

# Researching “my people,” researching myself:<sup>1</sup> fragments of a reflexive tale<sup>2</sup>

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The paper investigates my positionality as a Pakistani Muslim researcher, affiliated with a U.S. institution, conducting ethnographic research with Pakistani Muslim immigrants in California. Three vignettes reconstructed from field-notes and a reflective journal illustrate the tensions and contradictions informing the research process. The first vignette details my shifting subjectivities in relation to a segment of the Muslim community in Northern California. Although my perceived disempowerment of Muslims motivated my research, my failure to subscribe to the Muslim Student Association’s version of Islam cost me their disapproval. The second vignette highlights my relationship with one particular research participant. Although I shared the same ethnic background as this participant, my inability to conceive of her empowerment in terms other than those of Western feminism led to tragedy. The last vignette focuses on my interaction with the ethnographic data at my desk and becomes an analysis of the forces in my life that feed into my research.

We have never acknowledged either the birth or the death of the subject. Ours has been an ongoing search for the unseparated subject. In other words, the metaphor for the West is the human cycle (birth, life, death); the metaphor for non-Western cultures is unity/oneness/totality, etc. The former lends itself well to narrative – it is a narrative; the latter isn’t, except in fragments and anecdotes – a paradox! To us this search, perhaps for a partial totality, enforces and continues meaning, thereby allowing us to inhabit in the domain of memory. (Gabriel, 1989, p. 131)

Though I tried I could not really write my story. Each time I tried to write, everything splintered into little bits. I could not figure out a line or theme for myself... I had no clear picture of what unified it all, what our history might mean. We were all in it together, that’s all I knew. And there was no way out. (Alexander, 1991, p. 28)

## I

People have gotten killed  
And I really don’t want anyone to suffer or die  
But despite my sorrow and guilt I can’t help but think  
“First World blood is so much more expensive than Third World blood.”

My legs are trembling, and so are my hands grasping the paper with the scribbled poems. I am very conscious of the fact that my jeans and shirt are not appropriate apparel for the evening. I surreptitiously try to display my *Allah*<sup>3</sup> medallion more prominently, but my fingers refuse to cooperate. I am not imagining the coldness from some of the other Muslim students, especially the two young women with *hijabs* who are

sitting in the two chairs in front of the podium and the group of Muslim men who are sitting on one side on the floor. Since 1992, when I first started my dissertation research<sup>4</sup> with Pakistani Muslim women, I have interacted quite extensively with members of the Muslim community in various parts of Northern California, including the Muslim Student Association at the university where I am working towards my doctorate as an international student from Pakistan. I know many of the Muslim students in the audience quite well.

I am also very conscious of the fact that my poem is bitter, and many people would find it offensive. Am I just reinforcing stereotypes about the intensity and hostility exhibited by Muslims? These days I am already struggling with my feelings of alienation from people I perceive as being affiliated with the dominant culture in the United States. So it is difficult for me to figure out whether I am projecting, or whether I am actually the recipient of disturbed looks from some members of the audience.

Yet neither my voice nor my gaze waver. I enunciate each word firmly as I look directly into the eyes of the assorted group of students, faculty, and other university town residents. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Aisha,<sup>5</sup> one of the chief participants in my critical feminist ethnography, smile at me encouragingly from her rather precarious position on one of the windowsills further away from the podium.

It is May 18, 1995. We are all gathered in a cafe bordering the campus to protest against the false arrest of a Jordanian-American after the Oklahoma City tragedy. Students of Arab origin from different religious backgrounds, the on-campus Muslim<sup>6</sup> Student Association, and Muslim students like myself who are not formal members of the Association have joined forces to organize this evening's program of poetry and prose readings, recitations from the various holy books, dramatic skits, and media clip presentations. The cafe's wall display artwork by Muslim and Arab students, and the doors and windows are adorned with enlarged posters of the counter-terrorist act of 1995.<sup>7</sup>

... a journalist on TV, "The Bangladeshis continue to multiply. The world is going to be over-run by Third-Worlders despite the cyclones, the floods, the riots, the droughts."

I guess the blast would have been really useful in Asia or Africa, nature needs help in keeping the balance.

I continue with my rather angry recital. The participant-observer part of myself, which is never entirely shut off, mentally documents the exact moment when the cold and disturbed looks become warmer and less troubled. A few young men, active and vocal members of the Association, start to clap. They give my words the stamp of their approval. Other people, especially my friends and people who know me, take the cue, and soon everyone is clapping. I have to shout out the last few lines,

... all I wanted to ask was one thing,

"Where are the Save THE MUSLIMS T-shirts, guys?"

