

# **Immigrant Lives, New Horizons: Some Arab Canadian Women's Experiences in Greater Metropolitan Toronto**

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## **An overview**

Immigrant women are important participants in the migration process, and life accounts of first-generation female immigrants to Canada are significant documents in a multicultural society that values different voices. However, the study of Arab women's migration to Canada has received very little attention in academic circles in spite of the growing numbers of Arabs who make Canada their permanent home. This paper is an initial attempt to "fill-in" the gap in our knowledge by providing some information and basic questions for further in-depth research on Arab Canadian women. Its major objective is to chronicle and examine some of the experiences of contemporary first generation Arab women who have migrated to the Greater Toronto Area and to analyze the bridging processes and coping mechanisms used in making the transition from their former countries to their new land.

This paper is the result of a survey conducted in October 2001 with a sample of seventeen Arab women. Although the sample was somewhat random, the participants were selected on the basis of several characteristics: Namely, that they were women over the age of 18 years, first generation immigrants who have lived in the Greater Toronto Area with a wide-ranging length of residency, and the sample would be mirroring to some extent the proportion of Arab nationalities and religious affiliation represented in Toronto. The countries of origin they represent are: Lebanon (6), Syria (1), Jordan (1), Palestine (1), Iraq (2), Egypt (3), Sudan (1), and Morocco (1), and they hail from different religious backgrounds, such as Christians (4), Muslims (12), and Druze (1).

The questions were focused around some specific topics, such as reasons for leaving the country of origin, the migration and settlement experience, barriers and challenges faced, bridging and acculturation processes, and perception of Canadian culture. The objective is to have these Arab Canadian women tell their own stories and thus glean themes from the issues that matter to them.

Several themes emerged throughout the course of the interviews. Loneliness, alienation, invisibility, and a sense of dislocation dominated the landscape of their lives. Yet concurrently, their stories revealed great courage, and a determination to face obstacles and succeed against the currents of rejection and discrimination. Each of their stories intersects along shared experiences, yet their lives and issues are as varied and unique as each of these women are.

## **Push factors**

Ontario has always been the province of choice for immigrants from the Arab world especially since the 1950's (Ohan and Hayani, 1993). According to Statistics Canada, Ontario is home to 43 percent of the total Arab population in Canada (1996 Census). Being the largest and one of the most prosperous urban cities in Ontario, indeed Canada, the Greater Toronto Area is a particular magnet for immigrants of many different ethnic groups including the Arabs. It is the home of almost 30 percent of all Arabs living in Canada (Statistics Canada).

In the period following World War II, especially from the 1960's on, the newly decolonized Arab world was undergoing rapid socioeconomic development and political upheaval causing political and economic instability in many Arab nations (Ohan and Hayani, 1993). The main contributing factors include the festering Arab-Israeli conflict and the subsequent displacement of the Palestinian population with its overspill into other states. Also, the civil war in Lebanon, the Iran-Iraq war, and the 1991 Gulf War have increased dislocation. In addition, instability in the region is further compounded by mismanagement of wealth and Western exploitation - especially in the oil producing Arab countries - which created a widening gap between rich and poor, and lack of jobs opportunities for a young and increasingly educated generation (Suleiman, 1999).

These events, among others, have created push factors that propelled many Arabs to leave their countries of origin and seek a better life abroad. Many women migrated with their families to seek a new life away from the turmoil in their homeland and came looking for the stability and security that Canada is reputed to offer. They gave up homes, jobs, and the support of close relatives in exchange for a better life for themselves and their children. Others came independently seeking adventure and opportunity. They emigrated of their own will, or were encouraged to emigrate, believing that only through migration could they acquire a better future for themselves. Although some respondents indicate that they had planned to be here for short period of time hoping to return home one day, imperceptibly they developed roots in Canada and remained here.

