). This informs my awareness that, “our interrogation, revelations, and vulnerabilities in a feminists’ praxis generate intriguing insights and creations” (Villenas, 2000, p. 76).

*How reflexivity in general and reflexivity of discomfort in particular were applied in my insider-outsider research on Arab Muslim women in Canada*

• Overview of my Master's research

From my multifaceted perspective, I have found that many Western anthropologists and scholarly works tend to uncritically incorporate the marginal position and personality of Middle Eastern Arab Muslim women. In my Master's research, I explored Muslim women's representations within Western<sup>2</sup> academic discourses and I also examined common misperceptions regarding Muslim women that are embedded in Western media and scholarly literature. My work focused on deconstructing these negative depictions of Muslim women by employing both my "insider knowledge" as well as my deep understanding of Islamic teachings. My analysis was also informed by my understanding of global-education principles, particularly Merryfield's theory of global education (Merryfield, 2001a, 2001b; Merryfield & Subedi, 2000).

In my research, I used Merryfield's (2001a) global-education theories to deconstruct negative images of Muslim women. She suggests that teachers expose their students to Edward Said's ideas on Orientalism and the ways in which Europeans have constructed "the Orient" in writing and art. Students should be able to identify exotic images of the Middle East in popular media, entertainment, and textbooks, as well as to compare these images with the visuals and stories found on websites and in personal stories shared by indigenous insiders.

During the analysis stage of my Master's thesis, I discussed how my position as a Muslim woman has influenced my research and how the research has affected me both personally and academically. In particular, I employed a reflexive process while developing and writing my research findings. My Master's research, entitled *Bringing a global education perspective to understand "The Other": A case study of Western myths of Muslim women*, led me to question my own world views. I was interested in exploring Westerners' perceptions of Muslim women, both as individuals and as part of the Muslim community. My findings gave me the opportunity to see Muslim women's positions from the perspectives of others.

In my analysis, I concluded that many of the sexist traditions that are practiced in Arab Muslim societies are incorrectly shrouded as sacred. I also concluded that certain stereotypical Western images have some basis in the ways in which Islam is practiced in some predominantly Muslim countries. As an insider, I note that classical jurisprudential law is based on the conservative interpretation of the Muslim Holy text, The *Quran*, and that this interpretation is institutionalized in most Islamic societies under *Sharia* law. Many aspects of these conservative male interpretations are discriminatory towards women, yet they are presented as though that are the only authentic Islamic perspectives on women's issues. A skewed selection of prominent Arab Muslim discussions of



religion and culture seems to be highlighted in Western Orientalist writings and in Western media and these are mistakenly presented as being intrinsic to Islamic values and teachings to women. For instance, the African tribal practice of female circumcision is rarely referred to as being a tribal custom, but is usually attributed to the teachings of Islam (Jansen, 1998; Jawad, 1998; Robertson & James, 2002; Slack, 1988).

• *A deeper reflection on being an insider-outsider researcher*

While growing up as a Muslim in the Islamic society of Saudi Arabia, I had opportunities to explore and analyze, from an insider perspective, Islamic teachings from the *Quran*<sup>3</sup> and *Sunna* as well as Arab Muslim cultural traditions and to assess their implications for women. On the other hand, I have also engaged in analysis as an outsider who left Saudi Arabia as a young woman to live in Canada, a country with a comparatively small Muslim minority. My brief return visits to the Middle East have brought my attention to an area of great interest: gender discourse in Arab Muslim society. During these visits, my interactions with female friends and family members, and my observations of how gender ideologies are regulated, have caused me to reflect upon my personal experience. I consider myself both an insider and an outsider. My insider position grants me access to Muslim women's perspectives, not least because I have experienced many of the same things as other Muslim women. My insider position highlights the complexity of Arab Muslim Canadian women's lives. My reflexive, insider-outsider position as a Muslim woman living in the West guides and informs this research endeavour.

As a student, I consider myself an insider in Western academic discourse, whilst I am also an outsider in relation to the discourse surrounding Islam and Muslims, particularly Muslim women. While I am an insider in the Muslim community in Canada, I am also an outsider with regard to my professional interests and participation in a Western academy. I have lived in Canada since the spring of 1998 and, even though I can communicate fluently in English and therefore feel like an insider, I am also an outsider and a minority figure who is not immersed in mainstream Caucasian society. Moreover, my outsider status has been brought into relief through the ways in which Muslim women are often represented in Western academic discourses. Having read Western feminist and Orientalist literature has led me to question why Muslim women, particularly those from the Middle East, are mentioned "as merely objects rather than actors, as a victim of an honor crime, [as] a divorced woman, [as] the 'sexually threatened wife,' or [as] the 'self sacrificing mother'" (Shami, 1988, p. 117). These stereotyped images are prevalent in both Western popular opinion and Western popular culture. I was intrigued by these generalized images of oppressed Muslim women within Orientalist literature. For me, these images have "blurred the distinctions between the varieties of positions occupied by Middle Eastern Muslim women" (pp. 117-118).

Being raised in and exposed to different cultures can be enriching as the personal dislocation provides a more well-rounded view and many other advantages. When one is on the margins of mainstream society, one can better appreciate what has been previously taken for granted. I wholeheartedly agree with Moghissi (1999) that

Being away from “home” sometimes may be the only way one can look at “home” critically, dispassionately and with reason. Indeed, as Said (2000, p. 365) argues, “in a secular and contingent” world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. (p. 216)

My perspectives in this research as an insider are coloured by my exposure to gender discourse on Arab Muslim societies and by having been educated in its complexities. Indeed, my shifting and multifaceted position as an insider-outsider has informed my awareness of the divergent perspectives and dialogues that have taken place among Arab Muslim women as they seek to construct their identities within multiple dominant discourses.

