

Arwah Abiya From the Arabian Peninsula:
A Narrative Inquiry of Seven Women
With Fiery Resistor Spirits

by

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ABSTRACT

The topic of my research is the lives of resisters with *arwah abiya*. *Arwah* is the plural word of *rouh*, which means soul or spirit. *Abiya* is an adjective, from the verb *yabaa*, which means to resist and fight injustice, humiliation, or any controlling power.

The purpose of this inquiry is to understand living the life of a resister as a way of being. The six women of my research and myself, the seventh, are all from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We are Muslim and Arabs.

Being an Arab Muslim researcher of human science, I do not believe in an epistemology that claims one true “reality.” Neither do I believe in a corresponding theory of truth. Any truth is always culturally and temporally contingent. In my worldview all human-made or human-reached truths and knowledge are perspectival.

My research has been a journey of narrative inquiry. It has employed narrative to generate knowledge, telling a story as my way of spontaneously and authentically relating to others. I used stories in three key ways. First, I used stories as a data-gathering method. Stories were used by the women and the researcher as the culturally appropriate means of relating and learning about their lives. Second, as a researcher, stories were also used as a way of generating and transforming knowledge of the resister way of being and used as a way to represent and communicate that knowledge to my readers. What knowledge my stories carry varies with each reader. Third, stories also transformed me, the researcher, as a knower. I particularly stayed open and ready to hear and see what Allah revealed, made possible for me to know.

These spirits live out their destinies from an unchangeable core. They live it out assisted with gifts, and they recharge the inner energy in places of rest.

Examiners:

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Dedications	vii
“Just Looking for Trouble”	viii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Researching Resistors	8
My Research Topic	8
A Resistor’s Life	9
A Document From the Archives of My Past	11
From Memory	12
Women Resistors on the Path	14
What Is a Resistor?	17
Resistor Spirit and Destiny	19
Excerpt From the Journal of a Resistor (2002)	21
An Inner Dialogue	21
Aspects of the Resistor Character	22
Elusive Naming of an Elusive Way of Being	23
Other Researchers	25
Chapter 2: Researching As a Resistor	33
The Arab Thread	35
The Muslim Thread	39
The Sufi Thread	44
The Resistor Thread	47
Worldview and Reality	48
My Theory (<i>Nazariya</i>) of Knowledge	49
Chapter 3: Storying As Methodology	55
A Search for Methodology	55
Interviews and Selection of Participants	67
The Process of Translation	71
Multiple Meanings of Validity	74
Ethics Are Culturally Situated	77
Chapter 4: Narrating Resistors’ Stories	79
Five Dramas	79
The First Drama	80
The Second Drama	82
The Third Drama	83
The Fourth Drama	83
The Fifth Drama	84

Narrative Style	85
The Women's Quarters Storyteller	86
The Stories of the Seven Women With <i>Arwah Abiya</i>	87
Gasstoor	89
Phoenix	99
Undercover	109
Salata	116
Tree	126
Inad	132
Hopes	138
First Snapshot	138
Second Snapshot	139
Third Snapshot	140
Fourth Snapshot	142
Aspects of a Resistor Way of Being	144
Living Out a Destiny	145
Gifts To Assist in Living Out That Destiny	146
Places of Test	147
Places of Rest	149
Purposeful Spirits	149
Chapter 5: Reflecting on the Journey	151
Chaos With Order	153
Challenges of a Resistor's Research	156
When Writing Becomes an Act of Resistance As Well	160
As an Act of Hope	
The Openness: <i>Faraj</i>	162
My Heart Signaled the End	163
References	165

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Dedications

To my mother Noor Elyas, your love and patience help me understand living with a resistor spirit.

To my daughter Dunya and my son Tariq, your fiery beings exemplify aspects of living with a resistor spirit.

And, to my late father Hassan Elyas, who held my daughter on our last visit and said to me, "You are a mom now. Allah willing, you will be a doctor one day."

Just Looking for Trouble

I once had a student
Who would sit alone in his house at night
Shivering with worries
And fears. . . .
Then one day my pity
Crafted for him a knife
From my own divine sword.
Since then. . . .
Not only has he lost all fear,
Now he goes out
Just looking for
Trouble.

(Hafiz, 1999, p. 82)

Introduction

The topic of my research is the lives of resisters with *arwah abiya*. *Arwah* is the plural word of *rouh*, which means soul or spirit. *Abiya* is an adjective, from the verb *yabaa*, which means to resist and fight injustice, humiliation, or any controlling power. *Ibaa* is the noun of the verb *yabaa*. I would say that the Arabic word *ibaa* describes a concept or a stand in life and cannot possibly be translated into one word in English. It is a mode of living that colors all aspects of one's life.

To live with *ibaa*, one stands up against any injustice around and resists, regardless of the cost, and one refuses to follow or unquestionably conform. With *ibaa* one does not seek to be liked or approved of by the people living at society's center, but rather one finds life energy in resisting from the margins. With a *rouh abiya* one lives a life where all interpretations, all decisions, all views have to resonate with that spirit, the unchangeable core at the seat of one's heart.

By *resisting* I do not mean only resisting as a reaction to an act of oppression by external forces. I speak here of living the life of a resistor as *a way of being*. Any external forces of injustice or oppression would invoke a woman living with a *resistor spirit* to speak up, fight back, resist and take a strong stand against these external forces. A resistor would not accept confiscation of her voice. She would not obey when her inner powers are taken away. She forsakes tangible rewards if she feels that the price is her silence or her powerlessness. In addition to resisting external forces, a resistor battles with internal forces as well. By that I mean that when the force is coming from within she will not surrender easily. In order to elucidate my point further I would take as an example how a resistor desires, as do all humans, to be accepted by the ones closest to her (family members, partners, children, and others), but when that acceptance means her humiliation

or giving up her powers she will resist the voice inside that repeatedly says, “As a daughter, a wife, a mother . . . you are supposed to . . .” A resistor engages with any conviction of any outer institution--social, political, academic, religious, medical, or economical--in a creative internal dialogue that resists, questions, turns it upside down, interrogates, challenges, and seeks alternatives. In other words, a resistor engages with internal forces, voices, and assumptions and debates with the same ferocity, positive stubbornness, and creativity as she shows in her engagements with external forces.

By *positive stubbornness* I mean that stubbornness is not a negative trait by itself. Stubbornness could be self-defeating and destructive when used for the sake of opposing, no more, or less. I consider stubbornness to be positive when, as a resistor, I take a stand firmly and stubbornly, unwilling to compromise or negotiate, particularly when a core at the seat of the heart is at stake.

The six women of my research and myself, the seventh, live our lives within that way of being. We are living with *arwah abiya*. These women have left me with a deep sense of wonder and bewilderment: their wildness, their nonconformity, their risk-taking, their resistance, their strength to stand firm, strong, and tall, dancing to their own tunes, not expecting any applause from the outside world. These women have their own inner reward systems and their own meaning-making systems.

I live as a resistor, with a *rouh abiya*, and my life is a site of studying the resistor way of being. As in Hafiz’s (1999) poem above, I am a student who is out “looking for trouble” in rough terrain, with no fear of the road. Only faith in the Beloved is in my heart. Love is at the roots of my words, and so are the faith and knowledge that I know

only what is revealed to me. By revealed I mean what Allah facilitates, lifts the veil of, and makes possible for me to know.

Being a resistor is not about choosing to be one. It is about growing up and discovering gradually that you are one. When being a resistor draws a high penalty, a resistor camouflages being one--only temporarily--to protect herself and seeks alternative ways to resist with less penalty. Simply put, a woman resistor is wild when she needs to be, or poetic and soft. She is unconventional when conventions need to be challenged and respectful of conventions when they resonate to her resistor way of being. She is exceptionally strong, yet has the gentle heart of an artist or a poetess.

Being a resistor also played a great role in my way of proceeding on the research journey. Resisting as a way of being had its impact on the choice of topic, the methodology, and the method of data gathering. Living with a resistor spirit is my topic, and my life and the lives of the six women resisters whose stories are told in this document are sites where I can study the resistor way of being. As will be explained in more detail in chapter 3, the narrative form of knowing that is rooted in my cultural context has informed both my methodology and my data-gathering tools. In fact, I did not "collect data," so to speak; I collected women resisters' stories. Storytelling was the tool used to construct knowledge of these women resistor spirits. As a resistor I followed convictions in my research journey that resonated with me.

My research writing is a kidnapping. I take readers through the escape door of the tourist bus and on a journey walking through the sandy and dusty alleys of Saudi Arabia. There will be no tourist guide to tell them what should be seen. Rather, the six women of

my research will be speaking of their struggles and their joys, and telling and retelling their stories as resisters with fiery spirits, with tears at some times and laughter at others.

As a researcher I am a Muslim Saudi Arabian woman, who has lived most of her years in a place of tension between the East and the West, a woman whose life fabric has threads of both. During this journey I did not wear Western dress, as some Arab women researchers have done. I wore my traditional Arabian dress and a head cover at times--no high-heels on my feet either, but rather the handmade leather sandals through which my feet felt the hot sand of my Arabian Desert.

Some readers might feel frustrated if they expect a Western-style tour in an air-conditioned bus or Western-decor hotels to reside in during the journey, where Western-flavored Arab meals are served. Instead, the readers will be joining the six women of my research and myself in our Arabian sitting room. The hard cotton mattresses on the floor are the sofas on which we will be seated. The readers will be served light-colored Arabian coffee flavored with cardamom seeds. There will be no chocolate wrapped as in the West, only Arabian dates that have been ripened and sweetened during the scorching summer months.

The first chapter is on the topic of my research and what compelled me to choose life as a resistor to be the topic and my life as a resistor to be the site of my research. In the concluding part of that chapter I will speak of what I envision to be the value of this research to the understanding of Muslim women living with resistor spirits.

The second chapter deals with my worldview as a researcher situated in an Arab/Muslim/Sufi view of the world. I will speak in a greater detail about my life as a fabric composed of four essential threads: Arab, Muslim, Sufi, and resistor threads. I have

experienced living in both the East and West worlds, each of which contributes to weaving the fabric of my life. I will expand in depth the meaning of each thread in the fabric of my life.

The third chapter is on the methodology, or way of proceeding on the research journey. That chapter will include details on how in my search for methodology I honored and stayed true and congruent to my resistor spirit, as well as to my Arab/Muslim/Sufi life context.

In the fourth chapter the stories of the seven women will be shaped and constructed with a focus on the substories in which the spirits of these women are manifested. In the conclusion of that chapter the focus shifts to commenting on various aspects of living with these spirits.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, "Reflecting on the Journey," I noticed how in every event and turn along that path the journey was, in and of itself, another manifestation of living with a resistor spirit.

I understand that the main purpose of an introduction is to prepare readers for the chapters that follow. When I sat next to one of the women from my research in the back seat of her husband's car, she asked me to put the head cover over my face. I was unprepared for this. Her husband drove slowly as we passed by a police station on the way to their house.

When we arrived at their house, she took me to the upper floor where the women of the house resided. She told me the story of that drive, how her husband was reluctant to "allow" her to meet me, and how he threatened to report me to the right authority if he got

in any trouble from my meetings with her. Only then did I understand why he slowed down as we passed the police station.

I knew I had succeeded in winning his appeasement when he sent with her a present for me after our two weeks of daily visits. The present was a recording, a rare collection of folkloric songs from *Hijaz*, the province we both come from and where the holiest places for Muslims are located: *Makkah* and *Madina* (known in the West as Mecca and Medina).

I now realize that his fears and reluctance were due to the fact that I am a woman who lives in the West. Little did he know that his wife, along with the other women of my study, would teach me lessons on living as a resistor.

I did not know the profound depth of these lessons until I had met with the six women in my research. From the first week when I began talking with/listening to the women of my study in Saudi Arabia, I surrendered to the turns and surprises of that journey. In a nutshell, the research journey transformed me in ways that I did not anticipate, both as a resistor and as a researcher. As in the Hafiz (1999) poem above, I became a student who is out “looking for trouble” in rough terrain, with no fear of the road. Only faith in the Beloved is in my heart. Love is at the roots of my words, and so are the faith and knowledge that I know only what is revealed to me.

Living in the midst of a Muslim context, I believe that some knowledge is revealed to a seeker of knowledge at times by what we call “coincidence.” I also believe that other knowledge is not revealed, either because we are not ready to receive it or because it is beyond our grasp to understand. Allah in the *Koran* speaks to my beloved Prophet Muhammad: “If they ask you, ‘What is spirit?’ say to them that its knowledge is with

Allah.” I know that certain knowledge revealed to humanity was revealed at certain times purposefully and that other knowledge was not revealed, also purposefully.

In concluding this introduction, I feel the need to highlight that some of my Western academic readers might find my writing comes from the in-between cultural place where I stand. In my writing I move from the explicit to the implicit, from the world of thoughts and ideas to the world of metaphors. I write to my readers, and then move to an inner dialogue with myself. I refer to other writers whose words spoke to me. As well, I bring in excerpts from my research journal and use stories, poems, and memories from the past.

Many readers of this dissertation have noticed that my writing style reflects my verbal style. Some Western readers who are familiar with other Arabs have pointed out that they observe a similar pattern of expression among other Arabs. I declare here that I had no intention to lose or confuse my readers. One intention I have though, and live out of, is to stay true and authentic to where I am situated and to write and speak from that place. Readers of this study have realized that as I communicate in writing I also write in layers. By *layers* I do not mean vertical layering, one on top of another waiting to be unearthed beneath, but rather layers arranged like the petals of a rose. Knowledge is conveyed incrementally as the petals unfold.

As the women of my research were telling their stories, we were both reconstructing and reshaping those stories, and petals, or knowledge, continued to unfold. No center or final destination was intended. In chapter 4, as I worked with the stories in the process of reconstructing, new knowledge was revealed to elucidate for myself and my readers aspects of living with resistor spirits.

Chapter 1: Researching Resistors

This inquiry is a process of search and research, in an attempt to understand living the life of a resistor as a way of being. The six women of my research and myself, the seventh, are all from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We are Arabs and Muslims.

An important clarification has to be made between *Arab* and *Arabian*. An Arab is a member of the Arab nation, who speaks the Arabic language and shares Arab history and heritage. Since the twentieth century the Arab nation has been divided into twenty-seven countries modeled after the Western-style states. On the other hand, an Arabian is an inhabitant of the Arabian Peninsula, located between the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf. That region is a country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which consists of five different areas that came under the rule of the Saud family around the early twentieth century.

The name Saudi Arabia came into use in 1926. For a decade prior to that it was the Kingdom of *Hijaz Najd* and the Annexes. *Najd* is the central part of the current kingdom and the original home of the ruling family. *Hijaz* is the land of the Muslim holy cities of *Makkah* and *Madina* and the home of five of these seven women of my research. The oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia has been opened and influenced by Americans, working in the oil industry from the early days of the establishment of the kingdom. The other two women of the seven come from this area. It is also the area where I worked for two decades prior to coming to Canada and embarking on this research.

My Research Topic

What is research? It is a process of searching and researching life events. Life itself is a research process that includes various processes of search and research. Searching for a

truth, searching for meaning, seeking the face of the Beloved, seeking and searching towards the metaphorical light are all research processes of life.

I am aware that research in academia has its own rules and expectations. However, research for me is an inner call as well as a strong inner desire to search for answers, to construct an understanding or recreate new meanings. That desire resides in a mysterious deep place. Insistently seeking understanding, continuously wondering and pondering, it grabs us, it turns our heads towards that which we attempt to understand or try to illuminate.

I sat to write in this chapter what my research topic is about. The word *my* stood out loudly. Is there a separation between me and my research, like there is between me and my car? Writing that, I remembered that this me, this self, is situated in a cultural heritage that does not believe in a singular self.

By embarking on this research, I seek knowledge about a resistor way of being, living, engaging, and negotiating with restrictions and pressures imposed on resistor spirits.

A Resistor's Life

My inquiry is about a way of being that I live out. I research through a deep ongoing process of reading, observing, and reflexively writing of what might be lurking underneath the surface--the surface of living with that fiery resistor spirit. Living with such a resisting soul is the fire and the passion that propels my life. For me that way of being is not separated from my being as a researcher or from my research.

One could say that undertaking this research of understanding life with a resistor spirit has been my "personal legend," to borrow Coelho's (1998) words from *The Alchemist*:

“It’s what you have always wanted to accomplish. Everyone, when they are young, knows what their Personal Legend is” (p. 21).

My inquiry is compelled by that sense of perplexity that I grew up reading in people’s eyes as they tried to figure me out, the perplexed looks on my mother’s face, her questions that went unanswered: “Why make it difficult for yourself?” “Why do you like to fight and challenge?” “Why do you love to resist?” “The price of not conforming is high, so why call for troubles?” Her persistent suggestion to surrender to existing social powers fell on deaf ears.

My life path has been full of zigzags and turns during short-lived attempts to surrender to those powers, only to be followed by acts of resistance even stronger than if I had resisted from the beginning. It is as if that energy, that fiery spirit, erupts with more strength if I attempt to deny its existence.

My inquiry is about living with that spirit. It is a process of searching and researching within the inner layers, searching the spiritual and the cultural roots, searching in the six women’s life stories as well as my own. These stories work on me as I work on them. These stories reflect me back to myself as I reflect on the stories.

During that reflective and reflexive process, I grew from the graduate student searching for a research method to the one acknowledging that my topic *is* my method. I am a seeker of a way of knowing that has more than one prescribed method. During the years of my research I departed from counseling as a field and from counselor as an identity to the flexibility and fluidity of a degree by special arrangement. Indeed, growing up with that resistor spirit was a divine special arrangement.

My research did not start with this research toward obtaining a degree at the University of Victoria, but was going on before coming to UVic and will continue after the degree is obtained.

My inquiry is about resistance as a way of being. It is not about resistance in response to one particular form of oppression.

One day a long time ago I, the stubborn child, the “not being so popular” kid, discovered that I was the growing seed of a woman resistor.

A Document From the Archives of My Past

It is a second-grade school report. The school is in Cairo. The child is Amal Elyas, a child of a family from *Makkah*. She is six years old, and the previous summer she had managed to achieve a level of performance that demonstrated to her school that she should start in second grade.

She sits there with her two braids, which were not fashionable then in Cairo of the 1950s. The child is in her first year in Egypt, a few years after the country’s independence from British rule that had lasted for decades. She had moved from Saudi Arabia, then still closed to the West.

The child never tired of asking questions, never tired of moving physically and mentally from one place to another. The strict classroom rule of staying and working at her desk never resonated with her way of being, nor did the daily comments of the home teacher, the daily reminders and orders for her to sit down, listen, and obey the rules like “all good students do.” What her teacher did not acknowledge was that Amal was not like all “good girls.” Later in life too she never was like all the good teenagers, women, or students. Being unlike all the good others was a constant in her life.

Little wonder that the first page of the report card described her as a stubborn child. The mark for manners was average; her mark for social skills was below average. It was toward the end of that scholastic year that the high marks in math and English and Arabic languages gave the teacher a motive to endure the energy and nonstop questions of that stubborn child.

Not being so popular is one of the characteristics of these resistor spirits. Conformity and pleasing others are peripheral rather than central to their beings, in other words. They situate themselves in the margins of any group, culture, family, or other social category.

My inquiry is about that resistor spirit. What is it? How does it taste? How does it look? What are the many ways it manifests itself? How does a resistor tirelessly keep on being so?

From Memory

We women resistors push against the uteruses that brought us to life, as all others do. After birth we keep on resisting in order to emerge in this life and sustain our life energy. My baby hands were covered to protect me from the scratches of my tender fingernails. I kicked and screamed until those covers were removed.

For reasons unclear at the moment, I resisted my mother's breast-feeding. She must have thought that I had to be breast-fed.

"You have to" has been a key statement in my life. They said, "Girls have to," and I resisted. They said, "Women have to," and I resisted, challenged, and questioned. They said girls should not play on the street. I resisted, plotted, fought, and lost all interest in staying to play with girls inside. They said women have to cook. I lost interest in cooking then--which I now enjoy.

The list grew long with the years. Even when the reasons that followed every “have to” were statements from Islamic teaching, I resisted how the scriptures were interpreted and understood. It was as if I had a knowing, emanating from a deep level, that if the Creator created me with this free spirit, it must be acknowledged and honored.

In my search for the divine Allah, I choose to find my own meaning and my own interpretations of Allah’s words. I surrender only to Allah, my Beloved. That surrender is both powerful and powerless. That surrender to Allah is paradoxical. Once one acknowledges that Allah is the Source, Sustainer, and Depriver of all the powers one possesses, one experiences the state of powerful powerlessness.

Now as a researcher I resist following a strict procedure in my journey. As I write, I do not control my pen either. I allow my pen, or fingers when touching the keyboard, to surprise me. I live, research, and write from a place that respects what occurs in that process and that is never focused solely on its outcome.

It is also no surprise that conventional medicine has no appeal in my physical healing. I find that the alternative route, with its focus on and respect for the healing that comes from within the whole system, resonates with my resistor way of being.

It is no surprise either that in the process of worshipping Allah, I chose the Sufi path that does not adhere to the dominant interpretation of the faith of Islam as the sole interpretation. Choosing the Sufi interpretation of Islam is in itself a manifestation of that resistor way of being. It is an interpretation that encourages experiential knowing, as it moves one toward a deep center, not a husk. It focuses on a relationship with the Beloved that is a love-based rather than bookkeeping-based faith. In other words, it is not moved by rewards and punishment in this world or the hereafter, but rather by inner meanings.

In my late twenties when I came into contact with Western women, I also resisted their interpretation of our Islamic and Arab realities, as they wore their Western lens. I resisted what they had written about Arab women; it was written from outside the Arab women's life context, wearing the lens of the Western worldview. I resisted their attempt to offer us their prepackaged answers or solutions for our world problems.