I step off the podium, and my gang of graduate student friends, most of them non-Muslim and non-Arab, who are there for the specific purpose of taking care of my ego, and Jose, the man I am "kind of seeing" at that point, come forward to tell me what a wonderful job I have done. After many hugs and kisses, I am led to our table, and I sit down, high on the feeling that accompanies a successful performance, content to be an observer for a while. I am glad the poetry reading went well. After all, I have taken time away from my dissertation writing and my sick mother to be there. Aisha and the

two chief organizers, Nargis and Sara, talked me into participating, although I have my own reservations about arranging an event designed to educate people about Muslims and Arabs.

My sensation of triumph does not last long, and neither does my status as supportive, but uninvolved, spectator. For one, there are too many glances, ranging from mildly curious to openly irritated, being directed towards our table. As the evening progresses, I become more and more uncomfortable with the fact that I am sitting quite close to an attractive man who is obviously neither Muslim nor Pakistani. Jose is part Native American, part Mexican.

Second, as the program unfolds, I realize that unscheduled routines and presentations are being allowed to interrupt and disrupt the sequence decided upon earlier by the planning committee. It annoys and upsets me at the same time that it is the Muslim students, particularly those of South Asian origin<sup>8</sup> born and raised in the United States, who are instigating these changes. They are continually pressuring Nargis and Sara, the two graduate students who have played the most active role in organizing the program and are now running it, to make space for more recitations by “real Muslims” and more preaching of Islam. When Sara, a Christian Arab, comes up to me to commiserate, I extend her my sympathies for dealing with a difficult situation, but cannot help adding in a rather sharp tone that we need to understand why people who have hardly ever been heard want to make full use of the one opportunity they have been given. “It is perhaps the only time in their life that the Muslim students have a voice as Muslims,” I declare emphatically.

“This was supposed to be an Arab and Muslim event. I have never before felt this urgent need to go run home and get my cross ever before in my life,” Sara replies as she runs back to the podium to announce the break for the *Maghrib* prayers.

Many of the Muslim students, most of them formal members of the Muslim Students Association, stand together in two separate rows, one male, the other female, to offer their prayers. The non-Muslims and the nonpraying Muslims just stand by and watch. “I feel so proud of them,” mutters Sana, another Muslim graduate student who like myself does not join the *namaazs*. It is indeed an inspiring sight, these young people all facing Makkah, going through each step of the *namaaz*, in near-perfect coordination. I am impressed by the unity and harmony I am witnessing. For a second, I am overwhelmed by a surge of emotion in my heart. These are my people, and it is a privilege to be part of the Muslim *Ummah*.

Then the critical feminist ethnographer with her postcolonial, poststructuralist<sup>9</sup> leanings, rears her paradoxical head again. Why does the *namaaz* seem like such a staged performance to me? Why am I angry with them for making a spectacle of my religion, which happens to be theirs, too? Why do we have to cater to the white gaze? Have I been contaminated too deeply by postmodernist discourses about presentations of selves and identities?

The program is resumed after the prayers. I am still plagued with contradictory emotions and conflicting loyalties. I am thrilled by the manner in which the Muslim students are enacting resistance to dominant modes of thought. I am threatened by their attempts to empower themselves since their measures and intended outcomes could be oppressive in some ways. I suppose Salman Rushdie, in his reductive but effective style, would say the East and West are pulling me in different directions.<sup>10</sup>

“So this is what happens when margins generate their own centers,” I manage to continue my analysis even as my various emotions ebb and flow. I burn with shame when many of the Muslim students pointedly refuse to applaud a poem read by a young

Arab Jewish woman (I do remember her tendency on and off to categorize all Muslims as anti-Semitic, but I expect my Muslim friends to have more forgiving hearts). I want to go wipe the smirks off some non-Muslim Arabs' faces, when Adil, the young man courting my research participant, Aisha, gets carried away as he pontificates about the five pillars of Islam in his desire to impress Aisha and the rest of us with his knowledge (Adil does look very handsome and his intensity is moving). I completely understand why Nargis, who is from a Muslim family but adheres to strict secular beliefs, blushes and almost cries when one of the young, strident women wearing the *hijab* reads her poem chastising all women who do not cover themselves properly and looks directly at Nargis's bare arms and legs (I do wish momentarily that Nargis has had the sense not to show so much cleavage that evening).