I am aware of my privileged insider position, which cautions me “not to simplify any or all of the factors [affecting Arab Muslim women’s lives] into clichés, such as the Arab woman’s total oppression under Islam” (Abdo, 2002, p. 229). I am also aware of an insider’s limitations – an area which will be discussed later.

I argue that having “insider knowledge” of Arab culture and Islam has made me conscious of the larger socio-historical context in which these women are living. Being an insider has made me aware during interviews of how and when to ask questions, when to interrupt and clarify, and how to interpret the answers provided by my research participants. As an Arab Muslim woman, my lens has been “honed and shaped in the West [particularly in Canada] where I have been exposed to a largely Western model of feminism” (Abdo, 2002, p. 229). This exposure has opened doors for me in researching Arab Muslim feminist ideologies. In Saudi Arabia, feminist theories, books, and publications of Arab Muslim feminist scholars and researchers were not accessible to me. I am keenly aware of the fact that “inappropriate Western feminist paradigms are often applied to the Arab world, even by Arab women scholars themselves” (p. 229). This includes the Western colonial discourse which some Western feminists use to “devalue local cultures by presuming that there is only one path for emancipating women [which is by] adopting Western Models” (Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 14).

My subjectivities are multiple, fluid, and not easily disentangled and, thus, the position that I occupy as a researcher has likened my merited engagement in qualitative research to a reflexive odyssey. As hooks (1984) states, “We looked from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both” (p. 9).

As a scholar researching my own people, I cannot escape my experiences of “marginalization and dislocation...and I cannot escape the privilege” (Villenas, 2000, p.75). This certainly applies to me because I cannot ignore the marginalization of Arab Muslims in the Canadian context nor the privilege of being a member of the researched group. As an insider researcher, I need to bring to light my privileged position and associated responsibilities.

• *A deeper reflection on insider-outsider*

As a researcher I gaze backwards in three distinctive ways: first, analyzing from my position as a member of the group; second, analyzing in light of my position as an outsider; and, third, analyzing with due consideration for the impact of my study on the people being studied. In essence, I am as a researcher taking responsibility for my own account and putting myself in a position that enables me to see from all angles.

My interest in reflecting upon my insider-outsider position in part stems from the fact that I do not consider social-science research to be “value free.” Researchers do not approach a research topic in a vacuum but, rather, each researcher has a distinctive agenda in seeking answers to his or her research question(s). Any researcher who poses a question and seeks an answer has a partially insider position with regard to the research topic (Usher, 1996). A social scientist is not an observer running an experiment, but rather is implicated in the scene. By this I mean that the researcher in the social sciences is exploring a topic that is of interest to her or him and is thus an insider to it. In qualitative research, there is no detached, objective position from which to study human beings. The researcher is a self-interpreting being who is already in the world, as is the subject (Sandelowski, 1986).

Ribbens sees boundaries between outside voices and the inside, self-authentic voice, as more permeable and contingent. Thus, seeking to interview Arab Muslim women as authentic voices taking advantage of me being an Arab Muslim woman reflected my reflexivity as an insider-outsider researcher. “Some voices may literally be expressed by others around me, ‘out there’ in my current life, but some voices may also be voices from my past, which are, ‘out there’ but which I have incorporated and reshaped, and now echo in my mind, even below my conscious awareness” (Ribbens, 1998, p. 29).

Sometimes one is not conscious of one’s own thoughts as an insider. An outsider’s perspective is often needed to truly expose one’s own thoughts. Harding (1991) also supports the connection between the researcher’s insider-outsider positions. She says,

It is not enough to be only on the “outside” – to be immersed only in “women’s work” – because the relation between this work and “ruling work” is not visible from only one side of this division of human activity. Instead, it is when one works on both sides that there emerges the possibility of seeing

the relation between dominant activities and beliefs and those that arise on the “outside.” (p. 132)

Furthermore, as an insider researcher I attempt to investigate and revisit “questions like who is writing about whom, whose terms define the discourse, and even, who translates whose concepts and whose language bend to the other” (Abo-Lughod, 1989, p. 270).

Another matter of great significance is being an insider providing the context given the crucial role that context plays in the interpretation and explanation of the interview narrative. The meaning of what the participants say is always “contextually grounded – inherently and irremediably” (Mishler, 1979, p. 3). In order to understand the meaning of an individual’s response to the narrative that she or he is providing, the researcher must have an understanding of the context from which both the interview and the interviewee have come (Brown, Tappan, Gilligan, Miller & Argyris, 1989, p. 143), as well as the context in which the researcher has been immersed. In my opinion, such understandings cannot be fully obtained unless the researcher is an insider, specifically given the complex, intertwined nature of Islam and Arab Muslim cultural traditions.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, “I am creating a self, how I want to be known by them” (Riessman, 1993, p. 11). Before any interview, I would be excited but careful in terms of the way in which I presented myself. I intentionally avoided wearing black since it may appear to signify power. I wanted to present myself as being as much like my participants as possible. I wore my *hijab* in a way that most Arab Muslim women<sup>5</sup> do. Stone (1962) and Galliher (1983) observe that in our manner of dress we create a presentation of self. By wearing my *hijab* in the way that I did, I was asserting the fact that I was one of them.