I wonder if this resisting spirit is what my life is about, not just my research. I wonder at times if acceptance by others plays that powerful a role in my life. I know now that only the acceptance of this resisting spirit is what nourished me through the years. I also know that at the root of this spirit is the desire to come from the heart, to stay true to one's way of being. It is a call for life. If the life spirit says, "Resist," and any context says, "Do not," we women resistors listen to the call of life itself.

Women Resistors on the Path

As I stated earlier, I have come across many women resistors on the path of my life. Their way of being resistors, as much as it validated and confirmed my sanity and normality at times, has also left me with a sense of wonder and a hunger to know more and to understand in a deeper way that way of being.

So many aspects of their way of being have left me with wonder and fascination: their wildness, their nonconformity, their risk-taking, their being different, their resistance, their ability to stand firm, strong and tall, dancing to their own inner tunes, not expecting any applause from the outside world. They have their own inner voice, their own reward system, as well as their own systems for making meaning in their world and the events around them.

Living a resistor's way of being, I intuitively know when I come across a resistor. Over the last two summers, a cousin has been sharing with me the difficulties she is encountering with her fourth daughter, age six. Her story had to my ears a familiar beginning: "This daughter is very different. I do not recall having as many difficult times raising her three sisters as I have with this one."

The mother's reason for sharing this story, besides the usual catching up with events that is enjoyed during my summer visits home, was hearing from my mother and other elders in the family that this daughter of hers, Zaina, reminds them of me as a child. As her story of that "difficult daughter" unfolded, I had a deep sense that who we were talking about was a resistor spirit in the germination stage.

Her mother spoke of her daughter's unstoppable questions, the active and bright mind, the answers that leave adults speechless, and her sharp observance of details that most children do not pay attention to. The girl presents herself as a girl much older than her age, manifested in the choice of vocabulary she uses in her talk and in her knowing concepts too advanced for her age.

The eldest daughter, a twenty-year-old university student, shared a story of what occurred that morning. She was late getting ready and leaving the house. Zaina left the car and ran upstairs to her eldest sister's room to say to her, "One would expect a deeper sense of responsibility and more respect of others from someone your age."

The eldest daughter told me jokingly that recently she had been physically wrestling with Zaina, who was struggling to win. She told Zaina, "Do not even try. I am taller, bigger, and stronger." Zaina replied, "I am not going to give up. You might be bigger, but I will win with the power of my mind and my inner strength."

The mother and the other three sisters joined in with their stories, and as expected, my mother joined the group with stories of my childhood. The details were different, yet they each reflected a spirit older than the body it inhabits. They reflected a fiery spirit and that other term--for which I often wonder the exact meaning--*a wise spirit*.

The sharp tongue, the preference to talk and play with older children, the preference for and closeness to the father and his male world. Only women who talk of matters beyond the domestic sphere would interest her. As I looked at her eyes and the spark I could see, I knew that this fiery spirit would not make her life path smooth.

Zaina developed closeness to me over the annual summer visits. When she hears of my arrival, she insists that her mother bring her for a visit with me, as if our spirits need connection to be nourished. I made it clear, to point out to her and to others, that she is not going to be like me, and that Zaina will not be like anyone else.

I noticed that her mother found comfort in hearing different stories of appreciation of her daughter. What she usually hears from Zaina's school and some adults in the extended family is that more strict treatment and discipline would make Zaina more obedient.

Last summer Zaina invited me to her parents' house to visit with her. I accepted and went the following evening to find out that her whole family was instructed by Zaina that I was her guest, that they could only help her in making the chocolate cake for me and that she would be my hostess.

I sat with her and her family and respectfully observed. I watched and observed the way she walked, talked, commented, and commanded that others not treat her as a little child. I also felt a deep joy mixed with sadness, as I imagined the challenges and costs of a resistor spirit that still await her.

My childhood over forty years earlier was more difficult. In those days, prior to the oil era and the accompanying openness to different ways of living and acceptance of more relaxed rules of respect for adults, children had to adhere to strict rules, especially in some elite families. I often heard how I was not disciplined enough. I used to hear elders advising my mother to teach me how not to talk back and to properly respect adults.

The stories told and retold by my mother often led me to wonder if it was my respect that they desired or my silence. I wondered if my questions, which at times exposed their double standards or their social hypocrisy, disturbed them.

I looked at Zaina. And as much as her times are easier as far as child-rearing practice goes, I had no doubt that no amount of social, parental, or educational attempting to control, tame, or manipulate her could possibly extinguish that fiery spirit.

What Is a Resistor?

Being a resistor and coming across other women resisters has been a source of mystery and wonder. What is that resilience? How do they keep on going? Where do they get that determination in the face of exhausting challenges? What makes them resist the temptation of conformity's rewards and choose instead to live with the penalties that their choices at times invite?

What is a resistor? is the question that takes me to the circle or the maze or, rather, the labyrinth of my life since childhood. Now it is the topic of my research. I enter it and move in its territory, exploring it from inside, attempting to uncover some of the mysteries, knowing that I will not be able to uncover it in its totality.

A resistor way of being is like a gift. Attempting to interpret or explain it in detail is similar to attempting to understand being a gifted musician or an artist. It is like entering a

room full of butterflies; if one is able to catch a few of them, the rest will fly away. In my inquiry my goal is to illuminate some aspects of that way of being.

Stated differently, I am exploring in this research the different manifestations of that resistor way of being, offering glimpses of the inner, mysterious aspects of that gift. What is that gift about? Is it about patience, stubbornness, and determination, or about the call of life itself? Is it about how challenges increase the resistor's ability to keep on going? Is it about not being a follower? Is it about not needing to please or obtain the approval of others? Maybe it is about not seeking medals or rewards from the outside world. It is certainly not about only one of these; it is rather about all, or more than the sum of all these aspects.

Truly, attempting to explain the resistor way of being in detailed and full clarity is like explaining the gift of a wonderful voice for singing or an ear for music. We might say of a person, when she sings, that her voice touches our souls. One might say in describing the effect of this gift, "The way she sings has a magical impact on our ears or hearts." But that cannot possibly describe the gift itself.

Similarly, it is difficult to come up with a clear definition or a name for this way of being. I am using *resistor spirit*, a *rouh abiya*, for lack of an English word to describe resisting as a way of being. I know that I am not able to pin one answer down. Deep reflections might reveal some aspects, and at the same time they veil others.

Being a resistor is not about choosing to be one. It is about growing up and discovering gradually that you are one. At times along the path, being a resistor draws a high penalty. In those times one camouflages being one and attempts temporarily to be like others, only to feel the inner fire slowly getting extinguished and that mysterious

inner center of life energy seeping out. Then the resistor says no to this betrayal: “I will not allow it. It would be a waste of that mysterious gift. It would be like living a lie or a fake life.”

Resistor Spirit and Destiny

Women with resistor spirits live out a destiny. *Destiny* might be a problematic word for some readers. By destiny I do not mean a completely pre-ordained path or plan. In the Sufi Islam context there are two kinds of destiny, or *ghadar*. The first is *ghadar mobram*, a destiny that will not be altered. That is similar to what Hillman (Hillman & Ventura, 1992) refers to as “the unchangeable core.” In that place we have no choices, for instance, the country or family we are born into. We are born with tendencies, capacities, and aptitudes that persist. A parallel concept in the Muslim context is called *tabaa*, tendencies we are born with that will not change or be eliminated until the soul leaves the body. As the Arabic adage goes, “*Al tabaa wal rouh fe jasad*,” the *tabaa* and the soul are in one body, implying that they depart together as well. *Tabaa* is what I refer to at times as the core at the seat of the heart.

That second kind is *ghadar muaalag*, a destiny that is open to change according to the influences of the social context as well as choices we make and actions we take. According to the Sufi Muslim epistemology the concept of destiny does not negate or deny the influence of society or the effect of the socialization process, neither does it deny the role of parenting, media, and schools. All such factors are seeds that have a potential that manifests differently depending on the vicissitudes of the environment. These seeds grow and evolve in interplay with the environment, in the second kind of *ghadar*.

These resistor spirits live out these two distinctively different kinds of destiny. They have these spirits as *ghadar mobram*. However, how aspects of these spirits manifest and how the women engage with the social context and are influenced by it, as well as the meanings they make of events in their lives, are all factors that determine destiny at the second kind, *ghadar muaalag*.

Explaining the concept of destiny from that angle might seem contradictory. Arab Muslims are comfortable with holding what others might perceive as contradictory. Many contradictory notions are held among Arabs. For instance, holding the notion of destiny (*ghadar*) simultaneously with the notion of being accountable for choices made in one's life. Another example is the emphasis on hospitality to guests. An Arab would at times borrow money to extend generosity to guests. That notion of generosity is held together with the notion of moderation as an Islamic practice. An Islamic teaching requires that a Muslim should work hard in this world as if we will never die, and worship for the other world as if we will die tomorrow. According to Gibb (as cited in Rosen, 2000), "It is a characteristic of Arabs to possess a quality of double-mindedness, the ability to hold two contradictory propositions simultaneously--like saying, 'Everything is in Allah's hands, and here is what we are going to do about it'" (p. 123).

The English word *contradiction* implies that which is contrary of something or the opposite of it. It implies an either/or stance. Contradictory in that stance means if one is true then the other is false. When I speak of the Arab tendency to hold two contradictory notions simultaneously I use *contradictory* here from the both/and stance. I will explain further: What might seem as two opposites are but two positions in a continuum. So for instance white and black do not stand as opposites but they stand at apposite ends of a

line. It is intriguing to refer to a meaning of the word *continuum* stated in the *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1990): "a compact set which cannot be separated into two sets, neither of which contains a limit point of the other" (p. 284).

Excerpt From the Journal of a Resistor (2002)

Being a resistor is similar to being a tightrope walker in a circus, full of risk and the danger of falls. However, a resistor differs in expecting little applause. These women resistors live instead with lots of name-calling: "You are crazy, stubborn, difficult." "You challenge the norms in order to be different." It is true what they say: We are different. But we do not intentionally set out to be so.

Being a resistor is indeed like being a circus tightrope walker. The more one lives in that way of being and the more one learns how to balance, the more these skills are honed. I mean that through the years and with the wisdom of age, one learns to hone that resistor spirit to minimize the penalty. In other words, the tightrope walker learns to look for the net and decide when to hang on and when to fall into the net.

An Inner Dialogue

"Notice that you said, 'Hone that resistor spirit.' Why did you not say, 'Tame that spirit'?"

"Well, I guess because the term *tame* brings to mind *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Shakespearean play. Taming might mean ridding that spirit of its wildness, in fact."

"Whose fact? According to whose world?"

"According to a fact in my world of resistors. Do you have to jump and ask a question at every turn?"

"Remember, I am like you. I am a voice from within you. So let me be."

“Yes. Now, back to what I was saying about taming. To rid that spirit of its wildness is impossible. In fact--my world's fact--wildness is in that spirit. Once its wildness is taken out, only an outer shell is left. I mean, the spirit will be deformed.

“In other words, resistor spirit wildness cannot possibly be tamed. It can only be temporarily suppressed. In those times a resistor might hide away in solitude to self-protect, only to recharge and spring back, emerge again.”

Aspects of the Resistor Character

A woman living with a resistor way of being is a woman who is whole and fearless and who has a heart full of love. She is wild when she needs to be, or poetic and soft as the breeze of a cool desert night. She is unconventional when conventions need to be challenged and respectful of beliefs and conventions when they resonate to her way of being. She is courageous. She is exceptionally strong, yet has the heart of an artist or a poet.

When embarked on a path, she has an unyielding determination. She is a change agent at times, and at others she is in harmony with the Arab Muslim context to which she belongs. She resists injustices and oppression fiercely and openly, yet when required in some situations she camouflages her resistance, never losing vision of what lies ahead. She has humor, yet is firm and has a tongue that moves with the sharpness and swiftness of an Arabian sword.

She tests and challenges limits without compromising her principles. When set on a path, her commitments and devotions are at times beyond even her own ability to understand. She thinks, lives, acts, fights, dreams, resists, and performs all acts of living

from a place of passion. That passion is often misunderstood by those who live out a different way of being.

This way of being endangers her at times and brings richness and harmony at others. She forsakes the reward of accepting what is and embraces with an open heart the price paid for her acts of resistance. Any attempt in her life to be who she is not leaves her sapped of life energy.

While others seek comfort in living with what is agreed upon in any society, fearing the penalty of challenge, she is there to plow and turn up the soil, plant new seeds, and bring to life what is waiting to be born. As a resistor she does not seek approval of any authority. The approval she seeks is from that voice within. If it happens that the outer “official approval” coincides with the inner one, she is at rest. However, when the opposite is the case, she does not relish the outer approval, neither does she rest until the approval comes from that inner voice within.

Elusive Naming of an Elusive Way of Being

Early on in the process of this research I thought it was possible to find a clear name for this way of being a resistor. I started with an icon in our Islamic heritage, *Shahrazad*, the woman narrator of the legendary tales *One Thousand and One Nights*. She is an icon for today’s Muslim women.

Shahrazad is also the heroine of *One Thousand and One Nights*. She was the daughter of a powerful minister of the king *Sharayar*. As the story goes, he was betrayed by his wife, and in an act of revenge he decided to marry a different woman every night and kill her at dawn.

Shahrazad, being a crazy woman resistor, proposed to marry that king so as to stop his murder of women. In spite of her father's concern of her endangering her life, she married the king and proceeded every night to tell him a story and stop at dawn, just before the story's end. The king saved her life at every dawn, so that he could hear the end of that night's story. In those thousand and one nights she bore two children and was named the first queen of that kingdom.

Her stories to this day are the subject of various researches, from the field of literature to that of women's studies, in many attempts to investigate how her stories attempted to transform men's knowledge of women.

I decided later not to use that name, as the women of my research do not set out to achieve a specific goal, for example, to stop the murder of women. Nor are they after the transformation of the male knowledge of women.

They are gifted with resilience that increases with challenges along the way, so calling them "pearls" had its appeal as well. The Arabian Gulf was known for its pearls prior to the spread of Japanese cultured pearls. The similarity of authentic Arabian pearls to these women lies in the fact, known among Arabian Gulf pearl divers, that the bigger and brighter pearls are often those irritated constantly by big sand grains and strong waves. This image indeed represents an aspect of these women's way of being, but it excludes others.

Following that, I played with the Arabic term *arwah abiya*. *Arwah* is the plural word of *rouh*, which means a soul or spirit. *Abiya* is an adjective, from the verb *yabaa*, which means to resist and fight injustice, humiliation, or any controlling power.

I played with different words *wild, women warriors, rebellious*--to no avail. Each proved to be inconvenient, in that it emphasizes some aspects of these women's way of being but excludes others. At the end, I surrendered to the realization that this way of being resists, as well, confinement to one descriptive name.

We resistors also resist limitations or restrictions. When we think, we do not know the borders or territorial restrictions of a particular field. When we cook, we love to cross the borders of many countries. Our questions jump over all limitations or stop signs. Our choice of clothes does not follow the fashions of any time or the wish to look like others; we pick and choose what resonates with us. When we garden, attracting attention to our gardens and following rules is not our way of gardening. Gardening becomes the process through which we learn the lessons of nature and life.

Other Researchers

Social science research in the Arab world has been a point of concern and topic of debate among Arab intellectuals and researchers in the last two decades. The Arab world lives in the midst of the Islamic Arab civilization, with roots that extend to the ninth century, and Western civilization's influences that infiltrated and invaded the fabric of our culture over the last two centuries. The West's political, economic, and social influences are topics of ongoing debates among Arab social science researchers.

A conference was held in Cairo in the late 1980s on the problems of social science researchers in the Arab world. Ameen (1997; translated by the author), speaking to researchers from across the Arab world, described the problematic ongoing debates in his statement:

A society that reached that level of losing confidence in itself. A society that surrendered its leading decisions to outer powers, due to its unreserved admiration of

these powers' technological and intellectual achievement. A society that accepted the claimed superiority of the Western mind and its political and social institutions. A society that surrendered to the belief in the impossibility of development without dependency on the West. How could such a society in that state become creative in its social science researches? . . . At most, we cannot expect but quantitative and theoretical research that varies in its accuracy and its clarity, but similarly in its lack of creativity, in emerging with new research methodology or offering any new interpretations of our complex social phenomena. (pp. 259-260)

At the end of his paper Ameen (1997; translated by the author) invites researchers in the Arab world to refrain from "seeing ourselves through the West's eyes" (p. 261) and to conduct studies from our roots. While he did so, he also concluded that "it is not the absence of democracy that led to our following the West, but rather the absence of our political and economical independence. Freedom of our will is the condition for liberating our minds" (p. 273).

With this understanding of social science research in the Arab world, I will attempt in the following part of this chapter to shed light on how others study Arab Muslim women, in general, and Saudi Arabian women, in particular. These studies were conducted by other Arab women or women from the West. I will also discuss whether there are any studies conducted on Arab Muslim women with resistor spirits.

Numerous research books (Fernea, 1965, 1975) and academic journal articles attempting to understand Arab Muslim women were written mostly by women from the West, up until the late 1970s. Most of these studies seemed at times like tourist brochures claiming to tell and explain all, yet from an Arab perspective revealing very little, as all was seen and interpreted through the lens of a Western or feminist worldview.

The earliest studies of Arab women by Western women began in the 1960s. This era in the West was when feminism began and, with it, the interest of studying other women, including Muslim and Arab women. Most studies carried on by American women from

then to the present times (Badran & Cook, 1990; Cook, 2001; Tucker, 1993) focused on Arab women in general, but none of the studies were on Saudi Arabian women.

As stated by Altorki (1986), a Saudi Arabian anthropologist:

Saudi Arabia represents virtual terra incognita for social science research. Saudi Arabian society has not been studied by many social scientists. Certainly urban Saudi Arabia, though physically more accessible than the desert country, captured less of the interest of early Western travelers, who were more fascinated by the nomad and his camel. (p. 2)

Arab women's involvement in the study of the women of their societies began in the early 1970s. As much as I am indebted to the knowledge acquired reading their studies on the historical and social studies of the women of their countries, I felt the need for studies to be carried on in Saudi Arabia. While most Arab countries from the late 19th and early twentieth century were colonized and exposed to the West and its culture, Saudi Arabia remained closed to that influence until the mid-twentieth century. The slow and cautious exposure to the West and its culture paralleled the beginning of the oil discovery era.

An important realization developed as I read most of these studies: Most Arab women researchers are in some sense educated and influenced by the Western colonization of their countries. So when they speak, they speak with Westernized voices that use the colonizer's conceptual frames of reference.

For the purpose of discussing my research, I met with Al Sedaawi, an Arab feminist writer who is widely read in Western women's studies departments. From her point of view, Islam is a male construction and therefore interpreting the lives of the women of my research from a Muslim context would not yield any tangible results (personal communication, 1996). My personal conviction is that the opposite is true.

Islam, in my opinion, is not a set of beliefs as defined in the West. It is rather a way of life. Conducting any research about Muslim women without coming from their Islamic context would indeed be incomplete. Esposito (Esposito & Tamimi, 2000), the highly regarded scholar of Islam from Georgetown University, explained:

The post-Enlightenment tendency to define religion as a system of belief restricted to personal or private life, rather than as a way of life, has seriously hampered our ability to understand the nature of Islam and many of the world's religions. (p. 11)

Mernissi (1987), another American-educated feminist sociologist from Morocco, argued that the veil is the Muslim exploitation of the female. She stated, "The first gesture of liberated Arab woman was to discard the veil for the Western dress" (p. 167). I am not attempting to establish whether women in the Arab Muslim world should adhere to wearing the veil or not. I rather point to an example of the stand taken by some Western-educated Arab women researchers. My underlying question is: Why not discard the veil for Indian, Chinese, Japanese, or any other type of dress? Why is it a sign of liberation for all women internationally to adhere to Western dress?

I acknowledge that most of the Arab women researchers conduct their studies from either a feminist or a secular worldview. As stated before, I intend to live, research, and write from my Muslim worldview. As for feminism, like millions of Muslim women, I tend to view the feminist ideology with apprehension. Although I would like to join in advocating some features of their ideology, other aspects generate my suspicion and even opposition.

Dozens of doctoral research studies, conducted by Saudi Arabian women from numerous human sciences fields during the late 1970s and early 1980s, represent extensive surveys, numbers, tables, and percentiles on the then current status of women in

schools or the workforce. None of the studies used lived experiences nor addressed any of the issues in my study of women resistors.

Anthropologist Altorki (1986) conducted many researches on Saudi Arabian society, mainly on the women of the elite class. The study is a participant-observer, native-informant analysis of the women of the elite class in Saudi Arabia. Neither the topic nor the methodologies of the research are parallel or related to my research topic or my methodology.

Altorki and El-Solh (1988) informed my research journey. Their introduction provided a brief history of Arab women's involvement in social science research. It acknowledged how the ethnicity of the women researchers has played a role in their choices of topics and their access to their indigenous societies. It offered a comparison of challenges encountered by indigenous people researching their own societies with the challenges facing researchers of foreign status.

In a recent study, Saudi woman sociologist Al Munajjid (1997) stated, "This study attempts to examine and explore the quality of Saudi women's lives. . . . And to probe into the deep meaning of their social reality" (p. 6). The author conducted interviews with one hundred Saudi Arabian women who came from different geographical areas of the kingdom. That number included fifty *educated* and fifty *uneducated* women. The educated women, as defined by Al Munajjid, were women in high school or above, and the uneducated were either illiterate or had attended school up to Grade 9. I was perplexed by her categorization of educated and uneducated women and by her use of illiterate for every woman with less than high school. I was raised by a mother and surrounded by aunts of her generation to whom I owe a great deal for the women's cultural knowledge

they transferred to my generation and me. To group all nonschooled women and consider them illiterate and uneducated indeed raises many questions about the author's underlying assumptions and beliefs around school education. I wonder how she views knowledge and how it is constructed. I also wonder how she views the role of schooling in one's life learning and education. Al Munajjid's (1997) book includes an extensive bibliography, providing an excellent source of information on Saudi Arabian women.

As a researcher I value stories through dialogue during in-depth meetings with a few women. We work together to create knowledge, engaging in ways impossible when gathering and analyzing data by interviewing one hundred participants.

