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We Compromise on a Daily Basis

The Choices and Processes of Cross-Cultural Mothering

Mothering in a new country places immigrant women on a journey of complex negotiations over new cultural meanings where they redefine their philosophies, methods and strategies of rearing children as they draw selectively from their cultural backgrounds and from their experiences in their places of settlement. This constant assessment of options, ongoing choice, negotiation, and self-reflective practice, is the necessary intellectual core of what I term cross-cultural mothering and parenting, an activity and practice that for the most part has gone unnoticed in Canada's immigration, settlement and integration discourse. In this paper, I use a feminist lens to investigate the personal and gender dimensions of migration and integration to advocate for a more inclusive approach towards integration.

When I asked Ada, a migrant woman born in Bosnia, what it was like to be a mother in Canada married to a Canadian-born man, she responded with the assertion: "we compromise on a daily basis," as she explained how she and her husband adjust to each other's expectations in raising their children.

> *We both adjusted to each other's expectations. He is okay with me having a baby in the room. Both of our children were in the same room for the first two years of their lives in their crib; or a big part of the time they were in the bed too. So … I think that is what he adjusted to and I adjusted to a time out (laughs).*

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cultural backgrounds and from their experiences in their places of settlement. This constant assessment of options, ongoing choice, negotiation, and self-reflective practice, although at first sight hidden, invisible and not socially recognized is the necessary intellectual core of what I term cross-cultural mothering and parenting: an everyday activity and practice that reveals the complex forms of agency migrant[1] women deploy to adjust to new contexts and environments. It is an activity that is in itself a process of integration, a process of making home, and determining new belongings in a new place of settlement; and it is an activity that for the most part has gone unnoticed in Canada's immigration and settlement discourse.

In Canada's immigration discourse, the notion of integration often adopted to study immigrants and their settlement process takes for granted what constitutes desirable integration of immigrants while specific social processes that immigrants go through in their settlement process are overlooked. The work women do as mothers, their changing values, intentions and practices relating to rearing and socializing children, has largely gone unnoticed by policy makers and academics when gauging the success and failure of new-comers' integration and in determining the efficacy of immigration policy and settlement programs. The assessment of immigrant integration is in fact often based on, what Maria Kontos refers to as, a top down perspective as the term integration often implies a desirable outcome as newcomers become active members of a receiving society, which is thought of being an already integrated society. And it is based on, both, a narrow understanding and a rigid expectation that treats integration in terms of the degree to which newcomers converge to the average performance of the native-born Canadian and their normative and behavioural standards, economically, socially and politically (Li).

In exploring the cross-cultural mothering choices and processes of immigrant women I follow a bottom up perspective, the perspective of migrant mothers as actors and active agents of change in their process of integration; a feminist perspective that reflects the importance of incorporating a gender analysis in academic immigration discourse and in Canadian immigration policy and programs can help us to better understand how migration is enacted by families and individuals. Such a perspective, which is also useful in understanding how gender intersects with age, ethnicity, class and geography, allows for a more complex examination of concepts such as integration, culture, home and belonging, while potentially opening up a route to less essentialist discussion of migrant identification (Mohanty; Hall).

I draw from a study I conducted in Halifax with twelve immigrant mothers (see Yax-Fraser) from eleven different countries including Bosnia, China, Colombia, Germany, Egypt, Jordan, Mexico, Malaysia, Paraguay, Spain,

South Africa, United Arab Emirates and Trinidad. Six of them were married to partners from the same country and six of them married to Canadian born men from European descent. Borrowing from Avtar Brah's and Gloria Anzaldua's notion of diaspora space, and borderland respectively, I suggest that these mothers in their particular circumstances, inhabiting borderland spaces and living and operating in a diaspora space exercise their agency in asserting what constitutes desirable integration and notions of home and belonging, in asserting and reconstructing their identity, in negotiating their mothering and parenting practices and in negotiating and transmitting important cultural values to their children. I conclude that the work they do raising children, largely perceived as a private act in the immigration discourse, is work that mediates the private and public spheres. As such, cross-cultural mothering is an activity that has implications not only for the identity development and integration of the children into the society in which women settled, but also, as feminist writers have pointed out, for society's social and cultural diversity as well as its economy and political life (Yuval-Davis).