Aisha, who wears the *hijab* herself, stands up and challenges the poem's logic. Soon we have a full-fledged contest brewing between the very strict believers and the strict, but liberal believers. I am struck by how American the competitors are in their body language, their accents, and their demeanors. Most of us who were actually born and raised in Muslim or Third World countries huddle further into our seats. The thought is intriguing enough for me to dig out my notebook, and the tense Pakistani not-so-good Muslim woman takes refuge in the writing of field-notes.

It is in the midst of all this that Nargis and Sara take charge and assertively announce the last few items of the evening. I have completely forgotten that I have still to read one more poem I wrote earlier in the day. The poem was hastily put together in response to an interchange with Sara and Nargis about their dealings with the Association, a conversation that in retrospect appears to predict the evening's debacle. As I fumble through my papers, my first instinct is to just run. Nothing can be more timely than what I have to say. Nothing can be more likely to damage any relationship I have with the Muslim Student Association. Having always been more brave than circumspect, I take my visibly shaking body to the podium and begin with a voice that is definitely trembling this time.

... I am a Muslim, a Mussalman, an "Islamic person,"  
What do I mean when I say that...?

I doggedly read through the poem. Eyes are boring into me, as I grapple with the complexity of claiming a Muslim identity in different contexts. The segments of the poem where I justify my Muslim identity to secular radicals and Western feminists go fairly well, although two Muslim students walk out looking bored, a young white woman laughs incredulously, and another mutters, "Too academic!" The air around me crackles with tension, as I reach the climax of the piece.

... my Muslim identity is both a site of rebellion and resistance, There is no such thing as a pure uncontaminated brand of unmediated Islam, Your California Islam is different than mine...

I stumble off the podium, trying to disregard the angry voices. I notice a few members of the Association, both men and women, heading in my direction. I ignore them and walk to my table, almost falling on the floor in the process. Jose tries to steady me by holding my arm, and although I know I should not, I cling to him. As I try to hastily leave the room, he pulls me back, "What's the hurry?"

I try to explain that everything, the atmosphere, the gazes, the words, are too much like the University of Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan, where thugs and hoodlums used Islam to intimidate me and my fellow students. These trouble-makers were backed by the

military regime, which was, in turn, backed by the United States.<sup>11</sup> I also try to tell him that I do not want to be perceived like Salman Rushdie.<sup>12</sup> The main impetus for my dissertation research comes from my desire to reclaim and reinscribe knowledge about Muslim women as a Pakistani Muslim woman researcher. I do not want to attack the beliefs and faith of my fellow Muslims, but that is how my plea for understanding was being perceived.

I give up when I see his blank face, and just pull him through the door. That night I decide it will not work with Jose.

## II

It is around eleven o'clock at night on February 11, 1993. I am getting ready to go to bed after a protracted struggle with Paul Ricoeur's notion of the text. The telephone rings, and I pick up the receiver.

“Did I wake you up?” It is Fariha, one of the research participants in my study with Pakistani Muslim immigrant young women, sounding apologetic. “I am sorry, but I really need to talk to you. And you have to promise you won't tell my mother anything. If it is all right with you...” she says hesitantly.

I assure her that it is, expecting her to share news of another bad grade on a test. Last week I helped Fariha with two make-up papers over the phone.<sup>13</sup> She did not want her mother to know about her poor performance, so we pretended to talk about world politics and its impact on Muslim lives, an issue dear to *Appa's* heart. Fariha made it a point to mention Bosnia and Kashmir intermittently in order to alleviate my guilt.

School and grades, however, are not on Fariha's mind this evening. She launches into a rather complicated narrative about a quarrel with her mother, a recent letter from her estranged father, and her decision to marry the young man she loves. I ask her a few clarifying questions here and there. After she talks for a while, she suddenly asks me what she should do, adding that she counts on me to help her since I know so much about the real world.

I am rather taken aback by her question. I am not prepared for the switch from the role of confidant to that of an adviser, at least in this instance. I was flattered when a few weeks ago in early January Fariha trusted me enough to tell me about her secret love affair with a nineteen-year-old young man who has recently moved to California from Pakistan. She accidentally ran into him outside her school sometimes in November, 1992, and they fell in love quite dramatically at first sight. I was extremely flattered when Fariha sent Razzaq to meet me at my department in the first week of February in order to elicit my opinion. I was also thrilled when she told me that she did not mind me writing down her confidences as part of my fieldwork. Somehow her insistence that my age and varied experiences bestow on me a wisdom that makes me an expert is neither flattering or thrilling. I silently chide myself for being open to her about my divorce and my love life. I have been very selective in what I revealed to her, but I probably should have just abstained from the topic.