I know that the process of researching and writing about the various meanings and aspects of the fiery spirits of these women, about the crazy, wild, and rebellious aspects of their resistor way of being, will not lead to a final destination called "understanding," where all that is to be known is known. Understanding is more than knowledge of something. One's understanding has to evolve for the knowledge to reveal itself or allow itself to be discovered. Understanding occurs in those moments of harmony between the heart and the mind. Having said that, I also consider mystery as knowledge that has not yet been revealed. I also acknowledge that in this research I will not fully understand these resisters' spirits and all the mysterious aspects of them as a way of being.

The research process is a living one. Researching from that place where the researcher and the research are not separate, research itself becomes a process of purifying fire, a process where one unearths the surface and continues digging, sifting, and excavating. There are moments when one stands with a zoom lens to focus on some gems, leaving other topics aside for future exploration.

My research is about the lives of resisters with fiery spirits as a way of being. It is about six other women with fiery spirits and, concomitantly, about uncovering and discovering the Islamic spiritual context where we seven spirited women grew and evolved.

Another research journal (2000) excerpt:

Would all the mysteries of these spirits be revealed to me by the All-Knowing Power? I admit that some of the mysteries have been revealed, but as soon as they are received, the desire to know more becomes fiercely ignited in spite of that. I know that there will be some mysteries that will not be revealed.

My aim in this research is not to reach one final destination and close all the doors behind, but to reach a destination during that process where some of my questions are answered, but more present themselves, seeking more search and research.

As a researcher I seek an understanding of resistor spirits, while surrendering to a process in which I am transformed. Transformation of the researcher is the means by which understanding evolves and knowledge is revealed. Still, I seek not to offer final answers, but rather that the readers of my research will themselves do their own interpretations and searches. Although they may get some of their questions answered, as it is for the researcher, more questions will be surfacing for them as well.

The value of my research starts, as does the research process itself, with me. It started with being valuable to me, to the understanding and rewriting of my life. Current world events present an Islamic narrative that includes many complex and multiple forms of resistance. Some Western political powers attempt to dominate, exploit, and confiscate other forms of knowing and being that do not agree with theirs. My research is coming out in these times when some Western dominant powers are occupying parts of my Arab nation. In these confusing times the act of self-defense is considered an unjustified act or terrorism.

In these times the value of my research is in bringing into reality a deeper meaning of resistance that starts with and returns to the self. By understanding our form of resistance, others may find ways to honor, respect, and acknowledge different ways of resistance, without collapsing into narrow pathways that lead to ignorance, misjudgment, and conceit.

Chapter 2: Researching As a Resistor

Through listening to the women's stories and telling mine, I attempted to understand living as women with *arwah abiya* and how we experience our world. Our lives are storied lives. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told" (p. 3). Thus it was through stories that I was able to understand or make sense of these experiences. It was through telling stories that I interpreted, challenged, and reinterpreted our experiences.

Being an Arab Muslim researcher of human science (*science* as in the Arabic word *elm*, knowledge), I do not believe in an epistemology that claims one true "reality." Neither do I believe in a corresponding theory of truth. Any truth is always culturally and temporally contingent. In my worldview all human-made or human-reached truths and knowledge are perspectival. Each perspective, in and of itself, expands and enriches our perceptions and understanding of that which we attempt to grasp or understand. As a researcher I view all researchers in all fields of knowledge as but threads in the large tapestry of all human knowledge.

My view of knowledge is characterized by two main beliefs. First, all human-made knowledge is perspectival. Second, human-made knowledge is generated and received through the mind, body, and heart. The journey of my research has but confirmed that belief. The knowledge created was received by various channels as I told stories and listened to them. And it required my staying attentive and present along the path.

The weaving of knowledge occurred as well by questioning all assumptions, by reflecting on multiple meanings, by wondering and tirelessly challenging, and by reading between the lines.

I am not claiming here that I know all there is to be known about these spirits. Claiming or even seeking knowledge from that presumptuous place is illusionary and arrogant. *Allah aalam* is a frequently used expression among Muslims. That expression is used as a prefix or suffix to highlight and emphasize that no matter how much one knows, Allah knows more. Muslims believe that Allah is the source of all knowledge and speak of the Muslim belief that all knowledge reached by humanity is but drops from the vast ocean of Allah's knowledge. From that belief we Muslims often repeat the Koranic verse, "May Allah increase my knowledge."

In my journey I was attempting to bring to the surface and acknowledge that which I have already known at a deeper level. I have lived as a resistor grappling with an inner and implicit unarticulated knowledge of living with that spirit. This is a knowledge that cannot be completely explained. I did not attempt through this journey to capture the reality of those women so as to predict how women with rebellious spirits live. Nor did I intend to understand the realities of these women to bring about any change in their lives or the lives of other women with *arwah abiya*.

In this chapter I explain how, as a researcher, I come from roots that are deep in the Arabian Desert, the land in which the tree of my life, its roots, trunk, and leaves all grew and were nourished. I reveal here to my readers who I am as a researcher, where I am now at this stage of my life. It is of interest to point out that, according to *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1990), the word *radical* also means "relating to, or proceeding from a root" (p. 970).

I also share what has been revealed to me, while acknowledging areas that, like a fish not seeing the water in which it swims, I will not be able to see, even if revealed. I am a

researcher, a seeker of knowledge, an Arab Muslim woman who comes from a worldview that has been situated, informed, and rooted in a cultural context that goes back thousands of years. That worldview is the lens, the reservoir where all meanings are rendered, where all interpretations are made and where all views, beliefs, blind spots, and assumptions lurk under the surface of the calm water.

As I clearly stated in the previous chapter, research is not separate from the researcher and what knowledge the researcher comes to know depends on what she is ready to know and on her perspective or worldview. My worldview is not only that of a resistor but also of someone rooted in an Arab Muslim context. For that reason I see it necessary in these few pages to speak briefly of my life journey, growing and forming in the midst of that worldview.

At the outset I would like to acknowledge the existence of other threads that are also parts of my life fabric but will not be traced out in detail. The journey of my life has taken me to the previously British-colonized Egypt, the previously French-colonized Lebanon and Tunis, and to the European and North American continents.

The Arab Thread

I was born in *Makkah*. My extended family members lived in a neighborhood that carries their name to this day and that was, at the time, within walking distance from the *Haram*, the holiest mosque to billions of Muslims. Due to the many expansions of the mosque, that neighborhood is part of the mosque vicinity now. Before I was five, my family moved to *Jeddah*, the port city on the Red Sea that has been for centuries the entrance gate to the holy cities of *Makkah* and *Madina*, where millions of pilgrims pass through annually prior to their pilgrimage journey, the *Haj*.

The education available for women at the time was the main, but not only, reason for the family decision to move to Egypt in 1956 when I was six years old. At the time that move seemed like a move to a different world, from *Hijaz*, the land of the holy cities, to Egypt of the 1950s. Those were the years of postcolonial time in Egypt and of the peak of Arab nationalism.

The school where I received most of my schooling was called *Al Ma ahid Al Kawmiya*, the National Institutes. The mission of that school coincided with my family's belief in an education that comes from Islamic Arab roots, yet is open to the educational insights of the West.

I returned to Saudi Arabia in the late 1960s to join a local university. In 1970, I graduated with a bachelor's degree in history. My graduating class of women was the first in the history of the university. My four years of studies focused mostly on the history of Islam in addition to the history of Rome, Greece, and medieval and modern Europe. My first job upon graduation was to teach in the Middle East program in the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) schools. The message was getting clearer by the day that a university degree from the United States of America, to be on the safe side--was necessary in order to have a good career. Every job performance review by the American principal had a direct or indirect recommendation to that effect.

Having a degree from a Middle Eastern university was not enough to teach either Middle Eastern subjects or Arabic. The implicit message was that in order to obtain a degree that is more respected by Americans, as well as by some Arabs, I should study in the United States of America. In 1976, I obtained a master's degree in comparative and international education from Indiana University in the United States of America.

From those years the feeling of academic exile began. I know now that a part of me had to live in shadow. I returned home to be treated as an Americanized Arabian woman. I had chosen to dress in jeans, and had obtained a good command of the English language, but underneath the surface, an Arab Muslim woman lived in exile.

Why am I sharing my story with my readers? Storytelling is the primary means by which knowledge is created and shared in my cultural context and in my research methodology, or way of proceeding in research. I live a story. I communicate in stories. I learn from other women's stories.

As I am writing this part, I think of the story of Ahmed (1999), an Arab woman academic who received her doctorate from Cambridge and is teaching in the West. Reading her book, I found myself in some parts of her story, as I deepened my understanding of my own story. The details of our journeys are different, yet the feeling of academic exile is similar.

Ahmed's (1999) words spoke of my own story:

These same ideas and theories, however, did not in a parallel way or in any simple sense directly explain or illuminate my own life and the history I had lived. Connecting to them entailed for me, personally and analytically, a much more complex and complicated negotiation than it did for my fellow students. (p. 211)

I too felt that sense of "fundamental disconnection between what I was grappling with academically and my own life, . . . [an] entirely private and isolated struggle to make sense of what I had lived." (pp. 212-213)

From the early research methodology classes in my current graduate program, I was introduced to various approaches to research: the critical, the interpretive, and the empiricist. I was introduced to deconstruction, structuralism, and poststructuralism. Each has its assumptions about reality, truth, knowledge, and knowledge production. Each has

its historical roots in the Western context. And each left me struggling: Where does my research, or me as a researcher, fit in the midst of that?

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) confirmed my view:

Philosophical assumptions are rooted in what they (the scientists) term the traditional Western conception of the person. These are based on a Judeo-Christian tradition that has far-reaching influence on every aspect of North American culture, ranging from medicine to economics and from education to politics. (p. 552)

In a nutshell, these assumptions predetermine even the scientific results of scientists, who claim utmost accuracy and objectivity for their knowledge.

I am talking here about what I came to term “the Table.” It is a comparative table from Lather (1991). At the top of the Table there are three columns labeling three paradigms: premodern, modern, and postmodern. At the left side are defined the characteristics of each paradigm: form of authority, conception of individual, material base, view of history, and place of community or tradition. The Table was discussed in many research methodology classes, to represent historical paradigmatic transformation in Western society.

Every attempt I made to situate me or my cultural context in any paradigm left me scattered all over the Table. My Islamic context, with Islam informing and nourishing my life and my research, would situate me in the premodern column, while my cultural focus on nonlinearity and interconnectedness of knowledge would situate me in the postmodern column. The Islamic Arab cultural view, believing in the discoveries and progress that resulted in the contributions of the Islamic civilizations, situates me under the modern column.

At the end of these many disparate attempts, I reached the position where I had to admit that the West had interwoven many threads in the fabric of my life, yet the main

threads that hold the whole fabric together are from my Islamic Arab roots. The threads from these roots weave my life into a fabric, or worldview.

The assumption of individualism does not hold in Muslim culture. The cultural emphasis in Arab Muslim culture is rather on sociality; no privacy is promoted. The mass of believers prostrate before Allah. Their attachment is emotional as well as social, as stated beautifully by Davidson and Rorty (as cited in Rosen, 2002):

For the Arabs, as we have seen in various contexts, the person is not, as he or she is imagined in the West, a self-fashioned entity, an individual who possesses both the capacity and the right to formulate moral concepts or for whom the privacy of thoughts and values may be treated as sacrosanct. Rather, for Arabs the person is the amalgamation of a complex and shifting set of attachments to others, by virtue of which his or her own qualities, forms of interaction, and basic affiliations may be known to others. (p. 111)

In the Arab collective culture, the focus is on relationships with others. People negotiate meanings and relate to each other by telling and hearing stories.

The Muslim Thread

What is Islam? I hesitate here about whether to start with what could easily be found in any book on Islam, or to write of my story with Islam. The book market in North America has witnessed a flood of books on Islam in light of world events in the last decade. There are countless experts on Islam among Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Each expert interprets the Islamic faith from his or her perspective, as seen through his or her lens. I have read books by “modernists” who believe that “something went wrong,” and that Islam and its people, Muslims, must correct their mistakes and catch up with the developed world. These experts wear the lens of the developed world as they reread and reinterpret the *Koran* and the Prophet’s traditions. There are also the feminist Muslim

women experts who are advocating that a feminist interpretation is necessary in order to rescue Muslim women from the male-dominated interpretation.

On the other side of the fence one finds those who insist that the social, political, and economical problems rampant in the majority of Muslim countries are due to deviation from the original fundamentals of Islam. They lay most of the blame on leaders of Muslim countries, who are either westernized or working for the interests of the Western powers.

With the increase of Muslim women in academe there is also an increase in books by Muslim women. Some blame the Western colonial powers for the problems of the Muslim countries, and others take the opposite view that the Muslim women's situation will improve only if Muslim society adopts a secular life. Not only are there multiple perspectives among Muslims of the direction Islam should go; there is not even a unitary view of Islam itself. As Said (1994) pointed out:

It is very much the case today that in dealing with the Islamic world--all one billion people in it, with dozens of different societies, half a dozen major languages including Arabic, Turkish, Iranian, all of them spread out over about a third of the globe--American or British academic intellectuals speak reductively and, in my view, irresponsibly of something called "Islam." By using this single word they seem to regard Islam as a simple object, about which grand generalizations spanning a millennium and a half of Muslim history can be made. (p. 23)

It is neither the focus of my research topic nor in the scope of this study to enter this debate. In the later chapters, focusing on the women's stories and on my story as a woman resistor with fiery spirit, as the stories are interpreted and unfolding both major points will be dealt with in more detail: the role of Islam as a way of life that nourished and informed these lives, as well as the constant evolving and situational interpretation of this faith in each woman's life. In this chapter, I wrote my own story with Islam.

What is my story with Islam? I am again finding that the lens I see my world with--the soil that I am deeply rooted in, so immersed in, that it has an impact on every thread of my life--is often the most difficult to articulate. Eaton (1985) highlights the value of the lived experience to understanding Islam:

The keys to understanding [Islam] lie within the observer's own being and experience, and without these keys no door will be open. In Islam every aspect of human life, every thought and every action, is shaped and evaluated in the light of the basic article of faith. (p. 1)

He later stated, "What I believe or what the next man believes, provided we stay within the framework of the religious law, is largely a matter of a personal insight" (p. 6). Indeed, the role of multi-interpretation is so powerful that one can encounter an action taken or prevented by two Muslims, and each will have an Islamic justification. For example, a family will send all their daughters to university, motivated to do so based on the Prophet's teaching that "seeking knowledge is a duty of every Muslim man or woman. . . . Seek knowledge even by traveling to China. . . . Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave." On the other hand, some Muslim rulers did not allow education for women in their countries until the 1960s, based on their Islamic interpretation of the limited role of Muslim woman, that her place was the domestic domain of her family or husband's home.

My interpretation and understanding of my Muslim faith is a product of the teaching I received at home, as well as my lived experience as a Muslim both living with my family and afterwards. My travels have taken me to many parts of the world. Seeking knowledge has taken me to Egypt, Lebanon, Ireland, the United States of America, and now to Canada. The exposure to many ideas, theories, and ways of living has deepened and complicated my understanding of Islam. It has also enriched it, as I met Muslims in my travels and was informed by their various interpretations of the same faith.

As stated earlier, I came to this earth in *Makkah*, the land from which Islam first spread. The first words whispered in my ears as I was taking my first few breaths on this earth were *Bismilla Al rahman Al raheem*, “With the Name of Allah, the Merciful and the Compassionate.” These words were repeated before every feeding and every action that adults took around me. I grew up seeing grownups in the family prostrating on the ground to Allah in their prayers, five times a day, toward the mosque in *Makkah*. In the two *Eids*, religious festivals of the Muslim calendar, I went to the mosques with my parents to attend the *Eid salat*. As the family moved to *Jeddah*, weekly visits to *Makkah* were part of every trip, to visit the extended family there. During my schooling years in Egypt a tutor came to assist me and my sisters and brothers to learn how to recite the *Koran* and to increase our knowledge of the Islamic tradition. The decision by my parents to do that was due to the fact that school curriculum in Egypt at the time was moving more towards the secular curriculum of the Western countries. That was during the beginning of Egypt’s postcolonial era.

Upon my return to Arabia, I encountered a rather more literal interpretation of the faith. As for my parents, I have always experienced how their love for knowledge, their openness to knowledge of other cultures, was supported by their interpretation of Islam. I was encouraged to pursue my graduate work in the United States, as my parents saw no justification in Islam that agreed with the members of our extended family who opposed that. Upon my return I got a job working for ARAMCO. Working in that company meant mingling with men, and that stirred the opposition of some elders of the family. I still recall thirty years later my father’s reply to that: “Whoever disagrees should neither let

their daughters follow her steps nor encourage any of their sons to marry her. And after all, we are the ones whom Allah will hold accountable for that decision.”

The process of negotiation, discussion, and dialogue with my parents around various issues and their Muslim views of them was not always smooth. In particular, in my early teens I began to study sciences and to admire the objective paradigm, the perception of an objective reality through reason and senses only. Hours were spent while my father patiently listened and presented various metaphors as to how *agil* in Arabic, the mind, also comes from the same roots as the verb *agala*, which means to limit something. The mind and reason were never denounced as sources of receiving knowledge, yet the emphasis was mainly on not giving them the highest and ultimate status as the only ways of seeking knowledge.

In the last part of this chapter I will explore further my Muslim and Sufi ontology and epistemology, and their implications for my choice of topic, participants, data-gathering method, and methodology, that is, my way of proceeding in this research. However, prior to that exploration will come further illumination of the meaning of being an Arab, Muslim, Sufi, and a resistor: four rivers that informed and nourished my life, the site of my research.

An Arab is a speaker of the Arabic language who is born in an Arab country. The separation of Arabic and Islamic cultural threads in my life is impossible. The interweaving of Islam and Arabs is due to the fact that the Prophet of Islam was an Arab. The *Koran*, the Muslim holy book, was revealed to *Sayedna*--Muhammad, our Master, our Prophet--in Arabic. Muslims worldwide read the *Koran* and perform their five daily prayers in Arabic.

Having said this, I am in no way denying the fact that Islam as a world religion is the faith of Arabs and non-Arabs, and not every Arab is a Muslim and not every Muslim is an Arab. Due to that, the Islamic culture through the centuries has developed its rich fabric. I also acknowledge that, as my travels took me to many non-Arabic Muslim countries, I observed how each country has dressed Islam in the costume of its land and its traditions.

It is my view that Muslims have lost the spirit of Islam. Early Muslims had in their hearts an unconquerable love for truth. It is because of that love that in half a century they succeeded in reaching the peaks they did with the Muslim civilization. It is also my view that this loss of the Islamic spirit led to the decay in the Muslim world. Needless to say, this was compounded by the effect of the expansion of colonial powers following the Second World War.

The Sufi Thread

What is Sufism? Sufi ontology and epistemology are at the center of my worldview and my methodology as I proceed in this research. Following the Sufi path within Islam is the choice of only a small minority. The Sufis along the centuries have been misunderstood, ostracized, and persecuted. Their books, poetry, and chanting have been banned in many Muslim countries to the present day. Nevertheless, through the centuries they breathed life into Islam. As a student of Islamic history I observe that at times of confusion and disturbances in the Muslim countries, a surge in Sufism will occur. The Sufism I am speaking of here is the Sufism based on the *Koran* and prophetic practice.

Speculations on the roots of the word *Sufi* are many. Some say that it is from the root *safaa* (purity), being the main aim of following a Sufi path--that is, to purify from within. Others say that the word is from the root *soof* (wool), due to the fact that in the second

century of Islam, Sufis dressed in coarse woolen garments to protest the silks and satins of sultans and as an expression of unhappiness with the lavish worldliness taking over Islam at the time. However, some argue that it comes from *suffa*, meaning the entrance of the house. The advocates of this meaning state that during the early days of Islam, the Sufis used to sit at the entrance of the Prophet's house and busy themselves with their *ziker*, spiritual remembrance of the Divine, while others were receiving the teaching of the Prophet. There were some who asked the Prophet why some of those Sufis would chant and sway their bodies during the chanting. The Prophet replied, "Leave them. These are people who have their states. They are lovers of Allah and loved by Allah."

Simply stated, Sufis are Muslims who are not content to follow the literal interpretation of the rules laid down. What they want is at times difficult to explain; it has been expressed through poetry at times and love stories at others. They believe in their devotion to a path that leads to the inner meaning of the teachings of Islam. As some of the Sufi scholars point out, chewing on the husk of a grain of wheat does not nourish the soul as does feeding from the kernel.

The Sufi path is considered the mystic or contemplative path of Islam. The term *mysticism* is used by different people in different senses. In my view, mysticism is primarily the interior quest towards Allah. Sufism teaching of Islam is the most spiritual teaching that derives from the Islamic revelation. Sufis believe there are different layers of understanding to any revelation or knowledge. The outer is addressed to the great mass of believers, who are not predisposed toward contemplation, but rather toward the life of action; the inner is addressed to a small minority of believers who, though participating in the life of action, also pursue the life of contemplation. All Muslims, including those who

follow the Sufi path, are obliged to follow Islamic laws, yet not all Muslims are interested in the spiritual work of the Sufis.

Sufis take three routes to reach that inner teaching and then draw closer to the beloved Allah. The first is in the love-based relationship with Allah, the Beloved. The second is in ecstasy, which is defined as “standing outside oneself.” Only when one is in that state is knowledge revealed. The third is the approach of intuition, a route that brings knowledge. The first approach yields heart knowledge; the second, visual or visionary knowledge; and the third achieves mental knowledge that is received by the “eye of the heart.” *Heart* here does not mean the physical one; it is the transcendental entity that perceives and knows--*qalb*. *Aql* (reason or mind) is only a faculty of the heart.