## **Arrival and settlement**

Human migration is a complex social and cultural process with far-reaching effects on the life of each individual. Even when willingly chosen and eagerly sought, it produces a variety of experiences with significant consequences that shapes one's sense of perception of self and society. Rogler points out that "the study of migrations is first and foremost the study of how social networks are disassembled and reassembled during the cross-cultural movement towards incorporation in the host society" (1994: 704). The crossing of borders is not a process restricted to geography and physical space; it is also a crossing of social and economic systems and cultures that triggers emotional and behavioural adjustments. By becoming members of a new society, immigrant women's experiences of cultural transition are often expressed in feelings of dislocation, rupture, and loss. These feelings permeate most facets of a person's life, effecting family, community, lifestyle, as well as the activation of the pain of unrootedness in the everyday absence of the familiar and routines of doing the small tasks of daily life. It is

the lack of the "average expectable environment" which can prompt painful feelings of homesickness and cause further disruption to their lives (Espin, 1992: 13).

In addition to these difficulties, immigrant women are deprived of the support and interdependency network they could count on in their country of origin. These informal networks made up of their immediate family or surrounding community (friends and neighbours), were essential means of assistance and part of their survival strategies. Although many Arab Canadian women indicate that the initial period after their arrival was the most difficult, some still feel a sense of dislocation even after many years of residence. One of the respondents stated:

At the beginning I was longing for this social life that we used to have, now I am taken with the flow of life in Canada...now I am more used to it. In Lebanon, people drop in anytime to visit you, here it is different... we are busy and more isolated...but I still miss home!

Furthermore, they must resolve many basic problems, such as difficulties in accessing familiar food, needs regarding health, education, clothing, religion, and leisure. Oftentimes they must take care of integrating all of these necessities even without the support of their spouses. This is especially the case for Arab women whose husbands maintained their businesses in their home country -- at least during the initial period of migration -- in order to retain a steady source of financial support for the family. Hence, many of these women had to juggle the demands of their families while attempting to transition into their new lives without much spousal or familial support. They are parachuted suddenly into a situation where they must take on many additional responsibilities and look out for the welfare of their family. One woman expressed it this way:

My husband commutes between Canada and Iraq. I do not speak English well but I learned the basic words so now I am able to call the utilities companies and ask them to explain their bills. I carry a map with me all the time so I do not get lost in the city...I have always been self reliant, and now I know that I can make it anywhere.

The experiences of these Arab Canadian women took place within a process that is specific to emigration called "culture shock." This phenomenon is not restricted to the few months around their time of arrival; it can last for years, each time that regrets of exile and feelings about the strangeness of a host society come to the fore. For many Arab Canadian women, this shock is experienced partly as a reaction to the strangeness of the climate or the ignorance of Canadian traditions. But most importantly, this shock engenders solitude and nostalgia, and often remains a source of hidden anguish in everyday activities.

Arab Canadian women, just like most immigrants, also have to come to terms with having their values questioned and must ponder how much they wish to assimilate into society, reject, change, or integrate into new social norms. Woodsworth observed that "it takes no little decision of character to undertake to change the whole course of [a migrant's] life ... [great] powers of adaptation are necessary" (1972: 46).

But oftentimes, the price of adaptation can run too high. Some of the sampled women have chosen to seclude themselves from the greater society due to language proficiency problems and a self-perception of difference.

They opt to operate within a world of nostalgia in which they try to recreate the country and culture they left behind, and by remaining surrounded exclusively with other Arab friends and social contacts in order to maintain their psychic links to their original culture. Their lack of interaction with the mainstream allows them to live as a separate culture within Canadian society. They do not feel isolated because they have built a "safe house" for themselves by becoming invisible from the rest.

