

“The Mother Is a School”

Muslim Mothers and their Religio-Educative Roles

Based on my 2014 master’s ethnographic study, this article examines how my research question changed from “What role does Muslim mothering play in Islamic education?” to “How do Muslim mothers of the GTA imagine their religio-educative roles?” I examine how the seemingly empowering adage “the mother is a school” is actually a burdensome ideology. I locate spiritual growth in the interplay of remembrance, forgetfulness, and repentance, which are indisputable parts of the discursive backdrop against which my participants imagine what it is to be Muslim. Using found poems constructed from interviews with participant mothers, I use the themes of time and translation to highlight their overwhelming feelings of failure to mother adequately. Along with the mothers’ feelings of failure, I identify their moments of fleeting success as the important work of translating impersonal religious knowledge into personal experiences that are meaningful to their children. To move beyond the school metaphor, I offer “poetic spaces”—the spaces where my participants navigate creative and transformative relationships with a discursive tradition that is largely produced without them. Including myself as a Muslim mother, I identify my own poetic space as a site for resistance and look forward to creating alternative metaphors to reimagine mothering in the context of Islam.

*The mother is a school,
If established well, she establishes a noble people ...
The mother is the master of the first teachers
—whose legacies have reached the horizons.*

—Hafiz Ibrahim¹

The first line of the poem above, “the mother is a school,” has become an adage,

not only for Egyptians in Egypt but also for Muslims—non-Arab and Arab—in Canada’s Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The school metaphor is central to this article, which is based on my 2014 ethnographic master’s thesis completed at McMaster University.² In this article, I chronicle that journey, which initially sought to discover the role Muslim mothering plays in Islamic education. However, as will become clear, my central question eventually matured into: “How do Muslim mothers of the GTA imagine their religio-educative roles?”

In what follows, I begin by setting up the anthropological framework that supports my research question, which is largely influenced by anthropologist Talal Asad’s important insights about anthropology and Islam. I move on to review the scant literature on Muslim mothering to situate my own work and contributions. Next, I explain my methodology for acquiring data via unstructured interviews with eleven Muslim mothers and for analyzing my data using poetic inquiry. I then discuss my results, and consider the concept of “poetic spaces,” which was initially offered in my master’s work. Finally, I conclude by retrospectively adding myself as the twelfth Muslim mother participant and use my own mothering experiences and imagination to address the feminist potentialities of the work and possible new directions.

Theoretical Framework

My framework comes from the theoretical discourses of the “anthropology of Islam,” which Talal Asad argues begin with the following question: “What is the object of study for an anthropology of Islam?” (Asad 1). Some anthropologists such as the late Abdul-Hamid El-Zein describe various Muslim experiences as equally valid forms of Islam (Asad 2). This approach avoids essentializing the religion and also escapes the problematic great tradition versus little traditions binary. But Asad points out that advocating for a plurality of equally valid Islams encourages an insensitive relativism that ignores the beliefs of Muslims and violates their own religious sensibilities (Asad 14). Also, this approach falsely implies that each “Islam” is independent from other forms, which ignores sociohistorical forces and continuities (Asad 7).

Instead, Asad offers “discursive tradition” as a useful concept for an anthropology of Islam. In my understanding of Asad’s concept, a discursive tradition is like an imaginary reservoir. Some of its contents shift, some spillover, some are discarded, while some become static and calcified—all according to the historical and social forces that interact to sustain and revise them. The reservoir is imaginary, since it manifests both collectively and differently for Muslims in their imagination. Each Muslim has a different relationship with its existence and contents. This may seem vague and slippery, but Asad’s “discursive tradition” helps to construct anthropological categories such as “Muslim” and

“Islam” in diverse contexts without ignoring what connects Muslims to each other and to a broader, overarching concept of Islam.