I would like here to share a love poem by an Arab Muslim Sufi woman, *Rabi'a*, a Sufi saint of the eighth century, who believed that God's love is at the center of the universe (as cited in Smith, 1977):

I have loved Thee with two loves, a selfish love and a love that is worthy [of Thee].
As for the love which is selfish, I occupy myself therein with remembrance of Thee to the exclusion of all others.
As for that which is worthy of Thee, therein Thou raise the veil that I may see Thee.
Yet there is no praise to me in this or that,
But the praise is to Thee, whether in that or this. (p. 102)

In conclusion on this part on the Sufis, I point out that I follow a Sufi path, but do not call myself a Sufi. A Sufi is someone who has achieved all levels of purification, where inner knowledge is revealed to the eye of the heart. I am like the hundreds of thousands in my Sufi *tariqa*, order or path: I consider myself a *mureeda*, a seeker on the path.

A final point of interest to highlight is that even the Sufi *tariqa* that I follow is a path that attracts resistor spirits. Sheik Hassan Al Shazli, one of the founders of our path, made

a shift in Sufism a few centuries ago. It was believed then among Sufis that hunger and old rough clothing were necessary for the soul. Shiek Hassan Al Shazli opposed and resisted the teachings of other paths of the time. He used to wear new clothes and teach his followers that purification in Sufism means being in the world, but not of the world. To this day the Shazilli Disouqi Burhani path attracts academics and intellectuals, wealthy and poor alike. The poverty we seek is in the detachment in the heart from all worldly attractions--that is, wealth, fame, and power.

The Resistor Thread

Do resisters have a culture? Just as people of a culture share a language, a history and a context, so do the women of my study. Their language, so to speak, is shared across cultures. They speak the language of “dancing to their own drums.” They are often--and in every culture I lived in, seem to be--disturbers of the status quo.

In order for these women to stay truthful to their way of being and not to surrender to pressures from any powers, they are ready to suffer being ostracized and pushed to the margins. It is from these margins that they get their power. Forced temporary existence within society's center and its dominant status quo only weakens that fire within. Relationships and connections among resistor women are a source of nourishment and validation. Seeing our lived stories in other women resisters' lived stories affirms that being a resistor is in and of itself a way of being. In the metaphorical margins, the resisters' culture is lived and practiced, and the affirmations and validations nourish and energize our inner power and source of energy to continue resisting.

Worldview and Reality

Now that I have declared my worldview--that is, what I live in the midst of and what my lenses are--I am going to explore how the four threads (Arabism, Islam, Sufism, and being a resistor) have informed and influenced my research journey. In this section I am focusing on my ontological and epistemological stand, nurtured by the four rivers.

These four threads are intertwined with a degree of complexity that makes teasing out of each unattainable. Arabism, Islam, Sufism, and being a resistor all simultaneously and interconnectedly have informed my worldview and ontological and epistemological stand. All four threads nurtured and informed my worldview just as four rivers feed into one river.

At the outset, I point out that the word *reality* is rather a problematic word in my worldview. The underpinning assumption that *reality* means that which is out there, that which is perceived through the senses, and that which is real is alien to my worldview. All truths, in my opinion, that are human-made are, first, culturally and temporally contingent, and, second, these truths are perspectival. Each perspective enriches and informs that which we attempt to understand. The cultural context is a lens with which we view and interpret the reality out there. Our lived experiences and our relationships with others are pivotal lenses. The lenses are multiples and so are the truths made through these lenses. These truths are not made through the sense perceptions or the mind alone; they are generated and perceived through the mind, body, and heart.

Walking on campus the other day, I ran into a Muslim woman acquaintance. She is a student of biology at the University of Victoria. From her dress I inferred her adherence to the Islamic faith. We started chatting about my research and the chapter I was in the midst

of. As we started exchanging views around knowledge and reality in the Islamic context, our discussion led to talking about knowledge that is certain. Here was the science major student saying, “All human-made knowledge is changeable; only the Allah is real.” I then probed her further by asking, “Do you find any conflicts between your scientific field of study and your faith?” She answered with an answer that I have heard many times from Muslims in engineering or scientific fields: “Of course not.” I left her and kept on going deeper with my thoughts. “Of course,” she said. Whose course, I wondered. Is it in the course of our lives as Muslims, or whose course? I am going to explore all these questions further now.

My Theory (Nazariya) of Knowledge

As explained by Bohm (1983), *theory*, from the Greek *theoria*, has the same root as *theater* and means to view or to make a spectacle. “Thus it might be said that a theory is primarily a way of looking at the world, and not a form of knowledge of how the world is” (p. 4). As discussed above, human-made truths are culturally and temporally contingent and perspectival.

In Arabic the word for theory is *nazariya*. The root of that word is *nazar*, that is, vision to see or to have an insight. Insight refers to that depth of understanding that is experienced when the heart and mind are in harmony. The understanding gained from living with a rebellious spirit courageously interrogating assumptions is *nazariya*, deep seeing or knowing.

Knowledge, as I mentioned before, is encouraged in every Muslim from birth. The questions raised now are: What is meant by knowledge? What type of knowledge? And what are the sources for attaining these types of knowledge?

The story begins with the journey of my existence and its different stages. As my soul was being born into a body to live on this earth, I was also given a mind and a heart. I am encouraged to seek knowledge. In the divine revelation of the *Koran*, I am encouraged in thousands of verses to use my eyes, ears, mind, intellect, reason, and heart to know. Knowledge can be acquired through all these channels. I point out that Islam differentiates between the physical heart and the heart that receives knowledge.

Another distinction I need to make here before going any further is that between *intellect* and *reason*. *Intellectus* is not *ratio*. The intellect of which I am speaking--and to which I speak--is the instrument of knowledge that perceives directly, which understands. In Nasr's words (1985), "It is a contemplative vision of the nature of things made possible through intellection" (p. 139). Reason, on the other hand, is that through which one can conform ideas to logical patterns. It is also able to play with ideas and to perform any acrobatic games of the mind. The heart is considered by the Sufis as one of the intellectual faculties through which understanding is possible. In the Sufi path, through meditation and *ziker*, a suspension of rational thinking occurs. This in turns taps the unbound forces of the unconscious. Sufis spoke of the unconscious for centuries prior to Freud. The unconscious that I speak of is not the psychological abstraction. In Sufism it originates from the gut and the heart; in other words, it has a physiological basis. I leave this here, at this level of detail, as it lies beyond the focus of this study. It is noteworthy that medical doctor Shafii (1988), a psychoanalyst and Sufi Muslim, conducted a detailed comparative study of Sufism and psychoanalysis.

The following story of Al Ghazzali, a great Muslim scholar, illuminates further the Sufi theory of knowledge. Al Ghazzali was journeying through the desert from one city to

another. As was the custom of the time, he was traveling with a caravan. All of his books, manuscripts, and scholarly works on philosophy and theology were loaded on a donkey. Suddenly the caravan was attacked by a group of bandits. The bandits were taking everything; they were going to take his donkey with its load. Al Ghazzali became agitated and panic-stricken. He went to the head of the bandits and asked him whether he could read or write. The leader, who was a young man answered, "No, I can neither read nor write." Al Ghazzali began to beg, "Take all of my belongings, everything I have, except these books and my notes and manuscripts. These are the sources of all my knowledge; they are of no use to you." The young bandit paused a moment and then said, "Old man, you claim that you are a scholar and a man of knowledge. What kind of knowledge it is that an illiterate bandit can steal from you?" It is reported in many of Al Ghazzali's biographies that, following that event, Al Ghazzali went on many years of meditations and traveling, and gave up all forms of outward learning. It was later that he began to write, integrating outward learning with the Sufi knowledge gained through meditative experiences.

The root meaning for the word for *aqal* (reason) comes from *iqal*, the Arabic word for the cord used for tying up or holding down. It is used to tie a camel's knees in order to restrict its movements; it is also tied over the traditional headdress worn by men to hold it down. Al Arabi, a Sufi scholar of the thirteenth century, describes those who believe in the use of reason as the ultimate channel and source of knowledge: "I hear the grinding, but I see no flour."

Sufi scholar Ibn Sina (known as Avicenna) has a hierarchical ontology, and its five levels illuminate my point. My interpretation of Ibn Sina's hierarchy of knowledge (as cited in Aminrazavi, 2003) is as follows:

1. Knowledge by definition, which is based on sense perception; it is considered an inadequate means of cognition and limited in scope.

2. Knowledge by sense perception; that is, repeated instances of observation give rise to a conclusion. This is considered to be of a lower order, because it has to rely on rationalism.

3. Knowledge through a priori concepts. In Ibn Sina's (as cited in Aminrazavi, 2003) words, "A man has something in him, some substance responsive and receptive to conceptual ideas." He describes this substance as "the seat of these ideas. . . . It is not in a body and does not depend for its existence in a body, even though it is a power in a body" (p. 206). In simple words, that is knowledge through innate ideas.

4. Knowledge by presence, that is, attaining knowledge of one's self, a knowledge considered by Sufi scholars as the prerequisite for attaining any knowledge.

5. Knowledge through direct experience: mysticism. This is the main focus of the Sufi teaching, experiential knowledge. Rumi (as cited in Zikria, 1978) makes a similar distinction commenting on acquiring knowledge: "Man's body is like a ladder of black ebony, and he has another of white ivory in his inside; he has to climb both in order to reach the light of truth" (p. 55). The black ebony *ilm* (knowledge) alone cannot bring him out of the dark well of his senses.

It has been a point of wonder and fascination for me to juxtapose Sufi thoughts with postmodern philosophies. Almond (2003) draws parallels between Ibn Al Arabi and

Derrida's perspectives on the error of rational thinkers who have mistaken their constructs for the Real itself. "When a person rationally considers God, he creates what he believes in himself through his consideration. Hence he considers only a god which he has created through his consideration (p. 27)." Almond noted that Derrida refers to thinkers "who base their thought systems upon illusory moments of 'self-presence'--a 'center' that is never really the center" and speaks of the text as a constant play of forces, "producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself" (p. 27). In contrast Ibn Al Arabi speaks of his god as a life-giving chaos: "True guidance means being guided to bewilderment, that he might know that the whole affair (to god) is perplexity, which means perturbation and flux, and flux is life" (p. 32).

This brings me back to the final parallel I like to draw between Sufi thinkers and the Western postmodernists. Ibn Al Arabi (as cited in Almond, 2003) insists that everything is "he and not he" (*huwa la huwa*). This important step acknowledges the illusion of dualism--that is, misbelieving God to be either this or that, out there or in here. In Al Arabi's words, "The one who isolates Him tries to regulate Him." Derrida (as cited in Almond, 2003) also objects to binary thought, pointing out that whenever two terms are opposed to one another, one is privileged over the other.

In conclusion of this chapter, it is apparent by now that just as the Prophet of Islam, my beloved Muhammad--Allah's peace upon him--said, "Knowledge is an obligation upon each man and woman," I had to respond to that inner urge to understand myself as well as the fiery spirits of these women. As pointed out by many Sufi scholars, the route to attaining any knowledge is the knowledge of oneself. Hence my life as a resistor with that fiery spirit became a site and source of illumination for the research. As in the

discussion of Sufi views of knowledge, the knowledge produced in this research is based on the experiential approach to knowledge in the Sufi path. I do not anticipate a set of clear and certain descriptions of the fiery spirit, nor do I attempt to uncover all the mysteries of their way of being. Total clarity and total certainty are not attainable. The following by Davies (as cited in Pitcher, 1994) speaks of how I view the knowledge generated in this research:

“Oho, now I know what you are. You are an advocate of Useful Knowledge.”

“Certainly.”

“Well, allow me to introduce myself to you as an advocate of ornamental knowledge. You like the mind to be a neat machine, equipped to work efficiently, if narrowly, and with no extra bits or useless parts. I like the mind to be a dustbin of scraps of brilliant fabric, odd gems, worthless but fascinating curiosities, tinsel, quaint bits of carving, and a reasonable amount of healthy dirt. Shake the machine and it goes out of order; shake the dustbin and it adjusts itself beautifully to its new position.” (p. 60)

Chapter 3: Storying As Methodology

Searching in the ocean, struggling with the waves, moments of floating followed by moments of panic and fear of drowning: These images came to me as I sat to write about the early stage of my research journey. When I say “the early stage,” I do not mean this dissertation research.

A Search for Methodology

My story of exploring research methodologies in North American academe began in 1975 at Indiana University with introductory courses on quantitative research methods and statistics. I had deep doubts that the game of numbers would deepen my knowledge of what I attempted to research; I was sure it would only deepen my knowledge of number manipulation. Saint Exupéry (1971), in his classic *The Little Prince*, speaks of the grownups’ love of figures:

Grownups love figures. When you tell them that you have made a new friend, they never ask you any questions about essential matters. They never say to you, “What does his voice sound like? What games he loves best? Does he collect butterflies?” Instead, they demand: “How old is he? How many brothers has he?” . . . Only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him. (pp. 16-17)

Claims of the ability to duplicate or predict outcomes if research is repeated do not fit with my worldview. In my view, that may be possible while doing an experiment in a lab with certain chemicals. Based on the result, one can predict the expected result with a particular degree of certainty if the experiment is repeated. Yet I had doubts that conducting social science research with the positivist empiricist approach would yield knowledge that could deepen our understanding of what we are studying. “I could hear the grinding, but see no flour,” to paraphrase Al Arabi’s words.

I browsed in my research journal writing (2001) where I had written reflections on my early search for methodology. The following excerpts illuminate my inner thoughts of that stage:

Reading about modernism and postmodernism, I feel eliminated. I feel a sense of foreignness--I mean being foreign, that is, not belonging. Why do they go in circles in their writing? Is it that they are looking for something?

As we Arabs joke among ourselves, that knowing with certainty the exact truths or what they call the laws of nature—it is like a cat chasing its tail. The postmodern era is a moment of awareness by the cat that it is chasing its tail. I am, again and again, like most Arab Muslim students in the academy of the West. We came to the West with knowledge of our worlds. We are trying to find a place for the knowledge we came with.

Initially I found postmodernism appealing, with its focus on the multiplicity of interpretations and realities that seemed parallel to some of the underpinning assumptions of the Arab-Muslim ontology and epistemology, as explained in the previous chapter. I was drawn to read Derrida (Derrida, 2002; Kamuf, 1991), the Algerian-born French philosopher, because of his focus on the tensions and instabilities within a text. I was intrigued by the ways Derrida's deconstructive style of reading a text, written or verbal, subverts the assumption that any text has an unchanging, unified meaning. Derrida repeatedly shows how language is constantly shifting. Reading Derrida, confirming the multiplicity of meaning, substantiated my cultural epistemology. His deconstruction is best understood as showing the unavoidable tensions between ideals of clarity and coherence that govern Western philosophy and the inevitable shortcomings that accompany its production (Kamuf, 1991). Seeking methodology available in the Western academy that would be suitable for interpreting stories situated in a specific cultural context, I explored ethnography, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. I ended my search with the same puzzlement produced by my exploration of postmodernism.

Ethnography used to be for studying ethnic groups, as its name connotes. What also does not sit well with me is the claim that the structure of that ethnic group could be excavated as could the language and the rules inside each group. Also, their aim is to study the group and to understand it from the perspective of the members inside the group. Is that possible? I wonder. In my opinion it is impossible for an outsider to understand an ethnic group in the way an insider does. An outsider would interpret it through the lenses of her/his worldview. In addition to that I do admit that another reason for my suspicion is due to the variety of ethnographic studies done on my people. Ethnographers were part and parcel of colonial imposition (Ahmed, 1992) in the lands of my ancestors.

The purpose of the following dialogue between PWA (pseudo-Western academic) and MR (mischievous resistor) is to illuminate my inner dialogue while exploring phenomenology and hermeneutics as possible methodologies for my inquiry. PWA is telling the story of journeying through various approaches within the qualitative research paradigm--a journey that has been elusive, frustrating, and exhausting, yet exciting, enriching, and insightful. MR's voice is also very much mine. It is mine from birth, the source of my wonders and my treasure in life or, let me say, Allah's gift, which is considered a curse by those challenged by it.

PWA: Now let me tell you about Edmund Husserl.

MR: Edmund who? Who is he?

PWA: Well, his work is considered to have revolutionized the twentieth century approach to hermeneutics.

MR: Hermes what? Listen, I do not like the sound of this. This journey sounds like the ivory tower, highbrow kind of talk that I neither have interest in nor get nourished by. It numbs my brain.

PWA: In this journey we both have to collaborate. I know that some concepts, words and ideas will get your tongue going, but please wait for the story to unfold. Now, back to hermeneutics: It means different things to different scholars, depending on where you stand and what field you belong to.

MR: Field? According to our Islamic Arab epistemology, there is no such word. All “fields” are but human knowledge, *oloom*.

PWA: Yes, I know. Nevertheless in the academy it is assumed that knowledges are separate and highly specialized, and each has its language, assumptions, canons and big names.

MR: I sure have many funny images when I think of the word *field*.

PWA: Please get serious. Stop these satirical comments.

MR: It is rather I who suggest that you keep play in our dialogue and stop that serious silencing. First, you know I am playful. Second, we both know that academic, unquestionable seriousness is a refuge and a hiding place for insecure academics. Aha!

PWA: Fine, let us stay playful. Just listen, *please*. In order to go with the process of interpretation, Hermes needed to be a trickster. He kept the process fluid and the meanings at play and unfixed.

MR: Aha, that sounds like our politicians of today.

PWA: Not at all. Contrary to politicians’ agendas, the interpretations as performed by Hermes and hermeneutics do not attempt to conceal or brainwash. Rather, they keep on pushing the limits of interpretation. Contemporary hermeneutics considers interpretations as infinite processes that assume no fixed meanings intended by the original author. Once the text is written, the author has no power over the infinite meanings made by each reader or by a reader at a different time. In other words, there is no fixed true meaning, but rather a multiplicity of meanings made every time a pair of eyes reads that text.

MR: I thought we started the journey talking about Husserl. Is he a hermeneutics expert?

PWA: Well, he is more associated with phenomenology.

MR: I’m sorry I asked. Here we go again, another jargon.

PWA: Well, in a way they both point to the same destination. Phenomenology is an approach used to study, research, or seek insights into a human phenomenon; it

is an approach to get to a true meaning or to the essence of phenomena by using phenomenological reduction. Simply put, when one cuts oneself off from historical, cultural, and social entanglements, one can purify one's consciousness and liberate it. Only then, Husserl believed, can one grasp the true meaning. In other words, it is a process that cleanses one's understanding of the germs of relativism.

MR: "Germs, cleanse, cut off . . ." Are we now in a surgery room?

PWA: Okay, I will put it differently. There is an assumption here that, in order to extricate the kernel of knowledge from the husk of appearances, this process is required. It involves suspending of the natural attitude or, in other words, "bracketing" everything which that attitude tells us. Only then is our quest for a secure understanding possible. It is making judgments that are purified and cut off from the spatial and temporal world.

MR: I have had enough! I am serious now. If you do not stop this academic ivory-tower gibberish, I will stop listening altogether. Please remember I am an Arab and what you are saying makes no sense in my worldview.

PWA: Okay, I am an Arab woman who is deeply connected and rooted in the Islamic discourse. In my research journey with the other fiery-spirited resistor women, we are united and embedded in the Islamic Arab social, cultural, and historical context. Each word in their stories speaks of their histories. Each is a factor that is at play in the process of interpreting and understanding their resistance.

So according to Husserl, any understanding handed in by history is transient and incomplete, prejudiced, preselected, and interest-bound. Therefore such understanding is dishonest and partially blind. In order to avoid that, one has to depend on the process of bracketing, which is cutting off these ties that blind the understanding.

MR: It sounds like installing burglar alarms on the door, but leaving the thieves inside. Is it possible to purify one's consciousness? It sounds too medical to me. Once the roots--the context, the worldview--are bracketed away, assuming that it is possible to do, what is left then?

PWA: I agree with you. That approach fits neither who I am as a researcher nor the topic of my research.

MR: Well, I am finding most of our dialogue very exhausting. Can you talk, please, more in words that are closer to my world?

PWA: Here is one of our Muslim scholars, Al Ghazzali, the Sufi scholar. Of course, you remember that, for the Sufis, knowledge is empty unless it is connected to what is known internally. Here is Al Ghazzali's proverbial saying,

“What a difference there is between knowing the definitions of health and diseases, together with their causes, and being healthy and satisfied.”

In summary, it became clear that phenomenology as a method for studying and grasping the essence of a phenomenon did not fit the topic of my research. First, living with a resistor spirit is not phenomenon but rather a mode of living and existing in the world. Second, phenomenology’s assumption of the possibility of a researcher free of context is not compatible with who I am as a researcher or with my topic. Third, understanding these spirits defies drawing common themes that occur in each of these women’s lives.

I went on to explore hermeneutics as a method of interpreting the women’s stories and understanding what is it to live with a resistor spirit. My exploration also reached a dead end, without a fit with this method. Historically hermeneutics in the sixteen century, its early stage, was “a means to demonstrate the basic intelligibility and non-contradictory nature of the Scriptures” (Mueller-Vollmer, 1997, p. 2). During the Renaissance its focus was to “establish the authority” of an interpretation. Later on in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century the notion of *authorial intentions* emerged. According to Wolf (as cited in Mueller-Vollmer), “Words and sentences--if used correctly--would always convey the meaning which the author intended” (pp. 4-5). Chaldenius (as cited in Mueller-Vollmer) defined hermeneutics as the art of “attaining the perfect or complete understanding of utterances (*vollstandiges Verstehen*)--whether they be speeches (*Reden*) or writings (*Schriften*)” (p. 5). With Schleiermacher’s (as cited in Mueller-Vollmer) major contribution in the nineteenth century, hermeneutics became grounded in a concept of *understanding*. For him hermeneutics was no longer focusing on extracting a certain, given meaning, or proper understanding, but was rather “concerned with the conditions

for the possibility of understanding and its modes of interpretation” (p. 9). Dilthy (as cited in Mueller-Vollmer), in the same century, abandoned Schleiermacher’s concept that interpretation is rooted in language. According to Dilthy “understanding as a methodological concept has its roots and its origin in the process of human life itself” (p. 25). In the twentieth century Husserl’s phenomenological hermeneutics became concerned with “acts whose meaning presents itself only in their actual performance. . . . The phenomenological study and description of these performances involves interpretation and explication of their implicit meanings” (p. 29).