Few can leave their old world entirely behind, but at the same time, many immigrants have very definite expectations of their new country, and this often magnifies the sense of alienation with which they are immediately confronted. Some, however, adopt differing social mechanisms to deal with this sense of dislocation. The unforeseen sense of cultural shock manifests itself in necessary changes to expectations and a rapid immersion in the environment and in daily activities. Modern studies show that for many immigrants, positive attitudes to the new country are formed for a short time after arrival. This often justifies the momentous decision to migrate and helps reduce the strain of relocation (McCormack, 1978). One respondent stated that she did not have the "luxury" of feeling sorry for herself. She arrived to Canada with her family at the end of the summer and her kids started school a week later. She said that she became involved in the community almost immediately by volunteering at their school and by connecting with other Lebanese immigrants:

I am on the go all the time...since I stepped in this country I have not stopped for a minute...yes I did miss my relatives back home, but you learn to adjust. The only painful moment for me was when I heard that my dad passed away shortly after we left. That is when it all came together for me...it was difficult.

According to Mead, adaptation and assimilation are conditional upon the degree of openness of the host society. In addition, the manner in which migrants interact with their new environment is essential to the outcome of their adaptation. "Until one can respond to himself as the community responds to him, he does not genuinely belong to that community" (Mead, 1956: 253). Therefore, the sense of self, identity, and community are concurrent developments. The newcomer thus must intermingle in her new surroundings in order to develop a sense of community and to achieve a revised sense of self. This intercultural interaction entails among other things "interpersonal variations in language behaviour, feelings of ethnic identity, and psychological adjustment" (Noels and Clements, 1996: 214).

According to Stasiulis, ethnic identity refers to the "world views, traditions, and practices brought by immigrants to Canada and dynamically reproduced and transformed within the Canadian context" (1990: 278) and it results from the development of an ethnic consciousness that emerges through the process of migration.

As Burnet states: "Immigration and ethnicity are almost invariable linked...it is through the meeting of peoples that ethnic consciousness develops" (1986: 2).

Ethnic identity includes a sense of belonging to a group that defines itself as a community of solidarity and commonality with a shared set of meanings and a web of symbolic and mythic markers. Ethnic communities mark themselves off from other groups by various boundary mechanisms, of which language and religion are most significant (Geertz, 1963). Maintaining those two very

important elements of Arabic culture is very evident for the majority of the women interviewed. Most of them insisted that their children learn Arabic and practice their faith. Some even send their kids to Islamic schools and are themselves active volunteers in these schools. The Christian women are equally committed to passing the heritage of faith and language, and for some, the church has acted as a bridge to the new society. One respondent indicated that had it not been for the Coptic Church she belongs to, she would have been totally lost in the Canadian landscape:

They took care of all our needs...if you want to learn how to drive, they would refer you to a driving school...my kids made new friends who hold the same values as their friends back home in Egypt.

But in many instances, some of the Arab Canadian women who were interviewed also expressed frustrations at the culture clash resulting from their kids' immersion in the mainstream of Canadian society. Teaching culturally prescribed moral codes and rules of conduct according to "old world" values is not an easy feat. These women are caught in a dilemma between their high expectations for their children, and acknowledgement that if they are to succeed, they must do so on Canadian terms.

However, they have not abandoned the wish that their children maintain certain key elements of Arab values, particularly in the areas of family interrelationships and marriage. Most of these women expressed a desire for their children to marry eventually within the Arab culture and thus maintain the traditions of heritage and the continual immersion in Arab Canadian society.

It is interesting to note however, that although most of the respondents expressed a strong attachment to Arab values and traditions, these women articulated their ethnicity and self-identification in a variety of ways. Some asserted their Arab roots as being first and foremost the only marker of their ethnic identity, while others chose a hyphenated labeling of dual nationalities such as Lebanese-Canadian or Iraqi-Canadian. Some even identified themselves through their religious affiliation. One of the respondents further commented: "In Egypt, I am Egyptian, here I see myself and others see me as Copt, Egyptian, and Canadian!"

## **Emerging themes**

From the moment of arrival to the new land, immigrants are faced with identity related confusion, starting with the labeling imposed on them from the host society, transforming them from an immigrant, to a member of an ethnic group or race, thus a separate and different entity from the mainstream (Abu Laban, 1980). The term "immigrant woman" thus,

...refers not so much to legal status as to the processes of social construction in everyday life which describe some women who are visibly and audibly different in characteristics such as skin colour, language or accent, religion, dress, food customs, and so on (Ralston, 1996, p. 3).