Integration, Home and Belonging

A couple of years ago, I moved to Toronto to pursue graduate studies. Dear friends of mine, and their children, had made a family decision to offer me a place to stay and take me as a family member to make me feel at home. They did, and I was grateful for their hospitality and kindness, and conscious of the ripples my presence would cause in their everyday routines and their social and family life. They, on the other hand, I believe, had the expectation that I would adapt to their routines and family life without causing any disruptions; and this became apparent in different occasions. Once, for example, my friend found me folding everyone's laundry. He informed me that this was his responsibility, advised me not to make changes to their family's structures, and suggested that it was my responsibility to adapt to them. I assured him that I would do my best, but while I was responding, my focus was on how this personal experience reflected Canada's integration discourse, where the onus is on the one crossing borders, on the newcomer, to learn about and adjust to a new culture, to deal consciously or unconsciously with culture shock and to work through the process of re-establishing one's own identity, sense of place and belonging in the new society. In spite of the policy discourse "as a two-way process that encourages adjustments on the part of both the newcomers and the receiving society" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 28), as Peter S. Li suggests, the concept of integration "clearly upholds the normative expectation of uniformity and conformity as the desirable outcome of immigrant integration" (2) blurring the fine line between integration and a politics of assimilation.

When I asked about their experiences of integration, participants in this ethnography spoke about the process of making home and the emergence of new belonging and identifications. Although, in Canada's immigration discourse, immigrant integration is discussed in terms of economic outcomes, while social integration often implies, and is gouged by how well, immigrants adopt the English or French language, move away from ethnically concentrated immigrant enclaves, and participate in social and political activities of mainstream society (Li), most women, did not see integration as an isolating activity or as the sole responsibility of them as newcomers. They understood integration as a task for all society members both migrants or non-migrants alike. Having come from collectivists cultures most women uphold the notion of integration as a two way process of building community, since building community with other immigrant and non-immigrants was for them a very important step in acquiring a sense of belonging, in renegotiating a sense of self and making home.

Successful integration for these mothers was assessed based on whether women felt at home in their places of residence and daily activity. It was assessed based on whether they felt a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic community, a community of friends, and part of the community at large. It was based on women's ability to participate in Canada's political and economic life; and their legal status certainly played a significant role in the dynamics of belonging. It was based on how welcoming of diversity women perceive the Halifax community to be, and this in itself was measured by how well women's multiple positionalities, identifications and multiple belongings were acknowledge and accepted.

Chandra T. Mohanty suggests that settled notions of home, identity, belonging, culture, and citizenship do not work to describe the experiences of immigrants, migrants, nomads, and transnationals. Identity is a complex phenomenon for subjects who live in multiple worlds. Stuart Hall argues that identity far from being fixed is fluid and in constant transformation and conceptualizes it as a strategic positional choice (220). Consequently he encourages to speak of identification to acknowledge that identities are never singular but multiple and in constant transformation. Avtar Brah also makes an important distinction between "feeling at home" and declaring a place as home (197), useful in understanding what home means for the participants in this study. Brah reminds us that it is more useful to view home as an experience that can cross arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously territorial, social, cultural and psychic boundaries when describing process of diasporic identity formation. For most women in this study, "home" could not be mapped to one geographical location, but as Brah suggests of diasporic subjects, many women located themselves at a crossroads of multiple

belongings. For Pimenta who grew up moving from country to country as her parents were diplomats, her sense of belonging and identifications transcended state borders, overseas obligations, attachments, loyalties and even citizenship.

Having migrated to Canada because of its multicultural ideology and policy, these mothers identified its diversity as important to their sense of belonging. Fadwah, for instance, felt a strong sense of belonging to Canada because as a "country largely made up by immigrants," she felt right to belong and the freedom to identified herself as an immigrant, as a Muslim, as a South African, as a Halegonian, and as a human right's activist. Like Fadwah, most women felt very much a part of this society although they acknowledged that often times they were made to feel "outsiders" or "aliens" and expected to assimilate. They felt that the onus of integration was place on them as individuals to adapt to the society rather than being a process of adaptation by the whole society. Fadwah puts succintly,

> Right now there is an unwritten thing that says "Be Like me, be like the mainstream and you will be fine; but don't bring your culture into the street. Don't live it everyday. Everyday be like me," you know? So, I like maybe, if there were changes in that to be more accepting of people's culture in the sense that bring it in the street: "Be your culture, because that is who you are." And don't use the cultures as for entertainment.