Notably, not all anthropologists agree with Asad’s approach. Indulging the various criticisms levelled at using “discursive tradition” would surpass both the purpose and scope of this article. However, I would like to address social anthropologist Samuli Schielke’s arguments against asking the question “What is the object of study for an anthropology of Islam?” He says the following:

Why is it so convenient to deal with the adherence of people to Muhammad’s message as an entity? The fact that Muslims themselves commonly do so is not a sufficient answer, for the typical answers given by anthropologists differ a lot from the typical answers given by Muslims (that is, Muslims not trained in anthropology). For Muslims, Islam is neither a blueprint, nor a multitude, nor a discursive tradition. For Muslims, Islam is the true Religion of God.

Schielke insists that since Islam is “the true Religion of God” for Muslims, they do not imagine Islam as “a blueprint, nor a multitude, nor a discursive tradition.” This generalization is suspect as Schielke also argues that anthropologists should aim to capture what everyday Muslim life is like in practice rather than their idealizations of the religion. However, I disagree that how Muslims imagine their relationship to religion is less important than their everyday practices of it. Furthermore, for some Muslims, Islam may well serve as a blueprint—list of commands, for example—and these definitions are not necessarily at odds with “the true Religion of God.” In other words, I believe Asad’s “discursive tradition” helps anthropologists explore the relationships between everyday experiences of Muslims *and* their visions of religion in a socially and historically conscious manner. To heed Schielke’s main concern—not to assume that Islam is the dominant force in Muslim lives (5)—requires that the anthropologist consider Muslim sensibilities and idealizations.

Tangled in the syntax and semantics of my research question, I struggled to frame it appropriately. For example, I considered asking, “What role does Muslim mothering play in Islamic education?” but found that such a question assumes “Islamic education” exists concretely and uniformly, which betrays the spirit of Asad’s “discursive tradition” and ignores Schielke’s cautions. Education researcher Farid Panjwani’s refrain that Islamic education is a mythical entity with little practical substance also dissuaded me from my question this way (6).

Finally, I was relieved when I stumbled upon the work of Islamic studies professor Ebrahim Moosa, who explores how Ghazali, a historical Muslim philosopher, imagined his own relationship to Islam as a discursive tradition, which straddled both ethics and aesthetics (45). Inspired by Moosa’s approach,

I changed my question from “What role does Muslim mothering play in Islamic education?” to “How do Muslim mothers in the GTA imagine their religio-educative roles?” This formulation shifts the weight of the question to the Muslim mothers, who are not “mythical entities,” but actual *agents*. Constructed this way, the question does not assume Islam plays the central role in mothering conceptions, although I do assume it plays *a* role, which my own anecdotal experiences also indicate. Whether the role is dominant or not is a question of imagination just as much as it is a question of practice.

Literature Review

Before 2016, little work was available about Muslim mothers, let alone their imaginations. I completed my master’s degree in 2014, so my literature review had a gaping hole, which presented an opportunity to pursue a relatively fresh topic. To fill the literature review section of my thesis, I had to read widely and attempt connections between distant issues. Although I learned a lot about topics such as Islamic education, Islamic schools, and Islamization of knowledge, my work did not easily converse with these topics. With the publication of an edited collection of essays called *Muslim Mothering: Local and Global Histories, Theories, and Practices* in June of 2016, my work became easier to situate.

This essay collection is the first of its kind and comprises the entirety of the academic literature focusing on Muslim mothers and mothering. For my purposes, this collection makes three main contributions. First, it marks Muslim mothering as a category worthy of centrality and interrogation. Second, it begins to explore mothering and motherhood in the context of Islam—whatever that may be and however that may be defined. Third, because of its commitment to feminisms, it emphasizes the experiences and voices of Muslim mothers.