It is my understanding that the interest of hermeneutics is in how meaning is made. People as meaning-makers are embedded in a con/text, the worldview that surrounds the text, verbal or written. Hermeneutics is concerned with how the context with its history, culture, social norms, and social institutions contributes to how meanings are made. The focus of my research is concerned with what is it like to live with a resistor spirit; the focus is not the meaning made by these women nor is it how the cultural context contributes to how the meanings are made.

In conclusion of my story of exploring methodologies established in the West, the method that increasingly seemed suitable for my research was *storying*. I was (and am) living in the midst of a story of a woman resistor. So were (and are) the other women of my research. Being a member of that Islamic Arab culture and a recipient of that wealth of cultural and spiritual knowledge, telling a story is my way of spontaneously and authentically relating to others. Relating authentically to the women in my study was important to me as a researcher, for it was the source of my ability to write their stories.

“Testimonies,” the following poem by Wallace (1987), speaks to the power of hearing stories as a research methodology:

As the cadence in an old woman’s voice
 Becomes the line that will lead others
 Into the territory her people saw,
 You make me see
 The importance of your work, the long hours
 Taping these languages which only a few
 Of the elders speak now. “My stories are my wealth,”
 One woman tells you. (p. 47)

In the Islamic Arab cultural context, storying is also a means of intergenerational transfer of knowledge, be it religious, social, or historical. The *Koran*, which is mainly recited in the form of stories within stories, and the biographies of the Prophet Muhammad--peace be upon him--are the main sources of all Islamic teachings and jurisdiction. These stories are the vessels of the Muslim teachings. Stories are the vehicle of Allah’s revelations, yet it is left for readers to hear and make sense, each according to their readiness. The inquiry around any topic is rarely answered in brief points. In Sufi teachings, stories are told to invoke and invite, according to one’s readiness at the time, multiple interpretations of the story.

While working for a multinational company in Saudi Arabia, I often witnessed the frustration of an American asking an Arab a question or seeking information and expecting a brief, to-the-point answer. Often the Arab would reply with an answer that was buried in a story. From the Arab worldview, brief answers take the life energy out of human relations and replace it with a mechanical and dry form of communications. Brief,

to-the point answers could imply to Arabs the lack of desire to truly relate. This is an excerpt from an earlier research journal (1994) entry:

People's life stories have had a transforming effect on me. At times I "step out of me" as I watch, and replay my life story, and that has its effect too. How people tell their stories, how they repeat their stories with different details, each in each setting. . . . The details they focus on in each telling are different, as they are in different places in their lives. As old stories are told, new ones are being written. We are the authors, yet we are stories. We live stories while rewriting the old ones.

It is crucial to clarify the reason that the title of the study indicates that this study is a narrative inquiry, yet in this chapter I am referring to storying as methodology. Narrative inquiry includes various methodologies. Like other narrative inquiry methods, my research used stories as vehicles for generating knowledge. Gough (1998) states that "much of what we claim to know in education comes from telling each other stories of educational experience" (p. 121). I would emphasize here that much of what we women with resistor spirits claim to know about living with such spirits comes from telling each other stories. Storying methodology differs from some other narrative methodologies in the way it uses stories to generate knowledge. Whereas storying as a methodology constructs and shapes stories to generate knowledge, some narrative inquiry is concerned, in Gough's words, with "analysing and criticising the stories" (p. 121), by "subjecting them to various forms of critical analysis and deconstruction" (p. 118) in order to expose the structure of the discourse (p.118) with the aim of generating knowledge as well.

The word in Arabic for story is *kissa*, which means a story that is told or narrated for a purpose of conveying knowledge. Arabic stories typically convey knowledge, contained in layers. By *layers* I do not mean vertical layering, one on top of another waiting to be unearthed beneath, but rather layers arranged like the petals of a rose. As the story is told each petal unfolds, for those ready to hear. There is no center to be reached but rather

knowledge grows incrementally. As a story is told there is no center or final destination to be reached but rather another bud would appear on the stem of that rose waiting to unfold for the seeker of the knowledge.

Seekers of knowledge, by listening to a story, receive knowledge incrementally, not only through cognitive acts of interpretation of that story, but according to the readiness of their hearts. Seekers must prepare themselves as instruments of knowing. This preparation is an ongoing process that is never completely finished. The key to preparation is intention; seekers of any knowledge are required in this process to check their intentions repeatedly. Questioning, verifying, and clarifying intention is central for the process of preparation. Questions like *Why am I seeking knowledge? What is my intention? What am I intending to do with that knowledge?* are crucial to pose. Seekers of any knowledge are required to honestly, and from the heart, ask themselves whether they seek knowledge from a place of arrogance, power, or self-aggrandizement, or from a place of humility. Only for those who come from a place of humility do the petals of the rose unfold.

In this research I use stories in three key ways. First, as a data-gathering method, stories were used by the women and the researcher as the culturally appropriate means of relating and learning about their lives. Second, stories were used as a way of composing, constructing, and transforming knowledge of the resistor way of being and subsequently as a way to represent and communicate that knowledge to my readers. Stories are carriers of knowledge to my readers. What knowledge they carry varies with each reader. In using stories, as in my cultural habit and practice, I respect the readiness of each reader to make sense and to take from them what she or he can, is willing and ready to. Third, stories

transformed me, the researcher, as a knower. I particularly stayed open and ready to hear and see what Allah revealed and made possible for me to know.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the researcher “conclud[es] the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives” (p. 26). I still remember stories I heard from elders as I was growing up, but at different places in my life each attained different meanings. Now I can see that even some of the humorous legends told to children are carriers of knowledge. The legendary Arabian tales of *One Thousand and One Night* and the stories of Joha that made me laugh as a child have their secrets, richness, and hidden wisdom. For example, in the story of “Joha’s Nail,” Joha wanted to sell his house and move to a new one. He sold it for a very low price on the condition that he would continue owning one nail that was hammered in one wall in the house. The owner agreed with that condition, and the deal was completed. Joha continued to come by the house daily. In each visit he requested that he be allowed into the house that he no longer owned, in order to check on the nail in the wall, which he owned. Centuries have passed since the writing of the legendary Joha stories. Nevertheless, even today it is very common to hear an Arab describing an unacceptable excuse as *mosmar Joha*, or Joha’s nail.

In early childhood I laughed at this Joha story. However, later in life its meanings multiplied. There were times when it was a story that taught me to be careful of the “fine points of an agreement.” At other times I take it to refer to self-deception, when we think we want or do not want to do something for a reason that hides the deeper reason underneath. A third meaning might be that it does not matter who owns the physical

house; what matters is who owns the nail. The house and the nail may be metaphors for the body and the heart, or for what is perceived by the senses and by the heart.

In concluding this section, I recall that ease with which the stories unfolded, were exchanged and interwoven during the days or weeks I spent with each woman of my study. The sharing as well as the interpretation of these stories was the means of constructing our knowledge and deepening our understanding of living with fiery spirits. It was as if each of us held a crochet needle in our hands. The stories provided the threads we picked and crocheted, creating beautiful meanings of the stories as we interacted. The stories, the interactions, and the context we were in and something else--a kind of mystical energy--all were at work. A mystical energy is the work of hearts meeting together. It is this same energy that close and intimate friends create with a few words or, at times, wordlessly. With the exchange of a glance, they understand. With a sigh here or a chuckle there, a whole world is created, with its history, images, and stories played out right there. Palmer (1969) calls this "understanding." He adds, "The subject understands through the shared language and the historical positionality in which his understanding stands" (p. 229). In other words, when stories of this study unfolded, there were seven mirrors at work. Imagine a room with seven mirrors. As these women tell their stories and I tell mine, the seven mirrors are at work. The seven mirrors are the story told, the teller at the time, the cultural context, the context in which the story is told, the listener-researcher-interpreter, what is being told (with its multiplicity of rendered meanings), and finally you, the reader. As you the reader enter the process, you too have your mirrors where you reside. And the process goes on every time those stories are read by every reader. In other words, understanding is the work of the mind and heart.

What is it to understand? That is a question many social scientists, philosophers, and researchers pose and attempt to answer. I am researching the fiery spirit of the resistor women in order to “understand.” There is no final destination called “understanding,” where all that is to be known is known. Understanding is more than knowledge of something. One’s understanding has to evolve for the knowledge to reveal itself or allow itself to be discovered. Understanding occurs in those moments of harmony between the heart and the mind. It occurs when the mind and heart are in harmony with what is being understood. I read of Husserl’s (as cited in Smith & Smith, 1995) “pure consciousness,” the place where he anchored his hope for certainty and I wonder if his “pure consciousness” is parallel to the heart in Sufi teaching. There are no right or wrong understandings; each might make sense in a given context. I wonder why some thinkers in the West searched frantically for context-free understanding. The following paragraph by Bauman (1978) has a possible answer:

The reason can be found not so much in the intrinsic superiority of context-free over context-bound understanding, as in the urge for control, which no context-bound understanding can satiate as far as no context is fully controlled. . . . Only if I can be sure that what I have grasped is, from now on, immutable and immune to contingencies of fate, can my knowledge give me the feeling of genuine mastery over the object. . . . Objective understanding appears, so to speak, as a substitute for practical control over the situation. (pp. 230-231)

Interviews and Selection of Participants

In many books on research interviewing (Mishler, 1986; Oakley, 1981; Seidman, 1991), an interview is considered not merely a conversation or a dialogue, where two are working together to collaborate in rendering meanings and constructing knowledge, but rather a pseudoconversation. Seidman (1991) emphasized that “the rapport an interviewer must build in an interviewing relationship needs to be controlled” (p. 75), due to the

inescapable power difference between the interviewer and the interviewees. As pointed out by Oakley (1981) in "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms": "In order to be successful, [an interview] must have all the warmth and personality exchange of a conversation, with the clarity and guidelines of scientific searching" (p. 191). "The contradiction . . . is that interviewing necessitates the manipulation of interviewees as objects of study or sources of data, but this can only be achieved via a certain amount of humane treatment" (p. 33).

Early on in the course of my research I was required to submit a list of questions that I would use during my interviews in order to obtain ethics committee approval for the research. As I embarked on my research and from the first interview it became clear that the mode of asking specific, preplanned questions and expecting answers was unsuitable for it was restricting and inhibiting to the women. Storying as a form of communication was more culturally suitable for these women. For example, if I asked a woman about her childhood and her resistor spirit at that age, she would begin narrating the story of her childhood. Narrating stories rich in metaphors seemed like a multidimensional knowledge, or way of knowing, while questions and answers seemed metaphorically flat, simple, a one-dimensional way of knowing.

An example of acquiescing to the demand of a cultural setting can be seen in the experience of another Arab woman researcher conducting research on her own people. Abu-Lughod (1986) is an Arab American anthropologist who was mostly raised and educated in the United States of America. In her doctoral research she traveled to Egypt to study Bedouin women of the Egyptian desert. She points out that her deciding to adhere to the dress code of the Bedouin women while living among them played a great role in

her research and the human relationship with these women. She opted to live and immerse herself in their lives so much that, in some parts of her book, she began to speak with endearment of these dress codes and how adhering to them uncovered the deep meaning of the modest dress code and veiling among Bedouin women. That story is an example of an ethnographic study by a member of that culture who was willing to allow herself to change in response to demands of the culture of the women she was studying.

Similarly, as I prepared questions to ask my participants and ideas around ways of selecting participants, I neither lost sight of the context that I was traveling across the globe to reconnect with, nor did I intend to follow any plan to the letter. I departed to Saudi Arabia the summer of 1993 with a deep determination to keep things in play and to stay open to all possibilities and alternatives that came my way. Seidman (1991) assumes “interviewing requires that researchers establish access to, making contact with, potential participants whom they have never met” (p. 6). I had what in English is called an inkling in my heart, or what I call, from my Muslim context, an intuition that many surprises awaited me.

Neither the participant selection process nor the data-gathering process turned out as initially planned. As the social custom requires, most relatives, friends, or acquaintances usually visited me as soon as they heard of my arrival. The greetings, the warm hugs, and then the exchanging and catching up on the news of each another--all would lead to the question, “So Amal, what are you up to these days?” I spread the word around that I was embarking on a research journey to write about women who are stubborn, fighters, survivors, tough, wild--in short, misfits and disturbers of the status quo. I knew that each of these descriptor words did not do justice to my topic. Nevertheless, these are some of

the labels and names women with fiery resistor spirits are usually granted by the majority, who see in them nothing but trouble.

I initially approached resistor women whom I grew up or worked with in my country. Relationships among us resistors women is a source of survival through the years. As explained in chapter 2, resistor women have their own culture, so to speak. We connect with each other and easily feel the resistor spirits that dwells in each of us. Some of the women I approached agreed to participate in my study, while others connected me with women whom they recommended as prospects. There was deep respect that my relationship with each one was a treasure, a river that nourished me through the years. We found support and consoled each other. As observed in any excluded minority group of any society, people who strive from the margins seek affirmation and support among each other.

Yes, the surprises were many. From the woman over sixty years old to the sixteen-year-old, as their stories unfolded, I knew that something magical had begun. The magic began as I stayed open and allowed the process to pull the rug from under my feet. I stayed with the ride, the fall, the overwhelming perplexity of seeing my assumptions challenged. The stories and the events of three months living with these women will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

This brief story of the journey's beginning is simply to illustrate that, had I insisted on following a plan, as is often considered advisable in research, I would have sacrificed and lost the gems that were washed ashore. I was like a seeker of gems from the sea. The stories these women shared were the waves of that sea. With each ebb and flow of the mysterious sea, some of its gifts washed ashore. Had I stood by the shore insisting that the

gifts had to meet the specifications of my questions, or had I shortened, amputated, deformed, or reshaped the stories to provide specific answers to preplanned questions, I would have picked some gifts but ignored many. In other words, I would have done “lots of stone grinding, with little flour seen,” to borrow Al Ghazzali’s words.

The interviews with the women of my research--or to be true to the cultural context of us, the seven women of these interviews--are better called times of narrating, exchanging, and interpreting stories. During these storytelling times, I knew that in the midst of our multiple realities the understanding of these *arwah abiya* would be deepened.

The Process of Translation

The interviews were conducted in Arabic. For the purpose of this research, I later translated and transcribed the interview stories into English. Hirshfield (1998) says of translations: “Translated works are Trojan horses, carriers of secret invasion. They open the imagination to new images and beliefs, new modes of thoughts, new sounds” (p. 54). The process of translation is, in and of itself, a special form of interpretation. In that process the translator mediates between two worlds and dances playfully between both. Translation is not a mechanical matter, as thought of by the producer of the pocket-size translation machine. During the process of translating the women’s stories for the English-speaking world, I was sensitive to and aware of the world where the Arabic language resides, the world that shaped our worldview. Arabic, like any language, is a repository of all the cultural experience and the negotiated personal interpretations of these experiences.

In the following example I illustrate what is entailed in the process of translation. I use my own writing rather than the women’s stories so as to be able to access the intricacies

of the process. I provide an English translation of two sentences from an introductory paragraph that I wrote initially in Arabic and then a description of the process after each sentence.

1. With the Name of Allah, the Merciful, and the Compassionate, the front part, or introduction.

At the beginning I wrote, "with the Name of Allah." There was a moment of hesitation to write that. It is a statement that I begin any Arabic writing with, yet I omit it when I write in English. I paused and questioned myself: Why do I omit it? What does it say? It says that Allah (God) is merciful and compassionate. It is also a statement that every Muslim on Earth is encouraged to use before starting any activity--writing, eating, walking. I whisper it dozens of times a day. It is a statement that as a child I was reminded to use in order to invoke the *barakaha*, positive energy. That statement also carried memories. I remember as a child the rush with which I used to start my meal, in order not to waste time. I wanted to eat quickly, then run and pursue whatever I wanted to do next. I remember being told that the food would be more nourishing when I started with that statement. And I remember my mother's daily reminder, as she saw us off to the school bus, to say that statement at the beginning of the school day, so our brains would have positive energy to facilitate our learning in school. Later on in life I learned that my parents must have said it before I was conceived in my mother's womb. That statement was whispered in my ears when the midwife received me from my mother's womb as I entered this world. I also heard it when the men took my father's body to the cemetery in *Makkah*. Hence it is a statement that welcomed me to this world and will be whispered when I depart--*insha A'llah*, Allah willing. I say that because if I die in a hospital bed in a non-Muslim country, I might not hear it from human beings, but I might hear it whispered

by angels, the other beings. This was the dialogue that I had before I decided to write that statement.

2. This introduction (*almokadima*) is for a paper (*takreer*) submitted for my candidacy (*tarsheeh*) as a doctoral student (*taleba*).

During the process of translating the two lines above, the four Arabic words in parentheses presented me with some of the challenges encountered in the process of translation. *Almokadima* means the front part or the part that appears first but hides the rest; it signals to the reader that something is hidden but will appear later on. If I say, “the front part,” I will be more loyal to the Arabic word *almokadima*. However, the English word *introduction* is the word used by most translators of Arabic. In order to be clear to the English speaking reader I chose the word *introduction*.

The word *paper*, *waraka* in Arabic, means one page, or in English, it could also mean a leaf of a tree. I chose to use the word *takreer* (report) instead. *Waraka* that would have indicated to an Arab reader that the report is of one page.

Tarsheeh is the Arabic word I chose to use for candidacy. It normally means purification, as in purifying water. I decided to push the limit of translation and use the word *tarsheeh*. Purification fits the image of putting students through fine water filters and might be more indicative of the sorting-out function served by doctoral candidacy examinations.

The Arabic word for student, *taleb*, is very interesting, in that its Arabic meaning also is tied to the Islamic Arab epistemology. It means a seeker on the path, seeking knowledge. Also, when a man proposes to marry a woman, he is then *talib al gorb*: He is seeking her closeness. In concluding this example, it is indeed important to highlight that the process of translation (Palmer, 1969) makes us aware of the fact that language itself

contains an overarching view of the world, to which the translator must be sensitive. It also makes us aware of the way that words actually shape our view of the world.

Language is clearly the “repository of culture” (p. 27).

Multiple Meanings of Validity

The word *valid* I first heard in the English language to describe a passport and other official or legal documents. Etymologically, *valid* comes from the Latin word *valere*, to be strong, to be worthy. The word *value* comes from the same source. The first definition in *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1990) is “having legal efficacy or force.” The second is “well grounded or justifiable: being at once relevant and meaningful.” The third is “appropriate to the end in view: effective.” The distinctions among synonyms are interesting: *Telling* means having such force as to compel acceptance; *valid* implies being supported by objective truth or generally accepted authority; *sound* implies being based on flawless reasoning and on solid grounds; *cogent* may stress weight of sound argument or evidence or the lucidness of the presentation of an argument; *convincing* stresses having the power of overcoming doubt, opposition, or reluctance (p. 1302). *Flawless*, *objective reasoning*, *solid ground*, *overcoming opposition*, and *doubt* are words that do not belong to my ontological and epistemological stand, as described earlier. These words are based on the assumptions that there is one true reality out there, and that by analyzing it objectively and with flawless reasoning one can submit valid evidence that will have the power to overcome any opposition to one's conclusions.

How could such words fit in research that is rooted in a world where the word *reality* refers to what is happening, where we do not believe in a solid ground in this life--the only solid ground is in the certainty of Allah's existence--and where all human knowledge

“truths” are changeable and fluid? With the Webster’s definition of *valid* in mind, I neither claim to offer valid, indisputable truth about these women’s lives, nor do I seek to have power that will win over all opposition. I am on a research path where I am seeking understanding or a knowing from the heart or a truth about a way of being that compels my readers.

Early on in my research journey I resisted the “masks of validity” available for social science researchers. From the conventional measurement of the positivists’ quantitative scientific approaches to the variety of suggested stances on validity of qualitative research approaches, nothing spoke to me, nothing “felt right.” In my opinion most stances on validity are measured by Western ideals and Western standards. In Scheurich’s words (1996) masks of validity fall under and legitimize the “Western project of knowledge” (p. 54). They are “masks for a boundary and policing function” (p. 53). As stressed by Scheurich, these policing practices are applied to researches in order to divide good from bad, acceptable from unacceptable, emancipatory from oppressive. The boundary line marks inclusion and exclusion by whatever criteria.

Moustakas (1994) suggests that when a researcher has an autobiographical relationship to and historical interest in the research question, the presence of the self of the researcher contributes to and increases the depth of the researcher’s understanding of the multiple realities of our lives. The truth in my stories is in that; it is about my truth from my life and the lives of these women.

The source of validity of my research story is in its persuasive power, and the measure of validity is the acceptance of my readers. It is important here to refer to the dictionary use of the word *telling* as a synonym for the word *valid*: “telling, which means having

such force as to compel serious attention and usual acceptance. . . . Telling stresses an immediate and crucial effect striking at the heart of the matter” (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1990, p. 1302). This striking can also be called *resonance*, the extent to which the stories ring true for readers. I recall sharing these stories with a Canadian researcher at a conference. During our week together she told stories of her daughter, who had many of the aspects of these women resistor spirits. A few weeks later she called to ask if she could meet me with her husband, who wanted to talk about the resistor spirits and how their stories resonated with stories of their daughter. Readers of this study are mostly from cultures and worldviews significantly different from those of the women of this study. Nevertheless when I shared the women’s stories with readers from a variety of cultures, their feedback revealed that these stories have resonated with them. While reading my stories they recalled specific women from their own cultures who possess aspects in common with these women with fiery resistor spirits. All aspects of these fiery resistor spirits resonated with readers across cultures.

What constituted the validity of my understanding was the inner feeling of harmony. This understanding, in my opinion, is not a result of a mental mind-gathering of facts, but rather a mental, emotional, embodied, and intuitive holistic understanding. An understanding is reached when the mind, heart, and soul are in harmony--an understanding that defies at times the words of any language to articulate. When I shared the stories with women across cultures, I often heard feedback of how the stories spoke to them either of themselves or of women they knew with these rebellious spirits.