Not everyone shares Fadwah's sentiments. Alicia, for instance, felt that since "we immigrated here…. I think we should, you know, work at home with our children and try to integrate them to the Canadian society as much as possible, keeping at home our cultural values and share them with other people, with other families."

Negotiating Mothering and Parenting Practices

Participants in this ethnography recognised their integration and settlement experiences as a journey of new beginnings that involved a re-evaluation of their knowledge as they immersed themselves in new discoveries and as a journey that involved joy and wonder, as well as sacrifices, sadness, loneliness, sorrow and at times insecurity. For most women, the processes of learning about and understanding a new culture and establishing their own identity ran parallel to learning about parenting and raising children in Canada. For others, giving birth to children in Canada was a new face of integration. They judged that for them to be a mother in Canada was different than being a mother in their country of origin. Cross-cultural mothering granted new intellectual dimensions

because of the additional invisible intellectual labour involved in negotiating cultures, in creating new parenting frameworks, and in transmitting important values to their children. Heba explained:

> *Everybody feels the same way I feel, that it is very difficult to move from country to country. Culture shock. A new country, a new city, new culture. Everything is new. So, it is very difficult for me the first time, but not too much difficult because I wanted to move to another country. But the feeling inside myself is very difficult. The first thing when I live far away from my family, my mother, I need more power to raise a big family because my husband is not with me. Sometimes come and sometimes go. And, do I need the strength to be a super woman!*

Negotiating mothering practices and parenting philosophies is possible because culture as well as cultural identities are not static. In addressing the process and choices of cross-cultural mothering, two definitions reflect the use of these terms: one refers to one's habitus including the changing knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, expectations, attitudes, meanings, and practices (Bourdieu; Liamputtong). The other relates to frameworks which are constantly evolving and being reworked; frameworks "that guide and bound life practices and through which actions are filtered or checked as individuals go about daily life" (Reebye, Ross and Jamieson).

Women negotiated the knowledge they had acquired through their own parents' philosophies and child-raising practices. They negotiate what they have learned and were learning in their process of adjusting to a new culture. Monica explained, "that's how I deal with my son, by adopting some of [their methods], but I still hold onto some of my [values]. I still hold on that for my son, how my mom brought me up."

Avtar Brah has formulated the term "diaspora space" as a conceptual category to refer to a space that is "inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous." As an analytical category, diaspora is a frame of reference for understanding and interpreting the historical, political, social, cultural and economic circumstances that frame a journey of migration that is about settling down and putting roots somewhere else; and to illuminate "how and in what ways a group is inserted within the social relations of class, gender, racism, sexuality, or other axes of differentiation in the country to which it migrates" (182). Brah's concept is akin to what Gloria Anzaldua has referred to as "borderlands": the in-between subject position where translation and negotiation of cultural identification occurs, and a site where transgression, subversion and inclusion is possible. A space where people of

different nationalities, cultural identities and race occupy the same territory, at sometimes merging and forming a hybrid identity, new language and new forms of culture, at other times isolating inhabitants who are caught between two cultures, alien in both.

Andrea O'Reilly reminds us that agency is central to our understanding of mothering as a social construction and as a potential site of power in which mothers have agency, authority, autonomy, and authenticity. And Nancy Schepper-Hughes asserts, that although mothers create their own mothering culture, they do not create it "as they please or under the circumstances chosen by themselves" (342). The material and cultural resources and constraints within specific social contexts determine how women conceive, organize and carry out their mothering. The choices women make in the various processes of their cross-cultural mothering experience are diverse and contingent to the particular circumstance that they find themselves and they re-negotiate their identities and their mothering practices living in contested diaspora spaces, where they often face contradictory social factors and experiences.