Notably, however, this collection does not make sufficient use of relevant anthropological discourses. Dismantling and constructing theoretical concepts useful in religious contexts, anthropology of Islam has come a long way. Awareness of this journey is largely absent from the essays—the cost of which is the use of contested terms without qualification. Two of the questions the collection seeks to explore are “How do Muslim mothers mother?” and “What role does the Islamic faith—and Islamic scriptures—play in the shaping of Muslim mothering?” (Pappano and Olwan 1). Reminiscent of my initial research question, the second question treats “Islamic faith” and “Islamic scriptures” as entities with roles of their own. This is problematic as discussed above. As well, although various authors in the collection demonstrate that different women practice Islam differently, terms such as “Islam,” “Muslim,” and “Islamic” are largely left unexplored.

In the collection, the chapter by Irene Oh called “Theoretical Constructions of Muslim Motherhood” is the exception to this oversight. Oh argues the following: “When we attempt to juxtapose texts from Islamic jurisprudence with contemporary medical or sociological studies, different results may emerge based on how we decide to apply these terms. Clear definitions, and consideration of the impact of such definitions, have ethical and policy implications” (286). In other words, researchers need to consider “the assumptions surrounding common terms whose meanings we too easily take for granted” before launching into a project (Oh 290). However, despite her arguments for scrutiny and interrogation, Oh does not point to the theoretical discourses and resultant tools that have already been generated to this end—those born from anthropological and religious studies discourses. Overall, the collection is an important contribution to Muslim mothering scholarship grounded in women’s everyday lives. But mothering research needs to consider paths already paved, even if only to choose alternative directions. This is where my work hopefully makes a small contribution in connecting two distant terrains: Muslim mothering research and anthropology.

Methodology

For my own study, I interviewed eleven self-identified Muslim mothers from the GTA. Initially, I tried to recruit participants by posting flyers in local mosques and Islamic schools as well as by emailing the administrative staff at these institutions. This did not prove successful. Ultimately, being a member of the Muslim GTA community myself, participants were recruited via word of mouth. All of the women interviewed had children, ranging from infancy to adulthood. In either English or Arabic, I conducted face-to-face interviews (excepting one, which was over the phone) with each participant. The interviews were done in their homes, local mosques, a local university, and even in my home; each lasted about an hour and a half. I was interested in their imaginations; thus, I did not structure the interviews in a particular way. However, I often began by asking about their personal spiritual journeys and the roles their mothers played in their lives. In the discussion following this section, I focus on the imaginations of only three participants because of space limitations. Their names have been changed to protect their privacy, and I refrain from disclosing personal information that would violate their anonymity.

To analyze my data, I chose poetic inquiry. Poetic inquiry emerged in the 1980s as an arts-based research method relying on poetry to generate, analyze, and communicate findings. I chose this methodology for three reasons. First, according to Monica Prendergast, who published a survey

of its various usages, benefits, and challenges, poetic inquiry acknowledges and even celebrates the “researcher’s own affective response” to findings (xxiii). As a Muslim mother myself, I saw some of my own experiences, convictions, frustrations, and anxieties in the words and stories of my participants. I wanted to examine and capture my own feelings of empathy and solidarity as part of my analytical process. Second, my interviews indicated that participants’ mothering experiences were invisible to others and, at times, difficult to express. As anthropologist Kent Maynard and language education researcher Melisa Cahmann-Taylor mention in their exposition on poetry and ethnography, poetry gives language to the “inexpressible (5) and “offers one means for anthropology to remain relevant, fresh, and ‘new’ for years after our studies occurred” (9). Put differently, subject to a poetic process, participant voices are engaged and shared in a way that makes them continually relatable and inspiring.

Finally, poetry delivers the images and metaphors of imaginations most potently. Hafiz Ibrahim’s school metaphor captures in a few words what generations of Muslims imagine when they think of a mother. Poetry can distill ideology, which otherwise operates undetected in everyday language, into tidy packages that can be more easily identified, criticized, and shared. I found that my participants felt overwhelming feelings of failure as Muslim mothers, despite many stories that read as successes. As I show in the next section, captured in poetry, my participants’ feelings powerfully interrogate the utility of the school metaphor, just as the school metaphor powerfully sustains a conception of motherhood that seems grand but is ultimately burdensome.