• *My Doctoral research*

In my doctoral research, entitled *Quilted narratives of Arab Muslim women’s tapestry: Intersecting educational experiences and gender perceptions*, I explored Arab Muslim women’s gender perceptions and the factors that may have influenced their views of their roles as women. More specifically, I explored the gender perceptions of nine Arab Muslim women who had immigrated to Canada. My analysis focused on whether their perceptions had changed as a result of having experienced two different cultures – their own culture and Canadian culture. I invited Arab Muslim women to reflect on their education and their perceptions of gender at various periods prior to their arrival in Canada and after having attended Canadian institution of higher education.

The experiences of Arab Muslim women in Canada are clearly distinct from those of Arab Muslim women in other Western countries and in European countries in particular. Muslim women in Europe are excluded from employment and from public life if they choose to adhere to the *hijab*, which is

an important aspect of the identity of many Muslim women, including the women whom I interviewed in my study. The *hijab* is well known as a focus of controversy in France. Also in Holland and in other European nations, Muslim women are not included unless they are stripped of their identity (scarves, language, names and so forth). The experience of Canadian Muslim women is unique in that in Canada Arab Muslim women are active members of society. For example, a significant number are becoming faculty members and deans in science and engineering faculties in some universities, a trend that does not exist in other Western nations with high Muslim populations. In saying this, I am not trying to deny cases of institutional racism, especially in contexts where Muslim women are denied access to certain sports because of adherence to the *hijab*.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Canada's multicultural policies make it illegal to discriminate against Muslim women because of their faith. In short, Canadian Muslim women's experiences are unique and deserve particular attention.

I emphasize that I approached my doctoral research topic with great difficulty. Not only am I a researcher personally tangled in the topic, but I am also a member of the researched group. As an insider, I clearly have a strong, personal interest in this topic and its possible and probable outcomes. Conducting this research has heightened my awareness of the possible challenges and/or the negative implications of being an insider researcher. As an advocate of equity and social justice, my intention is not to uncritically glorify Arab Muslim societies, cultural traditions or the practices of Canadian immigrants, but rather to decisively pinpoint gender discourse in Arab Muslim culture and in the Canadian context.

As an insider, I have experienced the same gender biases that other Arab Muslim women have experienced. My observations of how gender ideologies are regulated in many Arab Muslim countries has caused me to reflect upon my own personal position. This insider position allows me to understand women's realities in the Muslim world. For instance, my research participants narrated how the honour of both men and women in Arab Muslim societies is hermeneutically inherent in the behaviour of women – this fact alone being proof of the necessity for engaging in reflexivity. By listening to and getting to know the women whom I interviewed, I have gained a new understanding of issues that I did not fully appreciate beforehand, despite identifying with the researched group. The participants' stories had a profound impact on my personal perspective. A few personal lessons were learned, not as a researcher, but as a woman listening to other women with whom I share a religion, a common language, and Arabic cultural traditions. The intersecting influences of political, social, economic, and patriarchal forces, as well as immigration issues, generated more conflicting realities for women than those offered by Islam. Almost all of the women interviewed were inclined to challenge and resist oppression and gender apartheid, and refused to live passively.

Throughout my doctoral research, it was my hope that the personal narratives of Arab Muslim women would provide an alternative perspective to dominant views in Western discourses on Muslim women. My insider knowledge of Western academic discourse has made me aware that

The prevailing images of Arab Muslim women in the occidental world seems to shift between dual paradigms, either between the images of salient beast of burden, or that of a capricious princess, the half naked... or the shapeless figure of woman behind the veil. (Mehdid, 1993, p. 21)

My exploration of Arab Muslim women's gender perceptions has three distinct components: first, I analyze from my position as a member of the group; second, I analyze in light of my position as an outsider; and, third, I analyze with consideration for the impact of my study on the people being studied. I add a fourth component here, which is the process of gazing at the readers through the text and engaging them in the questioning process. In other words, as a researcher, I take responsibility for my position and consider myself in various positions to engage multiple viewpoints. This frequently results in feelings of discomfort for me as a researcher; I will later explain how I employed a similar paradigm in my understanding of reflexivity.

I acknowledge that being an Arab Muslim woman living in a Western country and doing research on Arab Muslim women for a Western university may also create discomfort or tension for certain readers. This tension may exist in part due to "rampant Islamophobia, which makes many individuals and institutions within the Muslim community wary of the gaze of outside scrutiny" (Zine, 2003, p. 122). People of Muslim and Arabic origin are apprehensive of how the West views them and research performed by them.

Many Arab Muslims believe that Western media have exploited Islam, Arabs, and Muslims – and Muslim women in particular. Edward Said in *Covering Islam* (1993) and *Orientalism* (1978) critiques the ways in which Islam, Muslims, Arabs and the "Orient" are portrayed with negative exaggeration which in turn leads many Muslims to question Western views of Islam and of its adherents. People of Muslim and Arab nations are suspicious of all representational practices in Western societies, including research performed by Muslims situated in the West. In both cultures, according to Ruba<sup>7/8</sup> who is introduced below, there "are stories that we don't hear about: The women who have been successful, the women who have been great mothers, and the women who have been great doctors. But we hear about the women who are oppressed or abused." However, in all of this, she emphasized that "The spotlight is only on Muslim Middle Eastern women, but, when it happens in North American society, we feel blessed that we are women living in the West. No... I think women here are facing the same abuse and Islam should not be exploited as a source of Muslim women's struggles."