Participants in this study who immigrated with their children recounted that they were, upon their arrival, faced with the responsibility of adapting to their new society not only for their own sake, but also for the sake of their children. They stated that as a result of their migration, their responsibilities as women and their parenting practices had undergone significant transformations. These transformation for some women included changes from community parenting to parenting within a nuclear family practice; others became full time mothers abandoning their professional career once in Canada. Yet for others, migration framed their mothering practices as single mothers. And many of them experienced downward social mobility.

In general, women married to Canadian-born men described the support of their husband and his extended family as facilitating their immigration, making the settlement process relatively smooth and providing vital guidance in understanding their new environment, and learning about raising and socialising children, thereby reducing feelings of isolation. Sarah Hrdy asserts that growing up surrounded by extended family is not only important to the cognitive, emotional and physical development and survival of children, but kinship support, has played an important role in the quality of care and mothers' responses to their children's needs in many societies (103). Women married to partners from the same country lost, in Toni Morrison's words, "that chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbours" to provide them with guidance in their mothering journey (cited in O'Reilly 137) changing their mothering practices from a shared and collective spirit of parenting to an often-isolating activity within a nuclear family and they grieved this absence. Fadwah explained:

> *I come from South Africa and from a very large extended family, many uncles, aunts, cousins, friends. Suddenly, I realised that I was IT! My husband and I were IT with the children, and we had to now do everything, be with them 24 hours, seven days a week. It was a rude awakening! And we were in Newfoundland so we were really isolated, by ourselves in a small town. I was never stressed about who is going to take care of my kids because we took care of each other's kids; and there was never this thing: "Okay, I got to find a baby sitter!" There was no need for such a thing.*

A number of women who became full time mothers, named the loss of their professional careers as a sacrifice they made to provide their children with a safe environment and the potential for a brighter future. This sacrifice was not always an option but was often imposed by women's inadequate access to learning the English language, the lack of Canadian work experience and recognition of their credentials, and their immigrant category and legal status. Originally from Singapore, Monica entered Canada on a temporary basis as a "dependent" accompanying her landed immigrant husband. Her legal status prevented her from engaging in employment opportunities and she struggled with the realisation that as a professional, her Malaysian nursing credentials were not recognised.

For two of the participants, their husband's transnational character of employment framed their mothering practices as single parents and stay-at-home moms. Heba, originally from Jordan, immigrated with her husband and her four children but the lack of suitable employment opportunities in Halifax forced her husband to relocate to the Middle East, while she remained in Halifax to provide their children with a Canadian education.

There were many differences between the choices participants made and how they negotiated their parenting practices as they brought with them a wealth of beliefs and practices based on their social, cultural, racial, geographical, and political backgrounds. Differences were also related to the particular period or stage of development of their children, their family forms, their knowledge of the culture and the English language. At the time these mothers immigrated there were no programs in Halifax to support parents in their settlement process like they exist now through the IWK Health Centre and the Immigrant Settlement and Integration Services (ISIS). Many of them named previous experiences of migration and the support of extended family as factors that helped them to better understand potential differences in parenting practices and ways of raising children. In contrast, women who did not have previous emigration experience, who did not have an extended family or did not know someone in Canada, observed that learning formally about available parenting resources, such as recreational centres and programs for families, as well as re-

ceiving information on discipline methods and children's rights and protective policies prior or upon their arrival, would have facilitated their understanding of Canadian childrearing practices.

Most women often became aware of vital information informally through their extended family and indirectly through their interactions with their school-age children. The latter occurred precisely at times when they were in the process of disciplining their children, when their children, in isolation from their parents, learned within the school system about their rights, about violence against children and about support programs they could access. This situation added to women's grief and sense of loss and created tensions within the family, as mothers felt their authority was being undermined, that they were losing control and confidence over their parenting roles and responsibilities, and that their parenting practices were not valued and recognised as valid. Orfa described her feelings:

> I don't know how to interpret this, but since we arrived, people think that we do not have enough knowledge, that we are not example enough, emotionally and intellectually. I do not feel discriminated but I do not think that people value our knowledge of the world in general until we prove it; and regarding the education of our children they think that is not the correct one.