In Statistics Canada's Census, Arabs are categorized as "non-white," therefore given a racial identity and labeled as "visible minority." Fleras and Elliott point out that,

"the 'minority' term, socially speaking, is not a numerical value but a social relation in which one party lacks power or access to scarce resources" (1996: 278). For Arab Canadians, this designation or label has no basis in objectivity or biology, but is purely dictated by politics and neo-colonial ideologies. In the United States and England for example, the census categorizes Arabs as "white" (Nagel, 2001). This difference in categorization only serves to prove the absurdity and racist basis for such labeling and adds to the marginality and misunderstanding of Arab Canadians. It also demonstrates the "fluidity of racial identity within the contextual specificity of racial ideologies and racialized practices" (Nagel, 2001: 381).

So how does these racialized identities translate into the lives of Arab Canadian women? First, it relegates them into the category of "colour." They are thus a coloured minority with all its implication of "otherness." It places them in "the processes and social practices by which certain groups are deemed biologically distinct and socially inferior and subjected to oppressive circumstances" (Nagel, 2001: 383). Hence, they are viewed and understood in public discourse to be foreign element in relation to the "Whiteness" of Canada, a separate group of dubious character that is non-homogenous to Canadian society, and indeed fundamentally inimical to it. The consequences of such labeling are manifested in incidences of racism, prejudice, alienation, and invisibility.

In addition, these Arab Canadian women are at the intersection of the collective experiences of the group "women" and the group "persons of colour." In this situation, the dynamics are both unique and difficult, resulting in individual and collective disadvantage, and systemic marginalization, as manifested through the neo-colonialist policies that have historically marred Canadian immigration and social policies (Ralston, 1996).

Moreover, for Arab Canadians, the often-volatile political climate between the Arab nation-states and the West - North America in particular - in the past quarter of a century has further complicated the problem of marginality in their host societies. Some have termed this problem "political racism" (Shakir, 1997). It is integrally intertwined with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East and its various manifestations. Currently, it has been further exacerbated by the latest terrorist events of September 11th, 2001. In addition, the media have played a significant role in the inaccurate and negative portrayal of Arab Canadians by perpetuating and disseminating inaccurate stereotypes and reinforcing general negative sentiments regarding the Arab people and their culture. The media also act as a powerful agent in the shaping of the perceptions of personal and national identity of Canadian-ness and the lens through which Arab Canadians' "reality" is perceived (Bullock and Jafri, 2000).

Most of the women in this study expressed a sense of alienation from a culture that inaccurately depicts them as weak, oppressed, or just different. This is further reinforced by the absence from Canadian society of Arab Canadian women's voices. Ardner calls it "mutedness" and "muted groups". This theory suggests that there are prevailing modes of expression in any society which have been generated by the dominant structure within it:

In any situation, only the dominant mode of the relevant groups will be heard, the muted groups if they wish to communicate must express themselves in terms of this mode, rather than in ones which they might otherwise have generated independently" (Ardener, 1978: 20).

Western feminism is the voice of White women who, although are subject to discrimination,

...their membership of a privileged racial group softens the impact of gender discrimination and works against their identification with... [minority] women as women with shared problems" (Walker, 1990: 11).

This mutedness or lack of voice only serves to conceal the reality of Arab Canadian women and entails misrepresentation and invisibility within their "official" visible minority status. It also reflects some level of exclusion from social and cultural participation in Canadian culture.

For Arab Canadian women, their invisibility is expressed through a sense of non-belonging related to an awareness or perception of difference. It is also a form of alienation or anomie, which is defined as "a painful uneasiness or anxiety, a feeling of separation from group standards, a feeling of pointlessness" (Dean, 1961: 754). It is the outcome of the differentiation of power and prestige embedded in socially constructed evaluations of groups (Merton, 1938). The feelings of anomie, or lack of a sense of being a part of a larger social unit, are in direct correlation to membership in groups that occupy lower rungs of power and prestige.