As stated in Sher, (1999): “The greater the depth at which you tap your own personal truth, the greater relevance your writing will have to humanity” (p. 167). When reading

the stories invokes parallel stories of other women resistors in my readers' memories, that is a measure of validity. When my readers find these stories relevant for women they know, or find these stories relevant to their lives' stories, that in itself is a measure of the power of these stories--their relevance to humanity. During my dialogues with mothers who were raising daughters with these spirits, I often received the empathic understanding that continuously validated, with harmony, my own mind's and heart's understanding. When I share my experiences with these mothers, and that sharing assists these mothers to see their daughters through a new lens, that in and of itself represents the validity of my research process and my research outcome.

Ethics Are Culturally Situated

The issue of ethics is rooted in my Muslim context as well. Adhering to ethical rules has a deeper meaning that goes beyond the approval of an academic institution's ethics committee. As a Muslim, I am accountable in the other world, the hereafter, for every act, thought, written and spoken word, and intention.

The words in Arabic for *judgment day* are *yوم al hissab*, "the day of accountability." When I did my soul-searching and clarification of my *niya*, or intention, I did so from that context. When I prayed, meditated, and discussed with my Sufi teacher that I would not write, think, or act in any way that would cause harm, I did so from that context too.

Another point I need to highlight briefly here is that the secular state and government, where citizens are governed according to man-made laws, are all Western constructs. In spite of the breaking of the Muslim nation into a few dozen states, it is yet one body, where the laws of Islam are adhered to and have the highest place of importance over any human laws. Deeply situated in that Islamic context, I know in my heart that no matter

how skilled a writer I am or how successful I am in obtaining the approval of other academics, these are not what matters. What matters is my *niya*, intention or hidden agenda; it is the criterion to which I will be held accountable by Allah, who knows what is in my heart.

Having said that, I am aware of the difficulties and dangers of the ethical issues in human science research. In light of that context the issues of confidentiality, anonymity, speaking for others, and truthful representation of the women's stories all have meanings, which are also situated in our Arab Muslim context. Alcoff (1991) suggests that "anyone who speaks for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved" (p. 25). I interrogate myself at every step of my research, remembering that the only power is the power of Allah. If I misrepresent, exploit, or harm these women or others in my writing, thoughts, or actions, it is this power to which I must answer. All worldly powers are but Allah's gifts; He grants and takes as He wills.

Chapter 4: Narrating Resisters' Stories

In this chapter I will begin by narrating five dramas. The function of these dramas is to introduce my readers to the cultural context in which the seven women of my research live. As stated in the previous chapter, storytelling is deeply rooted and embedded in the Arab Muslim fabric of these seven women's lives.

Following these five dramas I will explain the narrative style I used in the seven women's stories and how that style has its cultural and historical roots. The style of narrating I use follows the style of a storyteller in the women's quarters of Arabian homes prior to the introduction of television in the early 1960s. For centuries Arab men gathered in tearooms or coffeehouses to listen to the male storyteller, *hakawati*. In the women's quarters, women and children gathered around an elder woman during the cool hours of the evening to listen to, or rather watch, the telling of the stories and the acting of these stories' characters. The stories of the seven women will unfold in a manner and style similar to that of the elder woman storyteller from my childhood memory. Each resistor was given a name for the purpose of concealing her identity. I include in each woman's story how the name was chosen.

Following the narration of the seven women's stories, a final section will highlight aspects of these spirits that came to the surface as I worked on these stories and as these stories worked on me.

Five Dramas

I am not going to start with where Saudi Arabia is located on this globe. Nor will I start with numbers like its population or national gross revenue or the number of kilometers or miles in its size. Yes, Saudi Arabia is the country where all the women of

my research reside, with the exception of myself. At the moment I do not reside in Arabia, but it resides inside me.

After lengthy reflection I opted for stories as this section's introduction. What stories? Is not this the chapter of women's stories? Yes, it is. But before I begin these stories, I will pull a few others from my research journal, stories that I heard in the weeks prior to my research journey. These introductory stories are snapshots of the context in which the women of my research are living with their fiery spirits.

In retrospect I would say these introductory stories did not appear on the screen of my life as a series of coincidences. I am sure the reception controls of that screen picked these stories for a purpose.

Secondly, in spite of these not being the stories of the women of my research, these stories nevertheless speak deeply and loudly of the life context of these women. These introductory stories no doubt appeal to me more than just my listing such dry facts as are customarily written in the introductions of most books or researches on Saudi Arabia.

The First Drama

A villa has a palace's style, but cannot be called a palace. (A mansion is called a palace if a royal person is the resident, I guess.) At this villa, the rich *sheik*'s five maids and driver and his wife lived in the annex next door.

What is a *sheik*? In Arabic it means an old man and is also the title for a man of religious knowledge. It could also mean a man of religious knowledge. However in the post-oil era the meaning of *sheik* has transformed in a manner similar to the transformation of the country itself. It is used now to indicate a man of wealth. One hears of *sheiks*--side by side with the *mosque sheik*--who mainly possess money. They might or

might not possess either knowledge or old age and the wisdom culturally assumed to come with the years.

The *sheik* in this story is of the post-oil-era type. It is in fact the story of his wife, P. She is the wife of a rich *sheik*, a businessman who inherited most of his wealth from his father. P was chosen for her beauty and light skin. The white skin color is very desirable to our tan men in my country of tan-skin women. P has non-Arab blood that gifted her with the desirable white color of skin. Her dresses are designed by Akbar, the Saudi designer who graduated from European fashion design schools and whose designs are affordable by the wealthy and notables of *Jeddah*.

This P received a call from her husband's driver, who had gone to the airport to pick up the *sheik* as he returned from one of his frequent business trips to Cairo. The driver informed P that the *sheik* had been rushed to the hospital with an inflamed appendix. P went to the hospital and headed to his room to wait for his return from surgery.

There was a woman in the waiting room who introduced herself as the wife of the *sheik*. My dear P, first you thought there was a mix-up of some sort. No, there was no mix-up. That woman was, as it turned out, the second wife of your husband of many years. You gave him only sons, but he wanted another wife who might succeed in giving him girls, which that woman did. She had given him the daughter he waited years for. Yes, boys are highly preferred by our men, but do not be confused, P. Yes, you birthed him five boys, but that was no guarantee that he would not desire another wife.

You cried, you insisted on being the patient companion in his hospital room. You collapsed. Months of tears, sleeping pills, nervous breakdown, and hospital admissions

left you shattered. I hear that you went to Cairo to continue the war and to confront the second wife.

Your sister, who is married to the *sheik's* brother, tried to intervene, only to retreat from the *sheik's* threat that he would bring the second wife to live in the villa with the first one if the sister-in-law meddled in his "personal affairs."

What are your choices? You could accept it, as advised by many, and live in your marital house that is, as the advisers stated, "the only place where a wife can live in dignity." Your other choice would be to leave the *sheik's* house and move to a lower-status life as a divorcee in your parents' house.

Dignity is a difficult word to hear uttered in that context. Oh my countrymen, explain what you mean by dignity. By Allah's name, do not talk about multiple wives as your God-given right. You know--maybe you do not know, or even forget that knowledge--that following Allah's rules in that matter would have left hardly any of you married to more than one wife. My beloved Prophet in his often quoted last sermon told you, my countrymen, "The best amongst you are the best in treating women." How many among you nowadays, I ask, could qualify for that honor?

The Second Drama

N is in the hospital delivering her seventh child. It is her husband's desire that she produce twelve children. Her ovary exploded during the previous delivery. I did not know that ovaries would explode. Whether they do or not, she had a serious complication during the delivery. When she woke up from the anesthetic, her first question was whether she was still capable of bearing more children.

Her husband then threatened to wed another woman to give him the rest of the dozen. I asked if any elders in the family could talk to him or pressure him to reconsider the matter. The answer I received is that he did not like anyone to meddle in his “personal affairs.”

The Third Drama

The news hour on the television came with the news that a woman, M, and her stepmother had been sentenced to death for the murder of M’s husband and the disposal of his body. The news left me wondering what was omitted in that announcement. What had the two women endured? What other crimes had been committed that led to this insanity?

The Fourth Drama

This story is of a third-year university student, Z. His father told me the story as an example of the evolving insanity of the religious police.

Z met a university female student, in spite of the segregation of men and women in higher education. They decided to meet in a restaurant. In respect for the Islamic rule on mixing in public and refraining from mixing while alone behind closed doors, a restaurant seemed like a reasonable place. A member of the religious police arrested them. The parents of both were called to the police station to sign a document guaranteeing that this offence would not be repeated. Z went on a hunger strike in prison, until his release a few days later. As for the woman, only Allah knows what her family will penalize her with for bringing them shame. What is their crime? Are all the millions of Muslim men and women in the rest of the Muslim countries committing daily crimes by studying and working side by side?

The Fifth Drama

This story is a replay from memory. The year is 1973. The place is in a city in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, in the vegetable market of that city. I was strolling with my father. He was dressed in his Arabian garment, a long white robe, and the Arabian head cover. The reason for my accompanying him to the vegetable market was my curiosity and interest in visiting the vegetable and meat market; women did not frequently visit either at the time. The wrapped-in-plastic goods of a supermarket still remind me of a hospital room, where items are super-clean but untouchable.

My father responded to my request and agreed, to the surprise of my mother and sisters, that I could go with him to the local market, or *souk*, where vegetables were arranged in a way similar to farm markets in North America. The lamb or cow meat is hung from the ceiling of the butcher shop, a scene that might seem revolting to some eyes. I could not understand, and I still do not to this day, what is revolting about it. If one wants to slaughter an animal to eat its meat, what is then revolting about hanging it? Does wrapping it in plastic make it less revolting? However, that is not the focus of this story; the focus is evolving. Just like the hanging meat, these stories are meant to show what is as it appears through my Arabian lens. I will offer no apologies; neither would I use any plastic wraps to make the stories look more appealing to readers.

I was looking at a basket of vegetables. The religious policeman, or what is known as *muttawe*, a person who forcefully guides others to obey Allah's rules, appeared from nowhere. He started waving his stick, threatening that if I did not cover my face with a black veil, he would teach me how. He then proceeded to speak to my father, because

after all, in his eyes I was not responsible for my actions. According to him, any of my actions was my father's responsibility, as my guardian.

A woman's guardian is her father before her marriage, or her husband if she is married. After her father passes away, it is either her brother or her paternal uncles if she has no brother. Her son could be her guardian after her husband's death. A line of men is expected to guard her--anyone but herself.

Narrative Style

The process of listening to the interview tapes, completing the transcription, and finally narrating the stories was a process that evolved. As I sit to recall how I reached that choice of presenting the stories in a narrative form to my readers, I do so with a feeling of perplexity, as would a painter, who used paints and brushes as the medium to convey and communicate, then steps back to look and wonder at the creation. Narrative, for me, is as natural a medium of communication as painting is to a painter. I am narrating the following stories with an image in mind of the women's quarters storyteller from childhood. I am the narrator, the storyteller, to my readers and my stories are the carriers of knowledge generated about the lives of women resistors.

The women of my research were the first storytellers. As they were telling their stories and through our dialogues, we were both reconstructing and reshaping the stories in layers unfolding like petals of a rose. Knowledge was being revealed as the petals unfolded. In this chapter, by being the storyteller myself, I reshape and reconstruct these women's stories once again to elucidate for my readers aspects of living with resistor spirits. My readers in turn construct and reconstruct meaning of these stories. Knowledge that is revealed to each reader depends entirely on what each reader is ready to receive.

It is of importance to state here that neither the women nor the researcher are the authors of the stories. From a Muslim Sufi perspective Allah is the only author of all human stories. What we humans constantly do in telling and retelling, constructing and reconstructing, is seek new knowledge as the stories unfold their petals.

The Women's Quarters Storyteller

As I narrate the stories in this chapter, I recall in my memory the era in my country prior to the introduction of television. The tradition of male storytellers who frequented tearooms or coffeehouses to narrate stories existed in most Arab countries. This tradition goes back centuries in our Arab history.

In the women's quarters a parallel tradition existed as well. Among the elder women, one was often chosen as the storyteller. From my childhood memory I recall Sitti Zain, the storyteller in my grandfather's house. Sitti Zain used to entertain the intergenerational extended-family female members with her stories. She did not merely narrate stories. As I recall very vividly, her actions were more like a one-actress play. Sitti Zain used to start the story with a narration about the place and time of the story. In the middle of the "play," she would leave the room, or the "stage," to return a few minutes later dressed in different clothes, in preparation for acting the role of the next character in the story. She would narrate and offer cultural details of the country where the story took place. She would at times speak to us, her audience, and at times she would act out a dialogue between two characters.

While reading the following stories of the seven women of my research, I became a storyteller on paper. I narrated at times, and at others I left the woman to narrate her story. When needed, I would offer cultural details to build the context that the woman lives in. I

also used dialogue between the woman of the story and myself as the narrator when suitable. When needed, I would turn to my readers and speak to them on paper.

To my readers this storytelling style, as unfamiliar as it may be, might open a new window onto our Arab Muslim lives. At times it seemed that I left the main plot of the story and branched off to other substories, only to return to the story of the woman I was narrating. This is a recognized storytelling tradition that, even to this day, I catch myself using when I share stories or events.

The Stories of the Seven Women With Arwah Abiya

In the following section the stories of the seven women will unfold. I will take my readers into the stories of the seven women's lives and narrate the stories with Sitti Zain's style of storytelling. The main difference is that these stories do not come from books, but rather they are the lived stories of the seven women of my research. They "wrote" the stories as they lived their lives with their *arwah abiya*, their fiery resistor spirits.

As I narrated the story of each woman, I moved with an imaginary zoom lens. With that lens in hand, I zoomed into only the substories that were relevant insofar as they manifested the women's resistor spirits. The stories chosen here are the ones that highlighted the resisters' fiery spirits in living action, so to speak.

Following the stories of the six women of my research and my own stories, no systematic analysis will be performed, no themes distilled. In its most common usage, *analysis* means separating a whole into its component parts. However it also means examining the relationships among elements of a complex whole. By analysis I do not imply either breaking or separating the parts. To do so would change the whole that is being studied. To analyze the aspects of these resistor spirits each separately would alter

the whole with all its interconnectedness. The whole contains more than the parts. It contains complex webs of relationships that manifest uniquely in each woman's life. As I listened to the stories on the tapes, I did so from a place of humility and with humble intentions. In this section I construct the stories and shape them to convey the knowledge gleaned from my listening. If what I did is to be called *analysis*, it is of the kind that preserves the integrity of the whole while acknowledging that the whole is a web of complex interrelationships.

Each woman is unique. The seven are women with *arwah abiya*, but each fiery and rebellious spirit has manifested in its unique way in each woman's life. I intend to let the writing flow, honoring and respecting the creative spontaneity of these women's spirits without any attempt to erase the diverse manifestation of each.

In order to conceal their identities, I gave each woman a name that stood out as I was working with her story. At the beginning of each woman's section I will tell the story of how that name presented itself.

I wondered about the order in which I would write these stories--the order of the provinces they were born in, the order of meeting them, or what other order? At the end I decided to introduce them on paper by starting with the eldest. In a culture that emphasizes respect of elders, that choice seemed in harmony with this culture. After all, my beloved Prophet Muhammad said, "Respect your elders, and be merciful with your children."

In order to stay honest and respectful of that cultural context, my personal stories come last. When guests come to our Arabian homes, they are offered all hospitality first.

The stories of the women, for that reason, are narrated starting with the eldest. My story is left for last.

Gasstoor

I contacted *Oum*, Mother of H. (Once a woman gives birth to a child, she is called “Mother of” followed by the name of that child.) I contacted her to inquire if she would be interested in being interviewed. *Oum* declined, as she was in the midst of a life event that required her time and energy. However, she promised to contact Gasstoor and call me later. A few days later she called to pass me Gasstoor’s phone number. I made the call, and we planned to meet in a few days.

When I entered the house, I saw Gasstoor, a woman in her midsixties. The sitting room floor had an opening from which a tree reached the ceiling. I could hear chirping from birds that were flying in the green room adjacent to the sitting room, a very pleasant surprise indeed in Saudi Arabian houses. As I looked at Gasstoor, I could see that spark in her eyes, the fire that through the years I came to recognize. She was dressed in a pair of trousers, also uncustomary for a woman of her age in my country.

I began the meeting by expressing my intention in the research journey as an attempt to understand more about our spirits. She sighed and said, “I myself wonder at times about these spirits, what keeps us going, and what keeps that fire going.” I knew that she was going to be a companion in the journey.

Gasstoor never had any schooling. She never learned how to read or write. Yet I knew at a deeper level that she would teach me many lessons and that she would shatter many of my assumptions.

Education was a great source of power, I assumed, that nourished women with these spirits. The hours I spent listening to her over a period of two weeks raised many questions that called on me to go deeper in my attempt to understand the mystical rivers that nourish a woman with that spirit. Education, degrees, jobs, travels, and living in different lands are all experiences that had their influence in enriching my spirit.

Gasstoor had never stepped into a formal classroom, nor had she traveled farther than Bahrain, an island off the Arabian Gulf. She had the whole world around her as her classroom, though she never learned to read and write a written text. Her strength was in her ability to read the verbal language, as well as what was not said. She had the spirit that enabled her to travel to uninhibited places in her life journey, to places where admission was not permitted without taking great risks. Risk-taking did not frighten her, but rather it ignited her inner fire.

Her story began with a happy and safe childhood. "I had a sweet childhood. I was loved especially by my brother, who was going to school abroad. He used to tell me, 'I wish I could see you going to school abroad. I wish I could take you away to go to school too.' And I said, 'How could I leave my home and my people? They would not let me go.'"

The first school for girls opened more than a decade after she was born. Going to school abroad was not a matter that her family would even consider for her. "My grandmother told me not to go out to the streets. 'The streets are full of men who will kidnap you and hurt you.'" Gasstoor chuckled, "See what silly thoughts they had."

When she was fourteen, her family arranged her marriage to a man who was more than twice her age. "They chose a man whom I did not know, and he did not know me. I

did not even know what marriage was. The morning after the wedding, I told everybody what happened the night before.”

She spent the first few months of her marriage at her family house, “but my husband slept in a separate room. . . . A few months later he told me he would take me to a neighboring country. ‘You will fly in an airplane and will do lots of fun things there.’”

She was tricked into believing that she would return to her family when the trip was over. When she arrived in his country, he announced his intention to settle down there.

“I felt pain, I cried, I wept. I felt like a child kidnapped away from his mother’s breast. My family must have known. As you know, our families’ teaching is to obey the husband.”

Gasstoor is not an Arabic word. She was born in a neighboring country that had strong Persian and Indian influences. I asked her what the word *Gasstoor* meant. She said, “I do not even know where the word comes from, but it is a small house in an island in the middle of the sea. I wondered if it meant a lighthouse.”

And to the new country *Gasstoor* went with him. Sixteen years living in his country, she birthed a child every year for the first eight years. “I used to be happy when I got pregnant, so I could spend two months with my family in Bahrain after each childbirth.” The sixteen years had, in *Gasstoor*’s words, “no love, no rights, lots of pain and problems. I lived an unbearable life with that man. I lived in a valley, and he lived in another,” she said. This is an Arabic proverb used when two are worlds apart.

She cared for her children and their education. Their father never went to their schools, but she did. “Their father used to say, ‘My work is more important than these

meetings.' I wanted my children to have everything I did not. I used to tell the teachers that their father was out of town. And I attended all the school's teacher-parent meetings."

Sixteen years and eight children later, she lived with a man in separate valleys, a man who did not allow her to go out of the house or socialize with women in her neighborhood. During all visits to her family she pondered the idea of not returning to him. The possibility of losing her children soon made her change her mind. In most divorces there the man will take custody of the children.

Many women who have endured years in similar marriages could identify with Gasstoor's words: "I could not stand the thought of losing my children. What is their crime, to go through a motherless life with such a father? My family deprived me of education and other rights. Why should I punish my children?"

"Years went by. I grew up." (She was thirty years old at the time.) "I learned about life. I am telling you my story. It is not a story for me. It is a life I lived. When we say that one has endured and sacrificed, these are not just words. I did endure with patience through all the sufferings. Sufferings are part of life.

"But love was missing in my life. A life full of suffering is bearable when shared with someone who truly loves you. True love that is--not money, not status, not family. Love is what supports us and carries us through. A man who loves you for who you are, not for what he needs or wants from you."

I asked if her family supported her stand. "I complained to them repeatedly, and every time their reply was, 'We do not see anything missing in your life. You have food, a roof, and clothes.' If that is what they thought I needed, I figured, I had to find my way out, as I see it. They said, 'If you keep on complaining, he might divorce you.' And I said, 'That

would be the happiest day of my life if he does.’ So my family’s stand was clearly against me.”

And find her way she did, finding a way that took her to many turning points. She made her happiest day become a reality (*waki*) that happened in her life.

“‘There was no support during those years but from Allah,’ my brother used to say. ‘I wish I could get you divorced from this man and get you married to a man you could enjoy your life with. It is your right to enjoy life,’ he used to say.” That brother was in prison.

One day she stood up and announced to her husband, “I no longer want to be your wife. You can live in a separate room in the house downstairs. I do not want you to talk to me or interfere in my life. The day has come that I grab all my rights from you.”

Gasstoor said, “There is no power that would make me change my mind, not my mother nor my father. Not even--I ask his forgiveness--Allah, if he descends, would change my mind.”

She shared words in the interview with strength in her voice that was sending waves through the room we were sitting in. She had been afraid of losing the custody of her children, yet she told him that even her children would not be her chains.

With the supporting brother in prison and her family against her, were any friends supporting her?

“Yes, I had a close woman friend whom I poured my heart out to. She shared my pain, but in such matters I was the one who should take a stand. She told me not to rush things, as he might divorce me, and I told her, ‘If he does not, I would go to court and divorce him.’”