Women who were not fluent in the English language also identified their limited access to language training as an aspect that affected their ability to negotiate their parenting practices, their role as mothers, and their sense of belonging to Canadian society. It has been well documented that the gap in knowledge of the English language between children and their parents creates tensions and power struggles within the family (Wakil, Siddique and Wakil). These mothers described similar experiences. Language barriers created conditions of disempowerment, as it isolated them from the community at large, preventing them from independently carrying out their work of negotiating the school system, the health system and recreation services for the family, and from learning the intricacies of Canadian parenting and from negotiating cultures in an informed manner. Hui Ying described:

> For me the only difference is my language. I cannot communicate in the playground with other parents…. I cannot communicate with teachers … I don't know the Canadian ways of raising children so I cannot say anything about that … sometimes I would like to know some English words to explain myself with others, so this is making very frustrated. (laughs)

Regardless of women's particular situation and differences among them, they saw the process of negotiating their mothering and parenting practices and philosophies as an enriching journey allowing them to learn the intricacies of a new culture and re-learn their heritage from a new vantage point. Most, however felt that the adjustments they had to make were the result of the dominant perspective in Canada's immigration discourse, which has defined women as "dependents" and assumed a traditional view of gender roles for men and women.

Negotiating and Transmitting Important Cultural Values

Negotiating cultural values, beliefs, and traditions is complex even under a multicultural system that encourages integration rather than assimilation. The mothers in this ethnography negotiated with a wide range of institutions and environments. They negotiated within their home, with their partners, children, extended family, health institutions, school, work, recreational environment and institutions, and the judicial system. Mothers married with partners from the same culture perceived the responsibility of negotiating and balancing cultures as a relationship between their family and the society at large. For mothers in cross-cultural relationships, this balancing act began within the confines of their homes and their extended family.

A lot of thought and consideration, at times unconscious or unrecognised, goes into the process of negotiating cultures as women and their partners pick and choose the values they will incorporate to guide their lives, their families, and their children. Some of the values women negotiated and would like to transmit to their children included religion, spirituality, family ties, living in a collective spirit of parenthood and community, respect for diversity, multilingualism, the love for learning, collective well-being, and healthy nutrition. In this process, they, as it has been documented of immigrant parents (Cotrell and VanderPlaat), faced value clashes with their children. For example, mothers raising small children were concerned with language transmission and nutrition, as children often refuse to speak their heritage language and try to convince their parents to eat hot dogs and hamburgers at home. Some mothers raising adolescent female children were concerned with dress codes and sleepover parties, while others were concerned with impressing in their male and female children the value of gender equality. Mothers raising teen-age children and young adults were concerned with gender codes for relationships with the opposite sex and dating practices.

Empirical research on second generation shows that cultural identity formation is often shaped and influenced by the way parents socialise their children (Wakil, Siddique and Wakil). Most mothers in this ethnography asserted that

the invisible labour involved in cross-cultural mothering also included the work done to help children develop and negotiate their identity; integrate, yet resist pressures to assimilate into their environment. They believed that in order for their children to develop solid personalities and self-identification they, as parents away from home, had the responsibility to work towards building in their children self-esteem in a broader way than they would at home. This involved supporting their children to become socially competent, and building self-esteem to help them cope with and survive within systems of racial oppression and discrimination and to support them as they themselves engaged in a process of picking and choosing values and principles of their heritage culture(s) and those of their new environment.

> *We want him to be proud of who he is. We want him to be part of Canadian society but we also don't want him to lose who he is and then have this [uncertainty] trying to find his identity. I want him to be proud that he is Canadian as well as … Indian and Chinese too. We constantly try to immerse him in our cultures and of course we are Christians, so we bring him up in our Christian values.* (Monica)

Transmitting cultural values, beliefs, and traditions is important in their work of helping children develop a cultural identity and building their self-esteem, particularly so children can see themselves as worthy human beings and value their diversity in a world that, as some of them felt, largely denies them such value. A number of women expressed their desire to teach their children about their roots to protect their children from negative representation, discrimination, and racism. Women who themselves had experienced some level of discrimination or racism had some level of concern around this issue. They described visible and audible differences in their and their children's identity as provoking a kind of response that reflected stereotyping, racialization, and discrimination by others. Aneishia explained,