“So what should I do? What would you do if you were in my place?” Fariha repeats her query.

“Well,” I begin cautiously, “I wouldn't want to be married when I was sixteen or seventeen, even eighteen, because I would want to finish my education.”

“Well, I can do whatever I want when I am married to him,” she responds. “In fact I will do it better, because I won't feel so alone. I will be with someone who understands me and will help me fulfill my ambitions.”

And so begins an intense four-hour session in which I struggle to strike a balance between displaying consideration for Fariha's feelings towards this man, painting a bleak picture of a runaway marriage and its consequences, and ignoring my stress about the paper that I am supposed to start writing early next morning. We talk in Urdu, English, and Punjabi, and both of us draw from our multiple cultural bases to substantiate our reasoning. I, however, gradually become aware that my predominant persona is that of an older sister wanting to protect the little one from the clutches of an unsuitable man. Much to my horror, this older sister also wants to run to the mother to get help, even as she keeps on promising Fariha that she will never disclose her secret. I respect and admire Fariha's mother. In the few months that I have known her mother I have become quite close to her. I address her as "*Appa*," which means older sister.

What I can gather from Fariha's outpouring is that *Appa* has found out about this young man in Fariha's life and has forbidden her ever to see him again. She has behaved, in my opinion, somewhat unreasonably. I can see why she does not want Fariha to be involved with the man. But she has really made Fariha angry by comparing her to her father and threatening to send her off either to stay with him or live with his parents in Pakistan. After her outburst, *Appa* has locked herself up in her room.

I delicately suggest to Fariha that she try to talk to her mother. I offer to come over and be the mediator. After all, that seems to be my predominant role in their lives. Fariha resolutely turns down the proposal.

Finally, we reach a point in the conversation where I feel that I have convinced Fariha to put off her plan for at least a week. She is still adamant about wanting to get married as soon as possible, but decides to give me a chance to come up with a plan that is likely to have less disastrous consequences. Restating my promise not to tell her mother about our conversation, I hang up and drift off into a restless sleep.

I spend a lot of time in the next two days trying to figure out my course of action. I attempt to thrash out the issue with my colleagues and friends. Mostly, these attempts are a waste of time, because people seem to be more interested in critiquing Muslims for not allowing their daughters to date than offering me advice. A few friends, however, do present me their point of view succinctly.

Away from Fariha and her mother, back in my academic world, the simplicity of the logic employed by these friends appeals to my distraught mind. I decide my guilt at breaching *Appa's* trust is misplaced. My first commitment is towards Fariha and her desires. Fariha is seventeen, and by Islamic standards, an adult. She can marry anyone she wants. I would neither divulge her secret, nor force my ideas on her. I would respect her choice and be supportive no matter what she does.

When I get home from the library on February 14, there are six frantic messages from *Appa* on my answering machine. I immediately call her back. Fariha has run away. She left a letter for her mother. *Appa* has decided to tell people that she is staying with me. Only her youngest brother, one of Fariha's *mamoons*, knows the truth. *Appa* tells me that the least I can do for her and Fariha is to back up her lie, since my negative influence on Fariha is to a large extent responsible for her elopement.

Fariha has told me where she would go if she ran away. *Appa's* pain is hard for me to bear, but I force myself not to say anything. I know I would find it very difficult to maintain my confidentiality in *Appa's* presence, so I try to stay away from her as much as possible.

Nonetheless both *Appa* and Fariha's *mamoon* realize I know more than I admit. When *Appa* contacts Fariha's father in desperation and he almost takes the other children away, her uncle practically begs me to help look for her. I eventually give in, and using

the information I give him he traces her whereabouts. He cannot meet her physically, but sends her a message telling her to at least let them know where she is.

Fariha comes back to her mother’s place after a week all by herself in very bad shape. She looks haggard and seems to have bruises on her face. She tells her mother that she received her uncle’s message. She has gone through the *nikah*, the Muslim legal marriage contract, with Razzaq, but she wants help in getting it annulled. Her mother brings Fariha over to my place, and she stays with me for about two weeks while her mother and uncle arrange for the *nikah* to be declared void. During the time she spends at my apartment, Fariha is very quiet and lost in a world of her own. We barely communicate. I see her crying on and off.