The nine Arab Muslim women whom I interviewed told me their stories in ways that may have taken a different form had they been interviewed by a Western Caucasian researcher. I am not merely representing their experiences; I am also mirroring the social and cultural contexts of the gender discourses in question. I wonder if I was able to understand the implicit and explicit meanings of the participants' words due to my insider status, and our shared culture and language? Did my insider knowledge inform me of when to stop the interview and when to not intervene in what are considered culturally private matters? Being an Arab Muslim woman, I wondered if I understood the women's "pauses, inflections, emphases, unfinished sentences, and short periods [of silence]" (Riessman, 1993, p. 12). Silence, for instance, provided me with the occasion to speak and intervene, thereby eliciting more stories. Riessman (1993) explains "Something said in a whisper, after a long pause, has a different importance than the same words said loudly, without a pause" (p. 20).

The challenge of discussing these Arab Muslim women's narratives was overwhelming. Not only was it challenging to convey the richness of these stories, but being an insider to the women's experiences added to the complexity of my research. Nevertheless, it would have been very challenging to understand some of the most salient issues embedded in the participants' narratives had I not been familiar with the context (Brown, et al, 1989).

As an insider researcher, theorist, Arab Muslim woman, and narrator, I felt a tremendous amount of pressure when one of the participants emphasized how happy she was to participate in the research.<sup>9</sup> Initially, I was grateful for her appreciation, yet I was also unsure of whether she held expectations of how she would be presented in the research. The women who participated in the research generously gave me their time and I did not wish to disappoint them. Amia Lieblich (1996) has confronted similar issues as an insider researcher, such as the question of forming a bond with the research participants.

Another limiting aspect is that it became apparent that some of the women were striving to form a mutually respectful and empathetic friendship with me. I was excited by their offer of friendship and felt that they did not view our relationship through a dichotomous researcher-participant lens. Some of the women requested that I call them regularly or come back for a friendly visit. I understood that they felt the need to talk with me about personal matters and life struggles. Unfortunately, I was not able to form that kind of relationship with them for professional reasons. As a graduate student with family responsibilities juggling personal and professional commitments, it was unrealistic.

I expected that some of the participants would respond conservatively to some of my questions. It is possible that a few participants gave responses that they believed were either consciously or unconsciously reflections of the acceptable viewpoint in Arabic culture, rather than being reflections of their own personal

views. It is also possible that they provided me with answers that they assumed I wanted to hear. Jack Douglas (1976) asserts that people have devised immensely complex ways to avoid saying exactly what they see or grasp.

Being an insider may influence how an interviewee chooses to conform to societal and cultural norms in her answers to certain questions. This may be due to individual conservatism that dictates the answers that are acceptable according to societal standards. For instance, it could be that the negative connotation behind women mingling with non-relative men in Arab Muslim culture induced many of the participants in my study to deny any contact with male colleagues in their schools or workplaces. Peter Berger (1963) observes that there is a human tendency to conform to society in order to be accepted by particular groups: "What lies at the bottom of this apparently inevitable pressure towards consensus is probably a profound human desire to be accepted, presumably by whatever group is around to do the accepting" (p. 72).

Another issue I faced as an insider researcher was the idea that many Arab Muslims perceive Western education as being more than what one learns – they see it as a way of thinking. I was concerned about being seen as a representative of a dominant Western discourse that perceives Muslim women as the "other." Western academic institutions, of which I am a part, have historically taken this stance.<sup>9</sup> A few of these women expressed a concern by asking what I planned to do with the responses to the questions and why I chose those particular questions. Some of the participants wondered what I was trying to prove. I understood their apprehension, taking into account how my position as a reflexive researcher led me to expose and interrupt the representations of the "other" – something of which I am a part.

As previously mentioned, I had to confront the difficult issue of power as a researcher exploring other people's lives – in general, and as an insider. I chose to be reflexive in an attempt to investigate the power embedded in my research and to strive to eliminate it. Being part of the community or having racial commonalities with the subjects of one's research does not automatically make the research egalitarian (Pillow, 2003, p. 182). It is impossible to eliminate power disparities between the researcher and the researched. Yet, it was essential that I address the balance of priorities: the accountability of defining my research objectives, situating my assumptions and the decision of how to deal with potentially controversial issues pertinent to the research. For instance, while exploring gender discourses in two contexts through Arab Muslim women's eyes, I retained the power to frame all secondary data available on the topic according to my own views.

I understood that reflexivity would help me to investigate the power associated with researching my own people. I believed that reflexivity would help me to acknowledge my biases and to become "vigilantly subjective" (DeLuca, 1999). I alleged that being "self-reflexive" in conducting my research would



help me to be mindful of my subjectivity. In qualitative research literature, one of the most noticeable benefits in the “use of reflexivity is increased attention to researcher subjectivity in the research process” (Pillow, 2003, p. 176). Influenced by this notion, I followed certain protocols such as giving the participants the option to read their manuscripts. I believed that I was sharing my power as the researcher with the participants. Giving the participants the choice to read and/or change their narratives reflected my awareness of the risks in imposing meaning on the participants’ views of their gender roles and expectations. I realize that this is an ethical research protocol. I also believe that recognizing power dynamics, and balancing them, is integral to the conduct of ethical research.