> *My child went to school in Saint Margaret's Bay and the teacher would call me every other month. They had something to tell me: that my son had an identity crisis because he identify as black back then, and he painted himself brown while the little girl next to him painted herself purple, but that was not an identity crisis…. There was always that kind of involvement in my life and in his life … this mixed race child always experienced [judgement].*

They use a wide range of strategies to instil pride in their children's heritage and to educate their children to provide them with tools to respond to racism

and discrimination. Mothers teach their children how to develop healthy ways to deal with subtle expressions of discrimination such as exclusionary and alienating comments about the food they eat, the clothes they wear, or the names they were given. The strategies employed, reflect mother's desire to protect their children from getting emotionally distressed and hurt. Andrea O'Reilly suggests that this training is a form of nurtarance, an act of immunisation that shields children from negative representations and discrimination and fortifies them so that children can protect themselves and survive racism and other forms of discrimination (137). This is not an easy task. Women see it as an added responsibility to their parenting role, one that takes considerable effort and often causes pain as a result of witnessing how these experiences threaten their children's self-esteem and self-value.

The negotiation of a new cultural identity for themselves and their children requires that migrant mothers attend to the socio-economic and political realities in which they live. Avtar Brah highlights that identity is a process constituted in and through power relations shaped by the intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity, origin, language and a host of other distinctions. Migrant women's mothering practice is responsive to the positions in which they find themselves at particular historical conjunctures in relation to the diverse aspects that make up their identity and those of their children and families.

In spite of particular differences among women, these mothers agreed that they want their children to be happy, responsible and well-rounded individuals; respectful of others and conscious of the realities of the world. They wish their children will integrate well into the Canadian society and develop a solid understanding of their cultural heritage. And they hope their children will also develop a strong sense of self-identity so that they can "feel at home" in all situations they find themselves as they engage in the ongoing process of cultural transformation. Feeling at home, for most, means feeling a sense of belonging whether children are interacting within the Canadian environment or interacting with their extended families in Canada and abroad.

Conclusion: Cross-cultural Mothering: An Activity that Mediates the Public and Private Spheres

Through the cross-cultural training work, women become agents of change as they produce new cultural manifestations and new forms of ethnic and cultural identity, as they influence society's cultural diversity and help reproduce and transform social systems and often times oppressive practices. Inhabiting borderlands they are conscious actors in everyday life and are actively reproducing indentifications in negotiated social spaces of residence and daily activities. Operating in a diaspora space, as they carry out their cross-cultural mother-

ing work, they live and negotiate in spaces where borders are transgressed, on junctures at which cultures pollinate and are revitalised, and at the point where cultures die and are reborn.

Taking a cross-cultural mothering perspective to analyse the experiences of migrant women is to see mothers as subjects and to make visible their everyday labour and their contributions to the cultural, economic, social and political well-being of Canada. To view mothers as subjects is to acknowledge that the processes of migration, settlement and integration grants them distinctive experiences according to the positions in which they are located by virtue of class, race, gender, ethnicity, culture, nationality, sexual orientation, and status. Their cross-cultural mothering experiences reveal the complexities of the different dimensions of integration and the importance of analysing the work that they do raising and socialising their children, not from a dichotomous split between the public sphere of economic and political discourse and the private sphere of family and household responsibilities but from a perspective that acknowledges how these two spheres are interwoven.

Many women in this study were happy to mother cross-culturally in this country. The relative freedom "to be yourself" and the promotion of cultural diversity allowed them to incorporate into their family life what they valued from different cultures. Their experiences reveal the importance of accepting migrant mothers as equal partners in the building of Canada's future. As they suggested, this partnership would have to be based on respect and appreciation of diversity beginning with a broader perspective of integration. One that would take into account how Canadian society and institutions perform towards newcomers.

[1]The term migrant is often used to describe people currently on the move, or people with temporary status, or no status at all, in the country where they live (Brah; Ng). In this study I often refer to the participants as migrant women because they continuously travel and cross-borders physically or psychologically.

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