The sequence of happenings, Fariha’s running away, her coming back, and my being involved in these, assume a nightmarish quality in my memory. My reflective journal and field-note entries constantly remark on the “unreal nature of the experience.” The most authentic part of the whole episode for me is the rhetorical question *Appa* poses to me at one point when I am still mired in issues of confidentiality, choice, and agency, “What if this had happened to your own sister?”

Yes, what if it was my own sister instead of Fariha? Would I have not thought of words other than confidentiality, choice, and agency instead, words that I cannot translate into English? In my initial interactions with Fariha, in my attempt to have access to data, I dexterously mobilized my multiple identities. For instance, I got into the older sister mode with Fariha quite smoothly because of our shared Punjabi ethnicity. When it came to defining empowerment for Fariha, however, I set myself apart from the cultural bridge that connects me to her family. Choosing to ally myself with my Western modes of thought, I became the so-called objective “feminist,” detaching myself from my subjectivity as a Pakistani Muslim woman and from my familial relationship with Fariha.

### III

I get off the telephone feeling amused, exasperated, worried, relieved, all at the same time. My mother is up to her old tricks again. My father just told me how she hides the fruit from him, follows him to the kitchen to see he does not eat the food cooked by her or her children, and this morning even snatched his plate of toast and butter from in front of him, saying she has saved the bread for her daughter. If *Abbu* tries to cook, Mamma complains incessantly about the mess he makes and now has told him to acquire a stove of his own. These are all signs that Mamma is feeling better after her surgery, but my poor father is suffering, and it is getting difficult to eat again, knowing *Abbu* is probably hungry. My mother does have a rationale for her treatment of her husband. Her logic is something like this: after his retirement and move to the United States my father is not fulfilling his role as a provider, so she too deserves to retire as his wife and home-maker. They are living with their children, but again Mamma has more rights over them because she helped them with their early schooling and made sure they were trained into civilized, sensible human beings.

I turn on my computer. Instead of diligently working on my dissertation, I load the “paintbrush” program and play with colors. This is an old habit of mine. Even when I was a child, *Abbu* and Mamma used to confide their troubles to me. After listening to them, I would lock myself up in the bathroom – I shared a bedroom with my three siblings – and proceed to destroy any paint-box I could lay my hands on. I could not

draw realistic sketches, and I always got Cs in art (they never failed me, because I was their star student). But I liked mixing colors. I still do.

I cannot remember Mamma ever being happy with *Abbu*. I could not understand why my sweet-tempered, sensitive father irritated her so much. I myself got impatient with *Abbu* for putting up with so much abuse. I used to pray for him to get more strength. I still do not understand everything about my parents' relationship. But now I do perceive the irony of my mother feeling cheated out of a real man because my father is not enough of a patriarch in a very patriarchal society. She resents his reaping any of the benefits of being born a male and tries to ensure he does not have any privileges on the domestic front. She said once that she was more of a man than my father could ever be.

I am still playing with colors, but now starting to feel guilty. I have not had my fill of orange and green, my favorite colors, but I know in order to be on schedule I should at least try to compile all the data illustrating the nature of hybridity<sup>14</sup> today. The year 1994 is coming to an end, and I need to embark officially on the dissertation writing stage. So far, it has been very difficult to analyze the material about hybridity. It is so hard to be focused, concise and clear about an obsession. The orange and green web on the screen in front of me is invaded by splashes of purple spray paint as I let myself slide into my compulsive questioning mode.

How far back in time and space should I go when talking about the hybridization of meaning systems and identities? How do I date the rupturing of my own ethnic identity. Could I just trace that rupturing to when my village-born father became the first person in his family to attend the school set up by the British government or did it all begin more recently just before I was born when my father received the award for a PhD in the U.S.? Or did my hybrid state come into being when my paternal great-grandfather, who was born a Sikh, converted to Islam because a voice in the fields told him to go to Makkah? Or was it more significant that my maternal Hindu great-grandfather chose to migrate to the Punjab from Persia and became a Muslim to avoid going to trial after being accused of murder? What about my great-grandmothers and their stories? Why does no one talk about them?

The ringing of the phone interrupts my questioning and my computerized spray-painting. I wait for the answering machine to go on. I decide to screen the call. My mother's voice, strident and incisive, "Luby, if you are there, pick up at once" and my own cheery, rather phony-sounding recorded message reverberate in my tiny studio simultaneously.