It is a woman's right in Islam to divorce her husband. It is a rule that many Muslim women are ignorant of. Every time I bring this point up, I hear denial or opposition from most women. Women seeking divorce in the early days of Islam used to go to the Prophet and explain their case and get divorced. Fourteen centuries later, a woman has to struggle in courts for years to get a divorce.

Her sister-in-law visited her to intervene. This was Gasstoor's reply: "You are a guest at my house. Please do not interfere in my personal affairs. If a piece of flesh in my body loved him, I would cut it and give it to him." She proceeded to add that he never hit her, he never insulted her like some husbands did, but he was cruel, selfish, and unkind to her and to his children. Not enough ground to get divorced in most courts, I thought.

One day Gasstoor took her nineteen-year-old son and went to court. A woman needs a male to accompany her to most government offices or courts. She knew that no father or brother of hers would agree to go to court and support her. But nothing would have stopped that woman from reaching out to live her happiest day in her life.

When I use the words *judge* and *court*, I am not referring here to a judge or court similar in any way to ones in North America. The court was an Islamic court, where a judge listened to stories of marital cases and would either mediate or make a judgment aligned with the Islamic jurisdiction outlined in the Koran and tradition of our Prophet.

Gasstoor had two powerful discussions with the judge and with her father that reflected the strength of that woman's spirit. No paraphrasing or interpretation of mine could do such justice to her story as her words to the judge.

"I told him my story of my years living with that cruel and selfish husband. He then asked, 'What if he requested the custody of your young kids?' I said, 'He can do what he

wants. If you grant me a divorce, Allah will reward you for following his rule, and my thanks and gratitude would be to Allah.”

Her husband and her father were called by the judge to appear the following day. The husband tried to shame her for going to court. There is a social stigma around a woman who goes to court for any matter, let alone daring to request divorce of a husband.

As for her talk with her father, here are Gasstoor’s words: “My father showed up in front of the judge the following day. He too insulted me. He was very angry.

“I said, ‘First, I did not ask for you to come to court. Second, I do not seek your help. Only the help of Allah I seek and no one else. Do not be fearful that I will come and live in your house after my divorce. I would rather live in a desert hut.’

“He said, ‘Do you know how difficult your life would be without a husband?’

“And I said, ‘You were unfair to me from here to there [an Arabic expression to emphasizes the intensity of an act]. Now your words have no effect on me.’”

It is essential here to point out that those words to her father, in and of themselves, are volcanic in nature. She belongs to a generation and to a cultural context that reveres elders and parents in particular. A woman is passed to a husband’s house from her parents’. At the termination of the marriage, either by divorce or death of her husband, she returns to her parental residence. She was refusing both his interference and any moving back to her father’s household. That dialogue took place over thirty years ago. To this day, decades later, it would still sound out of the social norm for a woman to utter these words, talking to a father. For a divorced woman who chooses not to return to her parents’ home, to this day, is ostracized. Her family disconnects from her and her relatives and friends treat her with disrespect. This act of not returning to her family is considered a shameful act. Still

to this day, a divorced woman living alone is treated by some men as easy prey, and by some women as dishonorable, suspected of promiscuity. Gasstoor, now over sixty years old, is still paying the high price for her transgression.

The judge granted her a divorce. The husband's anger was so intense that he signed all the documents to surrender the custody of all his eight children. Gasstoor's words were that, the night before, she prayed to Allah that she would not lose her children. "I knew in my heart that my beloved Allah, who gave me this fiery spirit, would also send his help, and he did."

Her husband refused to provide any financial support to the children, though it is required by Islamic laws. The judge was pressuring the husband to support his children. Gasstoor insisted that all she wanted was the divorce paper, and she left the court with the divorce paper.

The husband came to the house and loaded most of the furniture and electrical appliances. I still recall her words to her youngest son, who started crying when his father took the television: "Do not cry. He took a black-and-white one. I will buy a colored one." Indeed, that divorce then welcomed many colors into her black-and-white life.

That woman had no means of supporting herself or her eight children. She sold her golden jewelry to live on initially. Her eldest son and daughter got jobs to help. At the end, her father offered to help as well.

Gold, in her generation, was a woman's financial asset. A woman receives gold jewelry from the time of her birth. The tradition is still followed even decades later when thousands of schools and many universities for women in my country have led to alternative sources of wealth.

When I birthed my daughter in Arabia, most of my Arabian extended family members presented me with golden jewelry for my daughter. Even the friends who presented me with baby clothes brought her gold jewelry as well. When I married her father, I got golden presents as well; so did I when I birthed her brother.

Divorce is permitted in Islam, but socially frowned upon. If the divorce is initiated by the husband, it might elicit others' pity for the divorced woman. However, if the woman is the one who initiates the divorce, with few exceptions, she will encounter anger and criticism by her family as well as other women.

Two days after her divorce, Gasstoor attended a cousin's wedding. In those days weddings were celebrated in our homes, not in wedding halls as in my country nowadays. In those days all women relatives attending the wedding used to help in preparing and serving food.

Gasstoor was serving guests of the wedding some sweets. She heard women whispering the story of her divorce. She went around the room for a second time with the sweets and offered more sweets to the gossipers, telling them, "The first round of sweets was to celebrate the wedding. This second round is to celebrate my divorce. Some of you women are married to husbands who are dead inside, but I refused to continue living with one."

Gasstoor went through her life journey, raising her children, respecting their differences, and offering each the space to grow the way she or he chose. Observing one son who loves singing and playing musical instruments and another who is very committed religiously to his Islamic education, I could see a mother who honors individual differences. "Allah creates people with many differences for purposes that we

do not understand, yet whom we are called on as mothers to honor and respect.” These were her words on her parenting philosophy.

I come now to another story of Gasstoor’s. Years after hearing it, this story still invokes both my tears and my awe at such a spirit, an event that, as put in her words, “left the deepest effect on me. The marriage, the divorce, the painful years--none has left such a deep effect in my life.”

Her son won a scholarship to study in the United States of America. She helped him prepare for his trip and said good-bye to him with tears in her eyes, comforted by his promises to call often from the United States of America.

She had to go to Bahrain, where a daughter was giving birth. She arrived in Bahrain and went to the hospital. While waiting in a hospital room for her daughter, she fell asleep and had a dream, a vision, a mystical experience--an experience called by many different names, depending on one’s spiritual place. She had a dream, let us say, of a bird that landed on the palm of her hand and wrote in blood. When asked what was it writing about, the bird replied, “I am writing with your son’s blood.”

She woke up in terror and called her children back in Saudi Arabia. She was assured they were all fine. After a week of calling them and receiving the same answers, she knew at a deeper level that they were hiding something.

As the story unfolded, the son who was leaving for the United States of America had been murdered around the same time as her dream. His killers lured him to a dinner, a farewell gathering, and killed him. They called her other son to come and pick up his body, claiming he died of a heart attack. When the police were called, they arrested the other son.

She returned to Arabia determined to get one son released from prison and to find the killers of the murdered one. It did not take long before she read the writing on the wall: The killers were sons of influential and rich families. That would not discourage a woman of her spirit. From police stations to courts went the journey of a few years of Gasstoor's life, tirelessly in pursuit of bringing her son's killers to court.

Five years later the trial day arrived. In the Islamic court were the killers, their mothers, the judge, and, of course, Gasstoor. According to Islamic laws, in such cases the family of the murdered is given three choices: capital punishment of the killers; or *diyah*, money paid by the killers as a compensation for the person murdered; or, the third and most difficult of the three, forgiving the killers. As stated in the *Koran*, the Muslim holy book, forgiving is the most difficult choice, yet the most rewarded by Allah.

Here is Gasstoor speaking of her choice to the judge. She said, "Of the capital punishment choice, I am not interested in it. I see here these men's mothers, and I feel their heartaches. As a mother I know that all the years left in my life will not dry my tears: Why would I want to put these mothers in that agony?"

"As for the *diyah*, not all the money in our king's treasury nor all the money of the world will compensate me for my son's little toe.

"Instead I am choosing Allah's reward. I hereby announce that I am choosing to forgive the killers." When the families of the killers sent her some money after the trial, she requested that the money be sent to orphanages.

Phoenix

Phoenix is a mythic bird of gorgeous plumage, fabled to be the only one of its kind and to live five or six hundred years in the Arabian Desert. Then it burns itself to ashes on

a funeral pyre of aromatic twigs, ignited by the sun and fanned by its own wings, only to emerge from its ashes with renewed youth to live through another cycle of years.

As I listened and lived with the story of the woman I named Phoenix, the image of the mythical bird from the Arabian Desert came to mind. The phoenix of this story was burnt on a cultural altar, which sacrifices women to a cultural interpretation of Islam that conflicts with the spirit of Islam as well as many Islamic rules.

Phoenix was forced into a marriage, which ignored one of the main required conditions of any Islamic marriage: ensuring the approval of both the man and the woman. Phoenix was married at the age of eighteen to a wealthy man her father's age. Her husband forbade her from visiting or being visited by any friends or relatives. In a religion that encourages maintaining harmonious relationships with relatives, women are faced, one after another, with ignorance of the religious rules used--or, I should say, abused--to justify the cultural and social oppression of women.

Oh Phoenix, you had nineteen years of a marriage, living in a golden cage. He later died, leaving you eight daughters and huge wealth: real estate, stocks, gold, and diamonds. I looked at your eyes, and I saw the ashes of a woman. Before reaching your fortieth year, you were widowed. At the time of our meeting you were a grandmother, at the age of forty. You had great wealth and eight daughters in one hand, and in the other you had a father, brothers, and brothers-in-laws, all of who claimed power over you and your wealth.

Fourteen centuries ago Islam gave women the rights to own properties and to manage their business. *Oum Al Moumeeneen Khadija*, or Khadija, the Mother of All Faithful, and the wife of our beloved Prophet, was a businesswoman. She hired Prophet Muhammad to

work in her caravans. Yes, women obtained so many rights in Islam. Yet the application of these rights over the centuries were left to the whims of the men in charge.

Phoenix, through a relative I heard of your story: the woman who is not acting properly and has gone insane. I inquired about your “insanity,” and it was mainly because you declared to your family that you met a man at your bank, you dared over the last few years to feel love for him, and he dared to propose to marry you. It was insanity in their eyes, and we knew why. You were first of all a widow, who in their eyes had no right to love and whose main duties were to care for your children and, one day, to die.

When I read stories of the Muslim women during the first centuries of Islam, I come across numerous stories of women, some who are descendants of the Prophet, who married after being divorced or widowed. But I know that over the centuries we lost so many of our God-given rights to the culturally dominant interpretation.

The second proof of your insanity, according to your family, is that the man you declared you love and intended to marry was a Muslim, but not one of your countrymen. We both know that a Muslim woman has the right to marry any Muslim man, but not in our country. In order to marry a non-Saudi, one is required to apply for government permission. This rule came into effect in the early 1970s; it applies to Saudi men as well, but that is not the point here. The point is that there is not a single verse in the *Koran* or in the Prophet’s tradition that supports or justifies that rule.

Phoenix is a name that came to mind in my visit with this woman a few years after our interviews. I saw then a woman who had emerged from her ashes with renewed youth. Even her dress had feather prints. It is important to point out here that at the time of our interviews Phoenix was going through the transformation from the ashes stage to the

renewed-youth one. The few years that followed her husband's death were the years of the breakthrough, the beginning of saying no to the powers over her.

As her story unfolded Phoenix moved from the place in her life where she said, "My family wants me to please them. The societal expectations of me as a widow are all around me. Where am I in all of this? Living to please everyone grinds me inside."

From there Phoenix moved to the place where she said, "I am determined to get where I want and to live with all the consequences. I will endure all difficulties, all strong winds, life or death. I will not be submissive to any threat. In spite of some doubts I am ready to take risks."

During those years her family was sending people to spy on her, and Phoenix expressed her concern that I might be one. I immediately stopped recording and assured her that at any time I could hand all the tapes to her to destroy and leave. Her answer came very strongly, that those doubts were initially in her mind when I called her and requested to meet her. Over the few weeks of our interviews she became sure of my being a companion on the path of struggle. Her interest in my research was expressed by her: "Our beloved Prophet, was sent to humanity to move us from darkness to the place of light. If my story would support women in their breaking away from darkness, I am for it."

It is interesting to recall here that the two Arabic words *zalam* and *zolm*, darkness and oppression, share the same linguistic root. This concept was repeatedly emphasized in the Islamic teachings, along with the concept that when one person is oppressed, darkness is brought over all of humanity.

Phoenix's story is unique in that the primary instrument of her oppression was her dominant mother. Yes, dominant women do exist in our cultural context, where some feel that either you have power over or you go under and will be oppressed. Their dominance has been a topic of many studies.

Phoenix's mother heard of a rich family who were looking for a wife for their son. She decided to take her daughter Phoenix to his family, hoping that she would be the lucky one. That was odd in the culture where a man would typically come with his elders to the woman's family to propose to marry her. It is my understanding that the mother's act would be considered an insult to her daughter and a devaluing of her. I later learned that some wealthy families do get away with a reversal of the usual rule. Phoenix commented that that made her feel like a commodity offered to them. She later added that her mother measured the success of her daughters in life by the wealth of the men they married.

Phoenix started crying as she told me the story of that marriage: "Years lost, of no value, and no education. I was the best in school among my four sisters and brothers. I am the only daughter who made it to Grade 9."

Did she object? "Yes, I did. A woman gets married to a man a few years her senior, not her father's age. A woman marries someone she knows, not a man forced on her. I pleaded, I begged, but no one listened."

Did anyone help? "Even my father did not want this marriage to take place. I even heard a woman friend of my mother telling Mother that Allah will not be pleased if I am forced to marry, but my mother's reply was, 'We will not find in-laws like these. They are the best choice.'"

The husband indeed locked her in a golden cage. He gave her all the material luxuries that one might dream of. But, in her words, "I was not allowed to engage with anybody in the outside world. His wealth was the price of my being enslaved."

Phoenix, the same woman who had no choice in her life, speaks of respecting her daughters' choices, to give them the freedom to choose that she had not enjoyed. "I do not want any of my daughters to be obedient. When my daughters choose what they want to eat, wear, or choose their friends, I feel happy. At times I struggle with them, but when they learn how to resist, I feel compensated." What also compensates is the supporting stand that her daughters took later on when Phoenix chose to remarry after their father's death.

Phoenix chose to focus more on the central facts in her life even then: the love she had for the non-Saudi man whom she met shortly after the death of her husband and her struggle against her family, who used every tactic to stop her from marrying him.

They first met when Phoenix went to her bank for the first time in her life. She was all covered up in black, terrified of taking her first steps out of the golden cage. He worked as a personal adviser at the bank. He noticed her and offered to help. Their first meeting was followed by frequent visits to the bank. She began to learn how to manage her financial affairs as well as her heart affairs.

That man was different, she said. "He keeps telling me, 'Do not do anything unless you are convinced and agreeable.' He respects me. What I say matters to him. Even a little weakness in my voice is a concern of his. He really tries to understand me, support me, and be there for me."

What would she do? The man expressed interest in proposing to her, but she knew her family's stand beforehand. Phoenix went to the mosque, the grand mosque of *Makkah*, to solicit the religious opinion, a *fatwa*, and the support of a *sheik*.

Phoenix told the *sheik* of her story with that man. He told her that it was her right in Islam to remarry if she wished. He offered to talk to her father about the matter. She told the *sheik* that the man was not a Saudi. He replied that his being a Muslim is the only requirement in the matter and that he did not see any problem. So the religious base was covered.

Phoenix now agreed that the man would go to her family and propose to marry her, to cover the traditional base. The family's involvement is encouraged in Islam in the first marriage of a woman. Their involvement is not required in subsequent marriages. However, it is socially expected and encouraged for both men and women to involve their families.

In this particular case--marrying a non-Saudi, as stated before--permission is needed from the government. The government requires the family of the woman to apply for that permission.

The man went to her father with his proposal. She was called to her family's house to discuss the matter. At the beginning her father was agreeable to the idea.

It was her mother who interfered and insisted on the refusal. Phoenix said to her mother, "Where is justice? I am not breaking any rule in Islam. I am only asking for what Islam gives me the right to. And, if I do, I would not be the first or the last Muslim woman to remarry."

The mother then warned her of the possibility that if she remarried, the second husband might take her wealth away. She said, "Mother, only what Allah wills would occur to me or to my daughters." Phoenix chuckled and told me, "My fear is that my family is who would love to take my wealth from me. My mother even tried to humiliate me and said that I want to remarry due to my strong sexual desire. I said that even though Islam did not forbid a woman from remarrying, it is Allah who created women and their desires."

Sayedna Ali, the Prophet's cousin, who was described metaphorically by the Prophet as the gate of the city of all knowledge, said, "Almighty God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men." That is another indication of how cultural interpretation at times deviates and distorts many of the Islamic teachings.

When all failed, the family then locked her in a room for one week. They brought her food and kept repeating their threat that she would be locked up until she changed her mind. "My father, my brothers, and my mother would take turns in opening the door to utter more insults and more threats. I felt that up to that point in life, men--whether a husband, a brother, or a father--all had been like knives that stabbed me, but the hands that moved them were my mother's. I felt like a straw in the middle of a high tide, lost in a sea, with the waves carrying me high and dropping me. I knew that Allah would be with me. I kept saying, 'Yes, I will marry him, and I do not see anything wrong with that.'"

It was inside that room that Phoenix thought of means that would win this life battle. She said, "I thought to leave the country with him, but that would be escape. I was determined to marry him and live here in my country."

A week later the door opened. They told her she could go to her home and they would give her three more days to reconsider the matter. They sent a family friend to hear her answer. She repeated determinedly that she wanted to marry the man whom she loved.

Her family tried different tactics, but to no avail. They called her daughters to encourage them to oppose the marriage, only to hear her eldest daughter reply, "Mother did not ask to do what is forbidden in Islam. Allah took our father, but did not require that our mother not remarry."

They even offered to find her another husband. Her words to them were strong and clear: "You chose the first husband. I am not going to let you choose the second one."

They finally pulled strings and deported the man back to his country of origin.

"They think they are powerful, but Allah is the All Powerful, and I will win with Allah's help." Just prior to his departure she went to a *sheik*, who agreed to marry them. Due to the many restrictions, more men and women are taking that course. However, the marriage in those cases is permitted in Islam, but not registered or recognized officially.

After his departure she spent a couple of years focusing on her business. A businesswoman could run her business through male employees, which she did then. "I took a business deal that tripled the capital I invested. I did not hear a word of encouragement from my father. I began to learn about real estate, shares, and stocks," she said with a proud look in her eyes.

She kept telephone contact with her husband. When her family, through their connections in the local telephone company, tried to stop her from calling him, she made the calls from a friend's house. They bribed her driver to report to them. Phoenix in a way

was besieged by her family. It seemed that the more desperate they were to control, the more determined she became to break away.

Women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to drive. Muslim countries are the only ones on Earth that prohibit women from driving. I often hear that some nomad desert women do drive in spite of the prohibition. I recall a story I heard from a policeman in the early 1980s. He stopped a woman in the desert who was driving her truck, which was full of sheep. She asked him for the reason he stopped her. He said, "The king's laws prohibit women from driving." She said, "I transport my sheep in this truck. I am a shepherd. That is what I do for living. Go ask the king to hire a driver for me if my driving breaks his laws." She drove away and left him to share the story with others for years afterwards.

Phoenix's story did not end at the end of our interviews. I contacted her a few years afterwards. We met, and as I stated earlier, she was dressed in a feather-print dress. I saw that same fire, that same spark in the eyes. Her mother was accompanying her to a social function that we were all invited to.

She shared how she fled the country in secrecy to visit her husband. In spite of another cycle of her family's rage, she endured. It is important to point out here that, to this day, no Saudi woman is allowed to leave the country without a male guardian or his permission. Phoenix was hesitant to share the details of her leaving the country without her family's knowledge or permission. I respected her, knowing that such an act could put her or whoever helped her at the border in a difficult legal situation.

At that stage her family decided to approve the marriage. What changed was that she was then taking actions that were forcing their involvement in legal trouble with the

government, as well as causing what is considered social scandal to her extended family. They had to give up.

I had the chance that evening during the social function to communicate my congratulations to the mother for Phoenix's marriage. I still recall her mother's words about how her daughter was a successful businesswoman, "making business profit that would take the brains and efforts of ten men to make." Phoenix was indeed reborn with renewed youth and beauty.

Undercover

The story of this woman is what prompted the name I chose for her, Undercover. From the first interview, all through the years of my research journey, I moved in circles in interpreting her stories. In some of her stories she came through as a woman with a fiery spirit, a resistor. However, there were many parts where I stopped and wondered if she was one.

The sparks in her eyes, achievements she made in her life, her refusal to submit to a husband's abuse, all these manifested her spirit very clearly. Nevertheless, her submitting at times without any resistance to her family or to a social rule kept pulling me in the other direction.

At some point, through writing and dialogue, what was revealed to me is that she had her unique tactic of resistance, involving, in her own words, "calmly, at times when no one is looking." She submitted to some collective views and resisted imposed expectations that did not resonate with her inner fire.

Staying with the difficulty I had in dealing with her story led me to see how that difficulty was within me and about me. It revealed my own resistance tactic more clearly

in contrast to hers. The more I heard an inner voice saying, "She does not fit," the deeper I reflected and dialogued with that voice, raising many questions. What is it that does not fit? Whom does it not fit? How does her resistance have to be, in order to fit, and according to whose criteria of fitting?

The decision to exclude her story came up early on, but was quickly voted down. Discounting her story and her resistance style would have been a repetition of another form of oppression that women with fiery spirits encounter socially. People discount us also due to the difficulty they have in seeing how we fit in the collective social milieu. Similarly, their difficulty reflects more about them than it does about us.

I knew Undercover from my childhood years growing up in Cairo. Our families moved from Saudi Arabia among a sort of exodus of families from the *Hijaz* area to Egypt, where less religiously indoctrinated education was available. As stated earlier, the education for girls available in Saudi Arabia in those years was limited to a few home-based Koranic schools.