My reflexive insider-outsider continuum and my multiple subjectivities grant me a critical view of the research process. This rationale constitutes one aspect of my understanding of reflexivity. For instance, before asking the Arab Muslim women questions, I would pause to think about how they would perceive these questions and the purpose of my research. Before meeting the research participants, I asked myself: Will they have a sense of comfort, or discomfort, because I speak the same language and have the same cultural heritage? Is the fact that I need their participation in order to conduct my research balancing the power between us? Are they aware of the power differences between the researcher and the researched? Would the power imbalance be greater or lesser if I were an outsider who did not speak the language and did not know about the culture? How do they feel about the fact that I am conducting this research for a Western audience? Would I be receptive if my participants refused to narrate their experiences? Am I perpetuating stereotypes about Arab Muslim societies by focusing on gender perceptions of the participants rather than by focusing on their race and class? Is my research only exploratory, as opposed to transformative?

I considered these questions repeatedly throughout the entire research process, to the extent that I was never at ease while conducting, writing, or presenting the research.

In my thesis, I chose to focus on the narratives of a participant named Ruba because hers are reflective of my reflexivity. Ruba’s inconsistencies and contradictory viewpoints, and my analysis of them, exemplify the reflexivity of discomfort. When I asked Ruba about gender discourses in Arab Muslim societies, she provided the following assessment:

Why is it an abuse when a woman has a cover on her head... it becomes an apparent physical abuse, and we’ll put the spotlight on it because she’s a Muslim woman, while we turn a blind sight on whatever happens in our American and Canadian, and North American society, we feel blessed that we are women living in the West.... I think women are facing, when it comes to abuse, they’re facing the same abuse. Actually, I think it’s even more in the West... When I grew up in Arab Muslim society, I never heard of anybody

beating their wives, or beating their daughters. But over here I hear it all the time. I never heard of rape there, but over here on campus there's always things and incidents of rape. So to me, when I am in the West I see it more. I'm sure it exists over there, but my own personal experience, I have not seen it over there. ... Funny, because here men and women would be working for the same jobs but they do not get paid the same.

While listening to Ruba's analysis of women's abuse in Eastern and Western societies, I found myself disagreeing with her point of view. I wondered whether the way in which I stated my question caused Ruba to answer the way that she did. How had she received my question? How did she view me? Was she questioning my position as an Arab Muslim woman like herself? Or was she questioning my intentions in conducting this research? Was she questioning my faith and my cultural authenticity? Indeed, Ruba was one of the participants who openly questioned my intentions in conducting research on the gender perceptions of Arab Muslim Canadian women. She said:

I don't know, what do people mean by "a woman's role in society" or gender discourses? I believe that people who do their research on gender issues only want to be looked at as sophisticated people; they want to have a good-looking, fashionable resumé, to show that they care about popular issues these days.

In the same breath, when I asked her about equality between men and women, she laughingly narrated her memories of an engineering professor:

he made a comment in the class while he was talking about his education in England at Oxford University. He proudly said "back in the good old days before females were allowed into engineering." And I thought that remark was kind of weird... we were only two girls, me and another one. He said it in a very subtle way... I was so surprised that he made that kind of remark or comment.... This is a professor who is white, middle class with jeans and long hair..., so he's supposed to be the hip and cool guy, but still his mentality was a little bit different.... Another incident was in the engineering lab while I was assisting a male instructor... he was uncomfortable answering my [casual] question.... I realized that he was avoiding eye to eye contact... later he told me that he thinks that women hinder the progress of things... he thinks they're a distraction.... These two incidents did not bother me. It surprised me, and actually I expected it... There are a lot of free sentiments about equality out there, but I don't think a lot of people believe [in] it... But there was always a push to get more females into engineering... which I found very strange.<sup>10</sup>

Ruba thought that persuading girls to enter engineering was "strange" because it should be left for the girls' choices. She narrated:

It was an event at the engineering school, an all-day professional day for girls, where girls visit from high school and inquire about engineering and women's position in engineering.... I remember that I participated and just to be honest and truthful, not for the cause of women because I'm not like that. I'm not trying to raise awareness of women's issues or anything like

that. I'm absolutely actually not interested in that, but to me it was an extra curricular and I needed it as a credit.

She persisted, "It's very sad when we get into this competition of trying to actually do everything because men do it.... If you want to explore something try it, but don't do it just for the sake that men are doing it." During this conversation with Ruba, I became curious to know why Ruba found that encouraging women to enter engineering is "strange." At the time, she was among a small gender minority in the Faculty of Engineering as only two to three girls were enrolled in this Faculty of Engineering of one of Canada's most prominent universities in the late 1980s.

Ruba's statements about the strangeness of encouraging women to pursue engineering were thought-provoking. She did not acknowledge the urgency of supporting women's goals and her comments suggest that she is opposed to feminism. She does not perceive that there are "women's issues" and she rejected the binaries of male-female and sex-gender. She suggests that this way of thinking could lead to competition between the sexes, which she perceives as unhealthy and unnecessary. This view reflects the notion that women and men are essentially different and suited for different activities and professions (Bjorklund & Olsson, 2005, para. 2). According to Hessini (1994), some Muslim women in Middle Eastern societies view that equality between the sexes destabilizes and dehumanizes women and undermines collaborative relations between men and women. This perspective was clearly demonstrated by Ruba's comments.