Mamma will definitely ask how much I have accomplished today. I am in no mood to be scolded, nor do I feel up to lying. I do not pick up. Instead I think about Mamma's multiple migrations and her relationship to formal education, particularly higher education. The last time she was visiting my apartment my mother's glasses got misplaced. "Books! Cursed books!" She exclaimed angrily and knocked a few of them on to the floor as she searched the shelf where she thought she had earlier kept her glasses (I later found them in the kitchen). I was deeply hurt; Mamma was cursing my entire life. I grew up hearing Mamma instruct her daughters to stay away from men who have PhDs, and so I knew I was already engaging in inappropriate behavior by studying for a PhD myself. Still, Mamma has always been pushing me to do well in school, and I know from my older cousins how she broke her jewelry to protest her marriage to my father because she wanted to go to college instead. What does Mamma's frustration with books really mean?

Mamma first came to a small university town in the U.S. with her baby daughter in the mid-1960s to join her husband who was then pursuing a doctorate. She cooked

and cleaned for him, had two more children, and sewed herself *shalwar kameezes* out of material bought during her midday explorations of the downtown before she went back to Pakistan in the early 1970s. During this time period, before she had her son, she tried killing herself and her two small daughters because the letters from my father’s family indicated their unhappiness with her inability to provide an heir to the family’s mystic legacy.

Mamma returned to the U.S., to another small university town in the mid-1990s, this time to join her daughter who is now working towards a doctorate. Unlike my father, she is very understanding of my need to live by myself in my own little studio apartment. She cooks and cleans (although not for her husband), takes care of her grandchild (my sister’s baby), and keeps a watchful eye on her older daughter’s progress with her dissertation in between sessions of debilitating chemotherapy and bouts of intensive crying. She was diagnosed with breast cancer three months after she moved to the United States, and her younger son was killed in a car accident four months before she left Pakistan.

Tears well up in my eyes. I ignore them and get busy retrieving the file entitled “Analysis.” I scroll through the document after it is loaded. I am pleased to realize that although I am still technically working on hybridity, I have a lot of work already done on resistance and empowerment.<sup>15</sup> I know what I want to say. I just do not know how to say it. The data are supporting what I have known for a long time and have never learned how to articulate very clearly. There is no one right path to empowerment; there is no one right way to enact resistance against oppressive power relations. The terms of resistance and bids for empowerment emerge out of the specific circumstances of a particular life, and who is to say what terms and which bids are more efficacious? What matters is the challenging of power relations.

I am stifled by my own abstractions and realize I need to either listen to tapes from my data set or go through transcripts and field-notes to regain a sense of how the lives of the four research participants anchor the theoretical observations. I flip through my transcripts, and the scribbled notes in the margins somehow transport me to the era when discourse analysis was the focus of my graduate work. I mull over my interactions with the other Pakistani female graduate students during my two and a half years’ stay in Hawai’i. It was those interactions that paved the way for the writing of this dissertation on resistance and empowerment.

Of the five women from Pakistan at the East–West Center going to graduate school at the University of Hawai’i, I was the only one whose mother was not a professional or whose paternal and maternal grandfathers did not have illustrious records of either serving or fighting the British rule in India. Moreover, although I was the youngest, I was the only one whose family was “backward” enough to make sure I was married before I was allowed to study outside my country. Yet I never accepted I was not enough of a feminist because my family or myself were not liberated. The continual insistence by some of these women that my family was more oppressive than theirs because my mother did not finish high school or because I did not even know what feminism was before I came to the U.S. did not detract from my realization of the value of the resistance enacted by me or my mother. I just needed to figure out a way to talk about the contextual nature of resistance and oppression.

I have been conscious of my marginality<sup>16</sup> for a long time now. Mamma wanted to leave my father when I was eight. My aunt, her older sister, begged her to stay for the sake of Salman and Noman, her sons. I was surprised my aunt had not mentioned my name. I was the oldest child, my mother’s favorite, and the one who always stood first

in class. Then the woman who sometimes helped my mother out with her seasonal cleaning emphatically told my four-year-old little brother when I was ten that I could not be the prime minister to *Abbu* King and Mamma Queen because I was “*paraya dhan*,” an outsider’s wealth, and my brother Noman, who was the third child, was the one qualified for the position.