In the methodology section of my master’s thesis, I describe how I use poetic inquiry to create “found poems” from my interview transcripts:

Being new to this process [poetic inquiry], I created poetry from interview transcripts by restricting myself exclusively to phrases actually used by participants. I sorted the data, and organized each interview into recurring themes and ideas. Then, I creatively engaged with these categories to “find the poetry.” I did not necessarily order these phrases chronologically, but I did try to stay true to the meaning I ascertained from the interview. I also used repetition where I felt emphasis would stay true to the voices of the participants, even if they did not necessarily use repetition to establish this emphasis. I did not use any phrases participants did not themselves use. (11)

In the following section, I discuss and analyze constructed poems against the school metaphor.

Discussion and Analysis

Arguably, for all of my participants, and for myself as well, spirituality operates in terms of remembrance, forgetfulness, and repentance. According to Timothy Winter, who is a popular preacher in Europe and North America and whose lectures are very influential in GTA circles, spirituality begins with the Quranic primordial conversation between God and humankind, where God asks pre-created humanity, “Am I not your Lord?” and humanity responds, “Yes we bear witness.” After creation, humans are born into a state of *fitra*, carrying an innate sense of that primordial covenant into the world. Winter maintains that since human nature is characteristically forgetful, spirituality must then be a conscious attempt to relive the terms of the covenant. Simply put, humans oscillate between both remembrance and forgetfulness throughout their lives; the spiritual goal is to try to align one’s spirit with the primordial, sacred contract (Winter).

Another Muslim academic popular in GTA circles, Hamza Yusuf Hanson, suggests that the movement between these two states (i.e., remembrance and forgetfulness) is embodied in the word *qalb* or “heart,” which comes from the same Arabic trilateral root as *qalaba* or “to revolve.” By sincerely repenting to God, and thus being forgiven, one crosses back into remembrance. In this sense, seeking forgiveness or repentance is the heart turning back to God. As long as an individual turns back at every lapse, that individual is moving forward, overall, on the spiritual path. This process is an indisputable part of the discursive backdrop against which my participants and I imagine what it is to be Muslim.

However, this conception of spirituality is at odds with the school metaphor. If “the mother is a school,” she is a destination. She is in a frozen state of remembrance instead of moving between remembrance, forgetfulness, and repentance. As gender theorist Nira Yuval-Davis argues, not only does the “burden of representation” rest on women, so too does the “burden of transmission” (17). If the “burden of transmission” is women’s in a general sense, mothers carry this burden most heavily. Although the rest of humanity can err and repent, forget and remember, the Muslim mother must be an exemplar of piety at all times.

I will share three poems to demonstrate how three of my participants exclude themselves from the spiritual process because of how they imagine their religio-educative mothering roles. Overall, they feel they are failing their children, even if they experience moments of sporadic success. Two themes characterize their feelings of failure: time and translation.

The first poem is taken from an interview with Linda, a middle-age Egyptian mother of three adult children—two daughters and a son. Her eldest daughter

works and lives away from home, and her other daughter lived and worked overseas for years before she came home for postgraduate studies. This poem refers to her eldest daughter:

I was empty
When she came
When she watched
When she asked
When she knew
that I didn't
And now when I have it
 some of it
She's all filled up

When Linda's first child was still young, Linda was not spiritual. She did not "have it." Now that her daughter is older, Linda has more to offer her by way of religious education, but it is too late. Her daughter is "filled up" with other ideas and convictions. Linda was not a "school" at the right time and at the time of the interview, she still did not consider herself a school for her daughter. Before we began the interview, she cautioned, "Are you sure you want to ask *me*? I don't think my take on things is what you're looking for."³ Even though at the time, she had more to offer her children, by her own standards, Linda was still not religious enough, and for that, she feels guilty and inadequate.

Another middle-age Egyptian mother, Samar, has two adult children. This next poem demonstrates how translation impedes Samar from fully realizing her mothering role.