For Arab Canadian women, their ethnic identity thus poses a problem, even a crisis that is experienced by each individual differently, and is processed according to their unique circumstances and situations. Some Arab Canadian women have internalized prevailing culture structures because unlike members of the dominant population, they are otherwise prohibited from structural or full assimilation into the Canadian society. Their willingness to assimilate at any cost leads to internal conflict and as a result, Arab Canadian women may develop disdain for the values of their Arab identity because this disdain is an expression of the dominant culture's values.

This conflict has been termed "double-consciousness" by DuBois (1903/1989) who saw the socially constructed ethnic identity as defined by two conflicted cultural essences including a "colonial model that represents cultural identity not as something essential, but as the internalization of a subaltern social position dictated by hegemonic power relations" (Hale, 1994: 449). Thus, those who aspire to assimilate in the context of domination focus their effort to distance themselves from their own Arab ethnicity and its symbols. Such is the case for some of the respondents who indicated that in their places of employment, they purposely discard any expression of their Arab-ness in return for approval and acceptance by their "Canadian" colleagues. One respondent expressed it this way:

I hate my accent, that is the worst thing for me...I want to lose my accent...I do not want people to know who I truly am...I am living here, I am a Canadian citizen and I do not want be different from the rest of Canadians...that is the only way for me to gain a good job."

She went on to say that although she is proud to be Iraqi, her physical appearance of fair skin and green eyes allows her to pass for a European, and that she uses this feature to her advantage in order to hide her Arab ethnicity.

Hence, for some Arab Canadian women, shedding their ethnic identity in the public sphere, denying their true self, and blending in according to the

dominant society's values and standards, are ways in which they perceive attainment of success on

Canadian terms. The privilege of Whiteness is not limited to material benefits:  
The

dominant norms and standards of Whiteness also shapes one's perception of reality and mold everything people come to understand about the world and themselves and what is right and acceptable.

For Arab Canadian women, racial invisibility has not been a matter of choice. In being positioned at the borders of White cultural norms, Arab Canadian women negotiate dual – and often conflicted – identities of a private and public self. While they are vocal in their desire not to be “othered,” many of these women are also interested in being folded into a broader cultural identity that supports their integration into Canadian society.

## **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, it is clear that from the standpoint of the seventeen women who participated in this study, international migration to a new country to settle and start a new life in a different environment and unfamiliar culture was indeed a dramatic step to take. Although all of them came here willingly and in the hope of making a safer and more prosperous future for themselves and their family, their adjustment was not an easy process. They had to face many obstacles: isolation, racism, invisibility, as well as difficulties in understanding and integrating into Canadian society.

They are also on personal journeys to redefine their identities and to confront the restrictive specters of racism and sexism that plague their lives. As Taylor argues, a person's awareness of the “fundamental defining characteristics as a human being” (1992: 25) is dialogically generated in relationship with others and with one's culture. How they are recognized by others affects the essential notions of who they are. Non-recognition or even worse, invisibility, can have hurtful effects and thus be detrimental to their integration into Canadian society.

Arab Canadian women are frequently confronted with shifting cultural boundaries that are subject to the external setting of their new environment, and to internal factors of heritage and embedded traditions. They must barter between sets of values and cultural norms that often seem incompatible (Kadi, 1994). Moreover, there is ambivalence about the costs of adjustments and assimilation in both the private and public sphere. And whereas there are commonalities in their response to their new environment, each of these women is unique and different. Although they share a common Arab ethnicity, they hail from various nations and religious backgrounds and bring with them unique flavours and traditions from their respective regions. They cannot be treated as a fully homogeneous category; gender, ethnicity, national origin, and religion intersect in their lived experience of migration but produce diverse outcomes. And unless more research is conducted, Arab women in Canada will continue to be misunderstood and invisible within the Canadian landscape.

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