At thirteen I was considered the most intelligent child on both sides of my extended family, yet I began to realize I was not going to be seen as a good enough match for any of my cousins by their parents unless I paid some attention to the domestic sphere that I had started to see as my mother’s prison. I decided to forfeit the claims to beautiful clothes and ostentatious displays of affection that accompany a marriage proposal from a cousin because I could not force myself to do what Mamma did even as she lamented her *kismet*. I had to get a higher degree, be like my father, in order not to be as angry as Mamma. Despite being proud of my accomplishments, my mother at times has expressed her resentment of my path over the years. Does she feel betrayed? I wish I could explain to Mamma how my resistance has taken a form different than hers, but it is her resistance that has made mine possible.

I give up looking at the transcripts. I am not into the women enough today. Maybe I should go for a walk. It might take my mind off my life and my mother’s life. Why did I not write a dissertation about my mother? Why did I go out and seek other Pakistani Muslim women and investigate their marginality, hybridity, resistance, and empowerment, when I keep on going back to the history of my own consciousness? And then why did I choose to situate myself in the field of Education? I used to wonder if I was obtaining a degree in Education almost by default, but now I am aware that I am fascinated by the role of formal education in women’s lives. Perhaps it all goes back to the historical gold bracelet, the one my mother denies flatly she ever broke. “Only people with no practical sense want to go to college,” she says as she looks me squarely in the eye.

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### Notes

1. Spivak (1993) points out how the nature of her “Third-Worldness” as an intellectual from an élite background in a developing country teaching in the West differed from the “Third-Worldness” of a peasant woman in India. In a similar vein, and more specifically concerned with the complex positioning of an ethnographer researching his or her so-called cultural group, Narayan (1993) asks, “How native is a ‘native’ anthropologist?” Arguing for anthropologists to engage in the “enactment of hybridity” (p. 681) whereby the constant reconstitution of the researcher’s identities in different contexts is acknowledged, she writes, “Whether we are disempowered or empowered by prevailing power relations, we must all take responsibility for how our personal locations feed not just into our fieldwork interactions but also our scholarly texts. When professional personas efface situated and experiencing selves, this makes for misleading scholarship even as it does violence to the range of hybrid personal and professional identities that we negotiate in our daily lives” (p. 681).

Visweswaran (1994) makes a similar argument for anthropologists to move from a politics of identity to a

politics of identification and to study the shifting, multiple subject positionings of the researcher in order to take responsibility for the knowledge being produced as well as to study the so-called postcolonial self itself as a site where multiple centers of power inscribe their meanings. Lavie (1990), Kondo (1990), Abu-Lughod (1992), and Behar (1993) are examples of anthropologists who have enacted hybridity in their writing in order to highlight the complexity of their positioning vis-à-vis their research participants and to illustrate how the self is transformed by the ethnographic process.

This present paper is my attempt to problematize my positionality as a Pakistani Muslim woman “studying” other Pakistani Muslims as well as my bid to contextualize the research project within those aspects of my self that are for the most part denied voice in mainstream academic discourse. Here I strive to represent, 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).

2. The term “reflexive” has been used by several people writing about ethnography and other forms of qualitative research. Whereas Lather’s (1991) notion of self-reflexivity as an attempted deconstruction of one’s work and the desire behind the work has influenced my own particular conception, Trinh’s (1989) usage best reflects my understanding of the term, “There is no such thing as a coming face to face once and for all with objects; the real remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech. In writing close to the other of the other, I can only choose to maintain a self-reflexively critical relationship toward the material, a relationship that defines both the subject written and the writing subject, undoing the I, while asking “what do I want wanting to *know* you or me?” (p. 76).

3. I have italicized Arabic, Punjabi, and Urdu words. A glossary (Appendix 1) lists translation equivalents in English.

4. My dissertation research was a critical feminist ethnographic analysis of the processes whereby young Pakistani Muslim immigrant women in Northern California forge hybrid cultural hybrid identities in response to their experiences and interaction with changing contextual realities within formal educational as well as community contexts. Using the margins as a site of resistance, these women deployed their hybrid identities and world-views to enact resistance against oppressive power relations in various contexts resulting in either their empowerment or further disempowerment in those contexts. I drew from feminist anthropological theories (e.g., Trinh, 1989, 1991; Abu-Lughod, 1990; Lather, 1991; Behar, 1993; Visweswaran, 1994), the body of literature on critical ethnography (e.g., Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Thomas, 1993), and poststructuralist critiques of anthropology (e.g., Clifford, 1988) to devise my particular conception of critical feminist ethnography. Using participant observation and various interview-interactive data-collection techniques, I was officially in the “field” for two years, April, 1992–April, 1994. My involvement with the women, their families, and the larger community circles within which they participated has continued to the present and was particularly intense when I was analyzing and writing up the data in the period between May, 1994, and August, 1995, before I moved from California.