What came to my heart
 stopped in my hands.

In this poem, Samar describes her experience with prayer. One day, she had a spiritual epiphany, and prayer, which had always been a struggle for her, suddenly made sense. The epiphany came to her while watching a religious lecture by Hamza Yusuf Hanson. According to Samar, Hanson said, "if you've missed prayer today, then you've missed the point of everything." Energized, Samar tried to impart this idea to her children when they were school age: "I'd say, come on try it! Pray first . . . it makes life taste better!" Her daughter would poke fun and respond, "it tastes the same to me, Mom!" In Samar's case, even though she "had it, some of it," she struggled to meaningfully transmit this knowledge to her children. A school is a container for complete knowledge and also a place where proper dissemination of this knowledge occurs. Even

if these mothers reach an impeccable and unalterable spiritual state, they are not schools if their children lag behind them.

As with Linda and Samar, Sidra shares these feelings of failure. A mother of two children in elementary school, Sidra compares herself to her neighbour, another mother with children in the same school. Of her neighbour, she says the following: “She sets a really good example for her kids.... Her kids play with my kids sometimes. They tell my kids what’s *haram* [religiously forbidden] and *halal* [religiously permitted] and I don’t even know that stuff.... I have to look it up sometimes.” To Sidra, her neighbour is the complete mother since she has imparted so much knowledge to her children, who are also very young. In comparison, Sidra’s knowledge of the religion feels inadequate, and she struggles to prioritize religion between her other commitments. The following poem expresses Sidra’s guilt:

Everyday, I forget to remember
 Too often, I forget I’ve forgotten
 One day, I won’t be forgiven.

Although Sidra consistently repents, she has almost outstayed her welcome in the spiritual cycle. As with Linda, Sidra races with time; her spirituality not only suffers from inadequate knowledge, but also under heavy layers of perpetual forgetfulness. She longs to become a complete mother (like her neighbour) before the privilege of forgiveness is lost to her forever. She longs to become “a school.”

Although mother as school seems like a beautiful metaphor—empowering even—it is actually burdensome. A school is not an agent that errs, repents, and grows. My participants exclude themselves from the spiritual process, which is central to being Muslim and corresponds to the primordial covenant Muslims carry into this world as *fitra*. However, unlike the rest of humanity, *they* should not forget, and if they do, instead of focusing on divine forgiveness, which succeeds repentance, they dwell on feelings of guilt and inadequacy for entering the cycle at all. Yet although interview transcripts reveal feelings of failure, these mothers also share some of their fleeting moments of success. I will only share one such example.

Occasionally before an exam, Samar’s son asks her to “make *duaa*” or supplicate to God on his behalf. At those times, Samar requestz he join her, and with every supplication she offers, he says “amen” of his own accord. To quote Samar, at those times, “when he says ‘amen,’ I know he’s feeling *something*.” As with other religious practices, *duaa* is governed (although not as strictly as prayer) by certain learned etiquettes. The ritual rules and proscriptions of supplication represent impersonal knowledge produced in a realm exclusive

to male scholars and distant from Muslim women and, by extension, these mothers. Lawyer and Muslim thinker Hinna Upal calls this “the historical male monopoly over religious meaning in the Quran, its interpretation, and in later years its translation” (86). And although there are notable efforts being made to cultivate women’s exegesis and jurisprudence by scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, their work and activism are considered controversial or even blasphemous by the mainstream. The global uproar after Wadud led a mixed congregation during Friday prayers in Manhattan is an example of this (Lehmann 490). Though well-versed in traditional Muslim jurisprudence, because of her controversial conclusions, Wadud, as with other female Muslim scholars, is marginalized.

Part of the work of mothers involves transforming male-dominated impersonal knowledge into personally meaningful experiences and ideas for their children’s consumption. By inviting her son to supplicate with her, Samar personalizes the practice and makes it spiritually meaningful for him. This is not just an act of transmission but also an act of translation. This work of translation is creative and transformative, which is not what the school metaphor suggests. These mothers are not schools because according to them, that ideal is unreachable. They imagine themselves at a more distant point, occupying an ultimately difficult but sometimes creative space, in which they mostly long for what seems decidedly impossible to attain.