I chose to discuss this part of the research in my research report and openly shared it with my colleagues. Ruba's narrative stayed with me for a long time and led me to ask myself the question: Had I been influenced by a Western focus on, and interest in, Arab Muslim societies' gender discourses? A question I am left with is: Does my background as an Arab Muslim woman heighten my awareness of gender discourses that emphasize unjust practices toward women in Canadian and Middle Eastern societies?

Throughout the interview, Ruba argued that "Women are the weaker sex and men are stronger because of their body figure... that's why men are protectors of women." As an opponent of complete equality between the sexes, Ruba argued that the sexes complement one another. Her comment does not only reflect her opposition to feminism but is also indicative of her contradictory opinions if one accepts the premise that, as an engineering student, she is in a field that is primarily occupied by men. She mentioned another point that provoked my discomfort:

School was very competitive because students' names were announced on the radio with their grades sometimes.... it was more so for the girls than the boys.... I think the expectation of the boys is that the boys can handle themselves, but we want our girls to be better.

Ruba's comment implies that Muslim girls' identities are constructed around schooling and that it is more important for girls to prove themselves. Yet, is Ruba implying that girls are out of control and need to protect themselves through education? I wonder why Ruba thought that girls are expected to improve in school. Are girls expected to excel in school to overcompensate for not being born male? In Ruba's statement "the boys can handle themselves," there seemed to be an insensitive tone. This is one of many implicit cues prevalent in contemporary gender discourses in Arab Muslim societies as girls' academic achievement has recently become the focal point of theorists' and educators' attention in Middle Eastern school boards. I posit that because boys are given opportunities to lead outside the school setting, girls are more motivated to focus their attention on, and excel in, school due to the perception that education is a way to attain status and respect in society. For instance, there exists a "glass ceiling" that prevents women from becoming political leaders in most Arab Muslim societies. The proportion of women compared to men who obtain post-graduate degrees in Arab Muslim societies suggests that women are hoping that education can act as a "springboard" (Hertz-Lazarowitz & Shapira, 2005) to status and leadership. Yet, are their societies able to negotiate cultural traditions, which exclusively assign leadership positions to males?

While Ruba did not acknowledge that some aspects of Arab Muslim customs still dominate and constrain women's achievements, she did challenge her parents' idea of a traditional marriage. She explained that one cannot truly know whether one likes a person by meeting them only once: "There's no dating *per se*, so people get introduced in the family environment, in a house environment... there's more to you than just sitting with that person whom you've never met in your life, and then deciding if you like him or not." This does in fact limit women's choices in Arab culture. Although Ruba believes that women do not have much power in choosing their partners, some of her narratives contradict this belief.

Throughout the research, I constantly questioned Ruba's narratives. I asked myself why some Arab Muslims and Westerners do not perceive that there are women's issues, and why they overlook the importance of supporting women's causes. Was Ruba denying something? Was she overlooking her femaleness? Or was she discounting the fact that she is an engineer now as a result of other women's struggles? Perhaps she is unaware of the early first wave of feminism in the West and East – as, for example, in Egypt. Today, Middle Eastern women in Arab Muslim countries are pushing the boundaries to become politically active within their societies. It is possible that Ruba and other women who disclaim the existence of women's issues are attempting to relieve themselves of their responsibility towards other women.

Referring to equality between the sexes in terms of gender roles, Ruba asserted: "To start with, women and men are different: I don't think we're physically compatible... Men are physically different... Emotionally, we are different... Men

can do things better than women and women can do other things better than men.” However, drawing on her personal experiences, she emphasized that interactions with intelligent men in the family and in the work place were unlike her encounters with women who, according to Ruba, tended to be emotional and manipulative. She also concluded, “Men have proven to be wiser because they tend to be calm and unemotional when trying to reason.”

A female’s physical ability appears to be a key point in Ruba’s gender perception and in her assertion of women’s weakness. She overemphasized that “Women being a weaker sex... she is in a form and a shape biologically that is different than men, so that’s why it is not recommended that she travel or live alone... This is what I believe in.” This made me wonder why Ruba chose to be an engineer. She rationalized her comments by taking the conversation in another direction:

what I’m talking about is not just the man as a financial provider, but, being a man, it is his responsibility to take care of the household, the security of that household [and] the safety of people. And for me... at the end of the day is that the man’s to be questioned.... for that safety, welfare, and well-being of the family. ... Like in any kind of an institution or an organization, there have to be people who share the burden of responsibility. There are people who we question at the end of the day. When we have that structure in an organization, we do not question it. We do not question why we have a supervisor... somebody who... all of the blame goes on to him.... Men’s superiority in the family is for women’s protection.

Ruba’s analyses kept her from discussing her perceptions as a female engineer of the implications of male-female biological distinctions and the alleged superiority of men. Ruba emphatically drew an analogy between the man as the head of the household or the supervisor of a company. The conviction with which she stated her beliefs implied an unwillingness to question these affirmed perceptions. The biological difference between the sexes seems to be an easier justification of women’s inferiority. Woman as the “weaker sex” is an ideology rooted culturally and historically in this kind of gender analysis.