5. All people with the exception of me, the researcher and the writer, have been given pseudonyms.

6. The on-campus Muslim Student Association comprised American Muslims as well as international students who identified themselves as Muslims. Not all of the Muslim students were of Arab origin.

7. The Omnibus Counterterrorism Act of 1995 was introduced on February 10, 1995, as H.R. 896 in the House and as S. 390 in the Senate. It was subsequently signed by President Clinton in April, 1996. This Contract on the Constitution allows the U.S. government to deport aliens convicted of no crime at all, based on secret information. It violates notions of equal protection by making aliens, but not U.S. citizens who engage in the same conduct, responsible for a wide range of federal crimes unrelated to immigration status. Under this Act, aliens who contribute to the legal, nonviolent, even charitable activities of organizations or governments unpopular with the U.S. government are deplorable. The Act was ostensibly introduced to make it easier for authorities to evict immigrants suspected of terrorism.

8. South Asia includes the countries of the Indian subcontinent – Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, the island of Sri Lanka, and sometimes Afghanistan.

9. Theories that fall under the rubric of poststructuralism as well as postcolonialism generally stress the fluid nature of identity and are built around the notion of self as multiple and are contingent on the working of power relations informing a particular context. Ultimately, there is no authentic self; each manifestation of what we perceive as the self is a response to the demands of a context, a specific performance and representation. See Sarup (1993) for a delineation of this dimension of poststructuralist thought and Bhabha (1996) for a treatment of the subject from a postcolonial perspective.

10. “I, too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, *choose, choose*” (Rushdie, 1994, p. 211).

11. Grewal and Kaplan (1994) write, “when the United States gave billions to General Zia of Pakistan to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, the United States propped up a regime that was inimical to women” (p. 19). For a succinct analysis of the U.S. involvement in Pakistan’s affairs during the U.S.S.R.’s occupation of Afghanistan, see Bajpai and Cohen (1993).

12. The publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* in 1988 generated a controversy that led to rioting and violence in different parts of the world. Muslim communities were offended by what they perceived as Rushdie’s defamation of the Prophet Muhammad and his life.

13. Reciprocity in a research design has been put forth by feminist researchers as a way to mitigate the exploitative potential of the researcher–researched hierarchy (Skeggs, 1994). Following Golde (1970/1986),

I wanted to give back something concrete to the participants for allowing me to collect the data. Given my relative familiarity with both so-called home and school cultures, I assumed the role of a counselor and broker for the research participants in institutional and community contexts.

14. Hybridity results through the yoking together of unlikely traditions of thought. Hybrids, those in a state of hybridity, exhibit hybrid identities as well as hybrid world-views deriving from different systems of meaning. According to Bhabha (1990, p. 207), “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity... hybridity is the third space which enables other positions to emerge... sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives... a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.”

15. Resistance refers to the opposition to structures of domination. Resistance is essentially contextual and can be deployed in spaces that open up because of the fluid, constantly shifting, nonhomogeneous nature of power relations. This notion of resistance is based primarily on a reading of Foucault (1978, 1982) and Sandoval (1991).

Empowerment implies a change in power relations in a certain context. These power relations are multilayered and dynamic (Foucault, 1978). My conception of empowerment is based on an explicit transnational perspective (as in for example Basch, Schiller & Blanc, 1994), whereby the sphere for political power goes beyond the nation-state and incorporates an understanding of global relations of power.

16. Marginality refers to the fluid, complex, and disputatious condition of existing in peripheral relations to the centers of power (Tucker, 1990).

### Appendix 1. Glossary of italicized words and phrases

*Abbu* – father

*Allah* – Arabic word for God used by Muslims

*Appa* – a term of respect for an older sister or someone you want to give that status

*hijab* – the Muslim veil; a headscarf worn by certain Muslim women to cover their hair

*kismet* – fate; destiny

*Maghrib* – the Muslim evening prayer; after sunset

*mamoon* – mother’s brother, maternal uncle

*nikah* – the Muslim marriage contract

*paraya dhan* – literally meaning wealth belonging to someone else; refers to status of daughters in a family

*shalwar kameez* – the Pakistani national dress, although worn in other South Asian countries, and by South Asians elsewhere; an outfit consisting of a tunic and baggy trousers worn by both women and men

*Ummah* – the Muslim community of believers that transcends ethnic, national boundaries; the followers of the Prophet Muhammad

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