To move forward conceptually, I introduce Ebrahim Moosa’s concept of *dibliz* or “threshold”—an in-between place to navigate ethics and aesthetics, dogma and agency, legality and imagination (112) and, I would add, the impersonal and the personal. At first glance, this term seems an attempt to avoid falling into binary traps. But the *dibliz* is useful because it encapsulates one’s relationships to these binaries at any given moment. For me, and as an anthropologist, this is how I imagine these mothers.

To build on Moosa’s *dibliz*, I would call it a “poetic space,” since it is where my participants navigate relationships with a discursive tradition that is largely produced without them. Their contributions are subtle and difficult to pinpoint, transformative, and creative. Constructing motherhood as a school alienates mothers from the process of spirituality and imposes an expectation that they must be in a state of pure remembrance at all times. This normative idea discourages mothers who have not yet reached the “proper” state of spirituality and, thus, motherhood. The participants in my study feel that they are failing in their roles as mothers, even if they do enjoy moments of success and breakthrough. I offer the concept of “*poetic spaces*” for the exploration of these overwhelming feelings of failure and moments of success. Imagining these spaces affords us the opportunities to ask: Are we, as Muslim mothers, resisting normative definitions of motherhood or are we engaging in proud

bricolage? Are we journeying or are we stagnant? Will we ever become the schools of our imaginations?

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, I want to offer my own experiences and thoughts as a Muslim mother. My own desire “to be a school” intensified with the birth of my children. Instead of providing calm and direction, the thought of my fluctuating spiritual state was a source of confusion and anxiety. After the birth of my first child, my anxiety manifested as a recurring dream, which I capture in this poem:

Piles and piles and piles
My hands in one
My eyes on the others
I don't find anything.

My anxiety, as with my participants', was really a longing and a desire to finally be spiritual—an urgency to possess and be an exemplar of religious knowledge and to then transmit it seamlessly. My participants and I may seem to be resisting institutions of motherhood that are dehumanizing and, to a lesser extent, religious institutions that exclude women and mothers from the production of religious knowledge. However, I would hesitate to impose a feminist reading on *their* stories, which mostly feature feelings of inadequacy but not necessarily those of resistance. However, as a Muslim mother and feminist myself, my poetic space *is* a site for resistance.

Two years ago, I perhaps did not grasp the scope of Moosa's calling, as I failed to see the *dibliz* as a site for resistance, too—namely resisting burdening ideologies in and outside of us. Now, I appreciate that through his work, Moosa encourages Muslims to transcend dogma, to imagine spaces not monopolized by legality, where human experience and feelings are sources of knowledge in their own right. For me, retrospectively, Moosa's *dibliz* takes on a “third space” quality (Khan) as I contemplate my own visions of mothering. Indeed, the “poetic” in poetic spaces captures the ambivalence and elusiveness of mothering but also its political power (Faulkner and Nicole 82).

For me, my research has demonstrated that identifying the metaphors of our imaginations can help us understand how we live and imagine our relationship to a discursive tradition that is both real in its effects on us and imaginary in its concreteness and uniformity. I hope to further interrogate the pressures and premises that have calcified in Muslim reservoirs by imagining and introducing new and, perhaps, more attainable conceptions of motherhood in the context of religion. Moving forward, I am personally propelled to reimagine mothering in

the context of Islam to find alternative metaphors—humanizing and dignifying ones—that fully include mothers in the spiritual process.

Endnotes

¹The poem is by Hafiz Ibrahim, and Sherif Elsbakhawi translated the quotation above from the original Arabic.

²My master's was supervised by Celia Rothenberg, and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

³I acquired Linda's permission to include this comment, even though the interview had not officially begun.

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