Ruba continued to contradict herself when she claimed that in both Canada and the Arab Muslim world, women are able to do what they want. She argued:

To me there is no issue for women... I did not face anything.... so I’m not gonna go support something I’m not part of. I was never treated unjustly. I don’t know anything about woman’s abuse... Also, I always think it’s a matter of personal choice. If you wanna be an engineer, be an engineer.... I think what we need to do is make... students aware of the options they have in terms of careers and education, and what that entails... and what they have to do to get through.... I never prescribe myself to the idea: we need to have more women in a certain field. I think we need to have better people in certain fields to serve the field.... I do not accept that we need to get more males into nursing school – I don’t see the connection between the gender and the career, or the education.... As a Muslim woman, I know

what my rights are. I'm a free woman. I have all my rights and nobody has taken that away from me and nobody can question that. It's not something I fight for at all.

While interviewing Ruba, I was challenged not only as a researcher but also as an insider Arab Muslim woman. As I noted earlier, I continuously reflected on my questions to Ruba and my interpretations of her narratives. However, I argue that, even though Ruba's interview prompted uncomfortable reflexivity, whenever I am asked about challenging experiences that I have had as a researcher I mention her narratives as the most interesting components of my research. My inclusion and analysis of Ruba's contradictions illustrate the reflexivity of discomfort. This differs from reflexivity that is merely a "telling tale or narcissistic text" (Pillow, 2003, p. 176).

Ruba's tone and how it caught my attention is another aspect of the reflexivity of discomfort. Ruba overemphasized her refusal to acknowledge or define any issue of gender discourses or any women's issues in Arab Muslim societies, thereby denying many women's lived realities. She clearly felt uncomfortable and exhibited a lack of confidence in me and in my research endeavour, thus questioning my insider status. Ruba consistently questioned the aim of research that involved gender or culture in Arab Muslim societies. As El-Solh (1988) states, "I became aware that there are many more dimensions – advantageous as well as restrictive – to my researcher role in my own Arab Muslim community than I had at first been conscious of" (p. 93).

Another aspect of uncomfortable reflexivity is related to the idea of critiquing one's own biased cultural traditions and customs, which can clearly cause tension. Critiquing one's own culture can be seen as inviting others to question one's loyalty. I used to feel compelled to defend my Arab Muslim cultural traditions. Now I am cognizant of the ways in which other Arab Muslims may perceive my critique, particularly given the fact that I am working from a Western location at a time when relations between the West and the Arab Muslim world are at their worst. Nonetheless, both my Islamic values and my Western education have made me "unapologetic in criticizing and condemning any patriarchal, antidemocratic aspects of any culture, especially the ones we know firsthand" (Tohidi, 1998, p. 289). I assert that remaining silent around institutional and/or systematic oppressive structures will only serve to sustain gender discourses and unequal access to educational opportunities in both the East and West.

My reflexivity of discomfort is related to my concern that I might unintentionally participate in generating stereotypical images of Arab Muslim societies, cultural traditions and/or religious practices in the Arab Muslim community in Canada. I had to find a balance in approaching my research inquiries, goals, objectives and outcomes.

I have felt that, in doing research based on my own culture, I have scrutinized women's lived experiences. This was a weighty realization and an uncomfortable experience. In many ways, criticizing gender discourses in my culture was like walking in an unfamiliar land. For instance, even as insider researcher, I was not aware of all of the issues that would emerge from my participants' narratives. I observed that certain aspects of these Arab Muslim women's gender perceptions may reproduce or reinforce biases, racism, and stereotypes about Islam, Muslims, and Arab culture. Another aspect of unfamiliarity pertains to how readers would perceive my research and the participants' perceptions of gender discourses.<sup>7</sup> I am fully aware that some of the discussions in my research may cast negative light on traditional Arabic views, customs, and treatment of women, thereby contributing to perpetuate stereotypical images of oppressed women. Yet, I make it clear that it is not my intention to cover the culture with a blanket of either condemnation or approval. I believe that every culture has imperfections and virtues and that it is the privilege of its people to critique their own culture. This pertains to the Arab Muslim female participants and to myself as the researcher. As both insiders and outsiders, we may have the privilege of seeing the advantages and shortcomings of the cultures with which we identify. This opens up new possibilities for constructing a better world for ourselves and for others.

Being self-reflexive throughout the research process pushed me toward the unfamiliar and brought me to a new level of self-discovery. This new level revealed an aspect of my identity that previously lay beneath the surface. Self-reflexivity seeks to "reveal the self, what is hidden inside, just as it tries to see the other.... The written word for me became an act of rebellion against injustice exercised in the name of religion, or morals, or love" (El Saadawi, 1999, pp. 292-293).

Reflexivity is especially an act of rebellion for me because I was brought up to believe that a "well behaved" woman should neither disturb nor critique her cultural traditions. Through the research process, I have come to understand that reflexivity means placing a critical lens, shaped by insider-outsider perceptions, on my own culture. As Chaudhry (2000) asserts, "Reflexivity is my bid to contextualize the research project within those aspects of myself that are for the most part denied voice in mainstream academic discourse" (p. 109).

As I look back on my research, I explore what it means to be self-reflexive. Was I representing the narratives of my research participants or was I representing my narrative of their narratives? Being vigilant about the limits of representing others has helped me to continue questioning the limits of my insider knowledge. I could not embody all the women whom I represented nor could I claim that my being self-reflexive allows me to speak in their voices and see through their eyes. My reflexivity is critical in that it exposes the difficult and often "uncomfortable task of leaving what is unfamiliar, unfamiliar" (Pillow, 2003, p. 177).

I have come to realize that being reflexive means acknowledging both the complexity and the limits of my research. In reference to lessons learned during the research process, I argue that understandings of others' perspectives cannot be fully obtained even when the researcher is an insider.<sup>8</sup> In this respect, I have much to learn about my native culture and its people. For example, some Arab Muslim women's satisfaction with the status quo with respect to gender apartheid in the Arab Muslim cultural tradition is worth exploring. Atkinson (1998) states that "telling and listening to life stories is a powerful experience" (p.3). I acknowledge that it is a privilege to conduct research within my own cultural group, but I must also acknowledge that potential limitations may emerge from such a position.

Occupying a fluid insider-outsider position during these research processes enabled me to tap into these women's lives, worlds, and perspectives. Now, in retrospect, I can also understand that I was hearing women's stories through several layers of identification, not the least of which were my own complicated feelings. (Luttrell, 2000, p. 514)

## CONCLUSION

Performing insider-outsider research and, by implication, being a member in the researched group makes it indispensable to be reflexive in relation to one's values and beliefs even though this may push the researcher into a zone of discomfort. In this paper I have considered how reflexivity of discomfort is indispensable for transcending distortions when conducting insider-outsider research.

When I conducted my Master's research, reflexivity was a major, albeit unintended, part of the research process. After I had completed my writing I realized that the process of research (i.e., collecting the data, analyzing the information and so forth) had profoundly impacted my personal perspective. It challenged me to realize that the stereotypical images of Arab Muslims are not entirely groundless. In other words, some of the stereotypes perpetuated in Western discourses reflect some aspects of how Islam is actually interpreted and hence practiced in the Muslim world. However, I also acknowledge that these stereotypes involve exaggerations of women's realities.

Over the course of my doctoral research, I became aware of the reflexive insider-outsider position that I occupied, which led me to reflect on the insider-outsider continuum. Reflexivity and my insider-outsider position added a layer of complexity to my research. I believe that being self-reflexive is an

exercise in sustaining multiple and sometimes opposing emotions, keeping alive contradictory ways of theorizing the world, and seeking compatibility, not necessarily consensus. Being reflexive means expanding rather than narrowing the psychic, social, cultural, political fields of analysis (Luttrell, 2000, p. 516).



When I revisit my earlier question – “Am I representing the narrative of my research participants or was I representing my narrative of their narratives?” – I am led to the conclusion that my reflexive research endeavour is unique in that it provides the research participants’ narratives as well as mine. This makes reflexive research a source of privileged knowledge. I argue that my background and history have heightened my awareness of the gender discourses that are intertwined with long established unjust cultural practices towards women in Canada and in Arab Middle Eastern societies.

This research odyssey has led me to continue my search for answers around reflexivity, its meanings and how it is practiced. I am aware that the work I do at every stage of my life is not static. This includes my definitions, understandings, explorations, and the ways in which I practice reflexivity. This is due to the fact that I will continue to grow as a person and as an academic. Changing or modifying my views around reflexivity is a part of this growth.

I believe, in the words of Abu-Lughod (1990), “that moving back and forth between the many worlds I inhabit is a movement within one complex and historically and politically determined world” (p. 27, as cited in Chaudhry, 1997, p. 451). Reflexivity also allowed me to look back into Arab Muslim culture and Canadian culture with a lens shaped by my reflexive insider-outsider experience.

Reflexivity has helped me to carefully scrutinize my biases and question my insider-outsider prejudices. Reflexivity has pushed me, the participants, and possibly my readers toward the unfamiliar, something that I call reflexivity of discomfort.

In brief, reflexivity is not only a way of thinking critically about the whole research process, the quality and richness of the data, the analysis and the limits, but also about the realization that there is “no easy story to tell, nor for the reader to hear, but a whirling of voices, figures, and histories” (Chaudhry, 2000, p.108). Reflexivity means deconstructing what could be taken for granted. In this way, reflexivity enriches educational research and reveals our thoughts and limits, first as human beings and second as researchers.

## NOTES

1. By “critical,” I refer to Usher’s (1996) definition of being able to detect and unmask researchers’ “beliefs and practices” (p. 22).
2. In many Western writings, including some scholarly writings, Muslim women have typically been constructed as one of the most oppressed groups of women in the world (Cayer, 1996, p. 2). Also, the image of Islam as the fount of unmitigated oppression of women, as the foundation of a gender system that categorically denies women equal rights and subjugates them to men, recurs in the movies, magazines, and books of our popular culture as well as in much academic discourse: “the complexities, not only of the situation of women in the Arab world, but also of the historical and political forces that have shaped our own views of the issues” (Khalidi & Tucker, 1996, p. 9).

3. I believe that the *Quran* has historically been interpreted by conservative male Muslim scholars who advocated conservative male chauvinist interpretations. More recent analyses incorporate a women's perspective, such as Amina Wadud's (1999) reading of the *Quranic* texts.
4. Particularly because of the complexity of the Arab Muslim religion and cultural traditions intertwined in these contexts.
5. There are different ways to wear the scarf; some ways are more common than others and some ways are especially known to be worn by women from Gulf nations.
6. "Nepean, near Ottawa, team quits soccer event after girl told to take off hijab."
7. Ruba is an engineer who earned her M.Sc. as a computer analyst. She arrived in Canada in 1994. Ruba chose not to disclose her age.
8. A pseudonym for one of the women I interviewed for my research.
9. When the participants would thank me for my efforts, I wondered what they were expecting of me. Some of them expressed appreciation toward me regarding my research, irrespective of whether they saw any outcome to it.
10. This took place where she completed her Bachelor of Engineering.

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