Undercover was the only daughter between two sons. Her family valued education for all their children. Special emphasis was put on the education of Undercover. As put in her words, "Of course pursuing my studies to university level was an idea ingrained in our minds as our route to financial independence. We were told not to depend on marriage as a future guarantee. What if he (a husband) betrayed me? Then I would have a degree to fall back on." Undercover graduated with a bachelor's degree in social work. She returned with her family to Saudi Arabia to fulfill her dream of working and contributing to the improvements of social life in the kingdom.

Our Egyptian teachers hammered these ideas in our minds and hearts. Egypt under President Nasser's socialist regime advocated many progressive social trends regarding women's role in society, a policy that created an atmosphere of political friction with the ruling regimes in neighboring countries. As I write these words, I recall my high school principal, who on numerous occasions gathered us students from Saudi Arabia in her office to lecture us about how the Egyptian women's struggle of emancipation had started twenty-five years earlier, and it would continue. We Saudi women, we would return to our country, and we would be "the bridge that the next generations of women will cross over." Forty years later those words still echo in my heart.

One could argue that these ideas of the Egyptian principal were another form of indoctrination, and that would be a point well taken. However, such indoctrination in the Egyptian schools was in line with the original Islamic call for Muslim women to seek knowledge and contribute to changing and improving their societies.

The first time Undercover and I met for an interview was after a working day at the orphanage that she managed at the time. At some point in our interview I expressed some difficulty in understanding her resistance tactic. She stood up and went to the window of her office. Pointing to the orphans in the playground, she said, "Yes, I might be considered a conformist and traditionalist from the outside. But I look at those children and how I manage this place, and I know in my heart that I am neither. Resistance has to be practiced calmly, at times when no one is looking."

Upon her return to Saudi Arabia, Undercover's father had a great financial crisis in his business. She decided to work and support her family through those difficult years. She recalled that those years had a positive effect: Her parents, who had various marital

problems during her childhood back in Cairo, were now working together in a business. They both had to improve the family finances. The difficult times, in her words, “provided the family with kind of a glue that united all family members.”

In order to continue her assistance to her family during that time, Undercover refused many marriage proposals. Marriage proposals do not occur, as in the West, as a result of courting, but rather as a result of a family searching for a partner for a son of theirs, or a son, through his family, searching for a future wife. The word then spreads around, and other families offer many suggestions of marriage-age women they know.

Undercover belongs to one of the very reputable families whose daughters are sought by the elite families. During those years university graduate women were rare to find in the kingdom. The increasing number of university graduate men who were looking for compatible university graduate women meant that a woman like Undercover was highly sought after.

It is important to point out here that fourteen centuries ago, according to prophetic tradition, our Prophet--may peace be upon him--advised early Muslim men of the following criteria in choosing a wife: “A man desires marrying a woman for her beauty, wealth, or her manners and integrity. Marry those who have integrity; your hands will be filled” (an Arabic expression meaning you will be content).

Undercover was determined to succeed at work as well as assist in the family’s financial responsibilities. Those five years her job was where she focused all her energy. That meant putting in much overtime with no pay and taking business assignments outside of her home city without the usual financial compensation. “Succeeding at work

became my challenge. When I am deprived of something in an area of my life, I tend to channel my energy to another area.”

Having been raised in Cairo from childhood to graduation from university, she had few friends from work. The ones she befriended and could easily relate to were women who had also been raised in Cairo. “Even among the extended family I felt like an exile-- that I did not fit.”

As her family’s need for her financial support decreased, that purposeful desire to work waned. “I began to feel I was not needed. I had no purpose in life. I kept on working, but without a personal purpose. I thought it was time maybe to get married or maybe to go to graduate school.”

At first she started looking into going to graduate school. In those years prior to the wide availability of graduate studies in the kingdom, interested students used to apply to the Ministry of Higher Education for a scholarship to study abroad. Undercover received two scholarships, one to the United States of America and one to Egypt. “Of course, we [our family] preferred Egypt. Our other home was there. ‘You could live easily there,’ they said. So I told them, ‘No problem. Any place is fine.’”

“My mother planned to stay behind in Jeddah, since my younger brother joined a university there. So we [Undercover and her father] agreed to go to Egypt and planned to exchange visits with Mother and my two brothers, who would stay home in Saudi.”

Undercover did not go to graduate school. Her life would take a sharp turn as the story unfolded.

I noticed her using *we* instead of *I* as she described the process of reaching a decision about her graduate school. It was a collective familial decision, not a personal one. The

role her family played in her personal decision was very perplexing at first. Only later did I begin to understand it.

Undercover was a university graduate from a generation who began to expect, or at times insist and demand, to meet a potential future partner themselves. Her parents had difficulty with that, as some families did then. While living in Cairo, she wanted to marry a classmate in Egypt with whom she went to university. He was not Saudi. The family was adamant that “it had to be someone from my home country who would value me and protect me. Of course, that was wrong.” Undercover accepted her family decision then and agreed that she should wait for a marriage proposal from a Saudi.

Her accepting her parents’ decision about two important personal decisions (going to graduate school and marriage) presented me with one of the difficulties I had in understanding her resistor spirit. According to her, all life matters and all successes or failures are in Allah’s hands and according to his destiny. As a Muslim, I do believe in destiny, but it is my understanding that Allah meant a destiny that one is actively making choices about. Does this sound contradictory? But does not the beauty of life lie in its complexities and contradictions?

As the interviews progressed and as her story unfolded, I began to see that a great deal of my struggle with her story “not fitting” revolved around the role her parents played in her life and her choice not to resist. Do we really choose? Or are we guided by Allah to choose? Even when we think we are choosing, is not everything in Allah hands? Is not surrendering to the will of Allah a form of resistance--resisting the impossible-to-achieve human desire to be in charge at all times?

Undercover was not a passive member in her family. It became clear that she was a very involved and engaged member in all her family's decision-making. In her words, "I had a very strong relationship with my parents, based on confidence. They depend on me to handle many family matters. They even get me involved in their conflicts. They ask my opinion in many matters. If they do not agree, they will try to convince me. But if I am not convinced, I submit [*ardakh*] to their choice." *Ardakh* is a powerful word in Arabic, meaning to surrender, to submit, to unquestionably comply, usually to a stronger power. Her using the word *ardakh* had a strong impact on me. As a Muslim, I am expected to submit only to Allah, but never to another human being. I dialogued with her further to know what the word meant for her. She later added that for her *ardakh* meant to agree with them. She reiterated she had deep belief in her heart that they knew what was best for her.

One could see clearly how Undercover resisted many powers to be at her work. She established a social care center that served as a haven for hundreds of orphaned children. Hundreds of local women became economically independent upon graduating from various programs offered in her center. However, the matter of choosing a future partner was to be left to her parents. Her decision to allow and accept that family-arranged marriage was a conscious choice involving reflections and thought. She surrendered to whatever Allah chose, through her parents. By surrendering and choosing not to resist, Undercover lived true to her own form of resistance.

Undercover agreed, but was not directly involved in, the preliminary stage of that marriage. However, as her story unfolded, she later was called on to resist her husband's abuse. At that stage, she clearly was actively engaged in her resistance.

“All that I wanted in a husband is that he is committed to Allah’s path and does not break Allah’s rules. Money or status are not matters of concern to me. That man [her ex-husband] proposed in the routine way, of course. He came with his family. My family did their investigation around his circle of relatives and friends, as is traditionally done in our society, and my family thought he was the right man and agreed. The first day when he came with his family they did the *fateha* [reading of the first page of the *Koran* to symbolize agreement of both]. The second day they did the *emlak* [the religious marriage ceremony considered the formal engagement]. “After the *emlak* he went to Cairo on a business trip and later met with my father, who stopped in Cairo on his way from London. They picked a date for the wedding day. They both returned a week before that day. They rented an apartment and bought the furniture. My father brought me a wedding dress from London, but I did not like it, so he bought me another one. It all went so smoothly, and the wedding took place. I did not know anything about him.”

Her marriage began with the early turbulence of incompatibility and different expectations of each other. As his work required various trips abroad, Undercover moved near her family’s house. A woman living alone who had no access to telephone or a car was not safe in those days.

Undercover chose to resist involving her family in the first two years of her marriage, as is customarily done or expected of women. She dealt with all the marriage challenges that occur when the couple are incompatible in multiple ways.

In her third year of marriage, following the birth of their daughter, the abuse began. He announced one day that he wished to marry a woman he had known before marrying Undercover, but could not get his family’s agreement to marry. That announcement was

preceded by months of a variety of hardships and emotional abuses: unexplained absences, broken promises, not showing up for social commitments, criticism, and other forms of pressure and abuse. As explained by him later, he tried to forget about the first woman, but he could not. Thus he wanted to marry that woman as a second wife.

Undercover resisted all his negotiations, refusing to stay in that marriage, “whether as a first or as an only wife,” as she put it. Undercover, as stated above, had no friends to share this calamity with and did not involve her family in any details of her marital life. She turned instead to Allah. “I turned to Allah. I cried. I asked Allah for guidance and strength to stand up and resist, and I did.” Once her decision was made very clear, he moved out and refused to give her a divorce.

He continued for ten years to be the sole male guardian, whose permission was needed if she wished to travel abroad. For those ten years Undercover was unable to travel abroad or remarry. She resisted the pressure all around her to reconcile, even “for the sake of the daughter who needs the presence of her father,” as those many advisers would say. To them Undercover’s reply was, “My daughter needs to grow up around a mother who will not accept deception or humiliation.”

A few years after she finally got divorced, it was time for her daughter to go to university. Her daughter wished to pursue studies abroad that were not available in Saudi Arabia. Also Undercover was encountering many political games at her work, and she was contemplating resigning. In spite of the opposition Undercover encountered from her own brothers, she resigned from her work, left the country, and moved to where her daughter was going to school.

She used to pay her family and her country annual visits in the first few years she lived abroad. Her visits then decreased. Recently I visited with her in the country where she lives and saw the same sparks in her eyes, the same strength and the same fiery spirit that had been present during our first interview.

Salata

Salata is the Arabic word for *salad*. It is also a word used in Arabic to express one's disapproval of a situation or an event that is unclear or mixed up. I chose this name for this woman as we were laughing about her story of going upstairs on the day of her wedding celebration. Someone had spilled salad on the stairs. She looked at her husband and said, "So it is going to be *salata* life from the beginning."

Salata started our interviews with a very refined analysis of the social hypocrisies surrounding women in our country, the abuse and misinterpretation of Islamic rules perpetuated to keep women in a submissive place. "If women are allowed to move away from these restrictions, they might even surpass the men," she said.

The story with which she began signaled that the woman I was interviewing was unique not only in her fiery spirit but also in her reflections, awareness, and courageous actions. A few months earlier a thief had broken into their house. The police were informed, but no one was arrested. She was not pleased with the police's efforts at the time. She suggested to her husband that he write a petition to the *ameer*, the prince in charge of their province. The husband declined for fear of getting in trouble with the police. Salata wrote a letter and took it herself to the *ammara*, the prince's office. She emphasized, "I did not get any results, but I tried twice, not once." In a country where men fear the idea of submitting a petition to any government office, she did not sit idle.

Salata was a woman in her thirties when we met. She spoke of her younger years, saying, "I was, you can say, of the intelligent type. I wanted to break free, to be a doctor or even a nurse--to succeed, to work, to be." She wanted to study medicine and that was possible and available for women of her younger generation. However, doing so meant years of studying and a late marriage, which her father did not approve of. In addition to that, "being a doctor means you will be working with men in hospitals. Take that idea out of your mind," her father used to say.

She was allowed to join a teaching high school, where she would receive teacher training. By "allowed" I mean just that: Any Saudi woman applying to any school, university, or work is required to submit a letter of approval from her male guardian. Salata three years later completed that credential, but could not get the approval of her father to work afterward. An elder uncle warned her father that allowing a daughter to work "would make her see herself [value herself]. She might one day encourage her mother to leave, as I heard happened to some men." Salata commented, "They [men] do not want a woman to have any power. They want to destroy any power we possess."

After her graduation from the teaching high school, Salata was to stay home to wait for the "right man" to propose. Salata had a different opinion about such a man. She wanted a man who would support her dream of having a career as a working woman. She also wanted to be involved in choosing that man. As for her father, his main focus was that she marry a man with whom she had no previous relationship.

Two years she spent at her family's house in a game of tug-of-war. Families looking for wives for their sons usually speak to families who have daughters for marriage, who also spread the word around: mere supply and demand. Romance and love do not enter

the equation of marriage here. In fact her father was adamant that a woman who married a man based on love and romance before marriage would not be respected by the husband afterward.

It is widely believed by men socially that a woman who would have a love relationship with a man prior to their marriage is not to be trusted afterward. It is an adage among some Arab Muslim men that a man would play around with many women, but when he is ready to get married, he will propose to a woman he never met, except on the day he goes to her family's house to propose. Few seem to see the hypocrisy in that view or how it conflicts with Islamic laws.

According to Islamic belief, hearts are in Allah's hands. Allah plants feelings of love in our hearts, and we are held accountable for only our actions. A Muslim man asked the Prophet, in the early days of Islam, his opinion of pre-marital relationships. My beloved Prophet replied, "If that woman was your sister, what would you like other men to do to her? If you abuse her or mistreat her, that might come around to women of your family."

Salata spent two years in what she described as "a war between me and my father. My father followed the Prophet's tradition that I have the right to meet and talk with the man I will marry." That does not mean in any way a lengthy relationship. It means a one-evening encounter, sitting around with members of her and his family.

Salata continued her description of the two-year "stubborn war": "If I liked a man and was sure he would not prohibit me from work, then my father would not accept his proposal. If I refused the proposal of a man, my father would insist he was the right man. I would then cry and beg Mother to interfere, so the marriage would not take place."

Finally a man proposed, and her father announced that she would no longer have a choice in the matter. “That one is my husband now. I did not like him at all, his looks, his manners, his overweight--nothing at all I liked. I wished then that I had accepted any of the previous proposals.”

The marriage took place, and she went to live in the husband’s family home. She initially had some difficulties, but “with intelligent negotiation and tactics I managed to bring him to my side and gain his respect and love. He even agreed to allow me to work.”

In curiosity I asked about her “intelligent negotiation” actions. She laughed and said, “For example, this morning he began to hint that meeting you and doing these interviews might be a risk--that you might be a journalist and cause us trouble. So I said, ‘Fine, I will call her and cancel our second meeting.’”

“I called the woman who connected us and told her, while he was sitting in the room, that we all knew and were sure that the interviews were part of a research project about strong women, ‘but out of respect for my husband’s wishes I want to cancel the meeting.’ He then nodded that I can go ahead and meet you. In fact he offered to drive me to where you were.”

Winning him to her side opened another war front with her mother-in-law, who began to feel the loss of control over that son. Salata used to cook for the whole household and sew her mother-in-law’s clothes after returning from her teaching job in the nearby school. “I did not mind serving his mother, but she wanted obedience. That I did not offer her.”

Salata managed to take charge of her family’s financial affairs, both hers and her husband’s. Her husband used to hand her his salary every month, an act that infuriated his

mother. In his mother's words, "a real man would not surrender such a matter to his wife."

The more decision-making power Salata achieved in her marital relationship, the more intensified her mother-in-law war became. The war intensified until a house she could call her own was built a year later. She financed it with her savings and the help of her father. "I think my father became aware of the injustice of forcing me into marrying a man of his choice and living with his family. His support in building my own house helped me to forgive my father. Maybe he helped me to clear his feelings of guilt anyway," she later said.

"A real man does not follow a woman." Those were the words of the mother-in-law on the day the move to the new house was scheduled. During the previous year while the house was being built, Salata continued her negotiations with the husband, who agreed that he would move to the house once completed. His mother, as was expected, resisted that decision with all possible means. She uttered these words to Salata's husband: "You give her your salary, what do you expect? Now she has built a house that one day she might kick you out of."

To her, Salata strongly replied, "Listen, in my culture we do not kick family members out. I will not ever kick out the father of my daughter. And as for his salary, it did not finance the building of the house. It was my savings and my father's help."

She announced to both the mother and the husband, "I am leaving with my daughter. The keys of my house are in my hand, and the taxis are available. If my husband wishes to join us, he is welcome. But if he does not, he can stay with you. You can lock him in your heart for good." Ending, she said, "If he does not follow me in two months, I will be

eligible to get a divorce.” Would she be eligible? Yes, she would. In Islam a woman who is deserted by her husband is eligible to request divorce if she chooses to.

Owning her own house, a house she built with her own *arag jabeen*, “her forehead sweat,” as the Arabic expression goes, increased her sense of power. “I felt more personal determination. I felt that I was in charge. In our society they want women to submit. I tried that earlier in the marriage, but it deadened me inside.”

What gave her the idea to own a house, when it is considered the husband’s responsibility to provide that and satisfy the rest of her financial needs? Salata explained that “the pressures were so suffocating, I was about to explode. I had to do something to gain some power in my life.”

Treating mothers with respect is highly stressed in Islam. A man asked the Prophet--peace be upon him--“Who is the most deserving of my love and respect?” The Prophet replied, “Your mother.” The man repeated the question three times, and the reply was the same. Only on the fourth repetition of the question did the Prophet say, “Your father.”

I recall here the story of a man who carried his old mother to perform the *Haj*, the Muslim ritual of pilgrimage to the holy land of *Makkah* and *Madina*. He carried her for miles on a trip that lasted around a week. The man then asked the Prophet if by doing so he paid his mother back for some of her efforts in her care of him. The Prophet replied, “What you did has probably compensated her for your kicks during her pregnancy with you.”

However, some Muslim men tend to sacrifice the Islamic requirement to treat a wife with love and compassion in order to please their parents. In Islam no obedience is owed

to anybody who demands that a Muslim commit injustice in treating others. Yet a mother's demand is used at times as justification even to divorce a wife.

Salata moved to her own house, only to be followed by her husband days later. Was this the end of her struggle? No, it was not. "How did I live all these twelve years with a man who was suited to succumb to his mother any day? How did I live with a man who insulted me and kicked my family out?" She gave a long and deep sigh. "After birthing my daughter, I decided to use my patience, my resistance, and to continue the act of intelligent negotiation. I encountered many difficulties. But I am grateful to Allah that he supported me, and I came out as a winner at the end."

Three children later, eight years of living in that house were full of smooth times, but interrupted by verbally abusive and violent fights. Salata considered these fights as periods of success for the mother-in-law in imposing her control. Socially twisted definitions of how a strong husband should act were at work here. These definitions, in and of themselves, lack any Islamic bases or justifications.

Salata laughed as she recalled how after some of those fights it was the husband who would pack some clothes and leave to go to his parents' house, an action usually taken by women when they encounter marital problems. She joked about how appreciative she was that he always returned. He would bring the clothes back in installments, "I guess when the laundry was done in his mother's house."

In one of those verbally violent fights he slapped her on the face and requested that she leave the house. "Out of my own house? No, I am not leaving." The slapping continued until she bled. That was the end of endurance, patience, or intelligent negotiations for her.

With blood stains on her clothes, she called her father, who said, "I am tired of that husband of yours. I have already taken him to court once. Listen, you are free to take any action you wish to handle the situation. Go to the police. Show them the blood stains. Do what you need to. I am confident in your wisdom and that you will know what to do."

Salata took a taxi and went to the police station. She met the officer on duty there and reported the attack. When the officer announced that they would not interfere in a family dispute, she told him, "Then I will call a taxi and go to the local *ameer* and report my problem to him." As she was leaving the police station, the officer called her back and started to write the police report. When he said they would come and meet her husband later in the day, she told him she would sit in his office until then. The officer reckoned that Salata was not a woman to be defeated or ignored easily.

He proceeded to ask about her legal guardian, whom had she come with in the taxi. She said, "I came on my own. If you need to talk to my father, then you call him." The officer's excuse was that it was illegal to ride in the police car unless she were accompanied by a male guardian. The police called a brother of hers.

The rest of the day was spent in the police car chasing the husband, who fled to his family's house and then to a relative's house. At the end the husband was arrested, and Salata was admitted to the hospital for a few days.

The police later came to her hospital room to check if, after the few days that the husband spent in prison, she would insist on going ahead with the charge. She ridiculed the police, saying, "What do you expect me to do--come and apologize to him in prison and offer him my obedience? He has to pay a price for his attack."

I asked Salata what prevented her from being one of those women who would dry their tears and blood and continue their obedience. She said, "Why would I accept that treatment? I am a free human being. Allah created me free. Why would I accept a life of slavery? I have feelings. I have self-respect."

"What if those were the social expectations of an obedient, good wife?" I asked. She replied, "I refuse such expectations. If I accept humiliation, I will raise daughters who might accept to be humiliated and sons who might beat their wives up. Allah did not require that I endure harm with patience. In fact, Muslims are required to fight against any injustices, or their prayers would not be accepted by Allah."

On the trial day the husband was released after signing a guarantee that he would be sent to prison if he repeated his abuse. Salata carried that signed document on her at all times, to wave in his face for a long time.

As of my last contact with Salata, after that event nothing had been the same. He moved out shortly after. She heard rumors that he was about to wed a second woman "who will be more obedient." What would Salata do? She said, "I would for sure request a divorce. I will not surrender."

Tree

I chose the name Tree for this woman when I recalled a story of hers at the end of our last interview. Tree was a single mother at the time, living on her own to the consternation of her family and the society around. She was a very attractive woman: tall, slim, with a light color of skin contrasted by long black hair and sparkling black eyes.

To her annoyance, an influential celebrity in her area started stalking her. He used to park his car near a tree by her house. That went on for months. She tried to explain clearly

to him that she neither feared the power he had nor had any desire to have any connection with him.

Tree talked to her family, whose only suggestion was to move back to their house with her young son. That was an option she would not consider, after her long struggle in moving out to live on her own. In short, she felt besieged and helpless.

She was leaving her house one day, and he, as expected, was in his car waiting for her to pass by. As she described that day, "When I went out and saw him waiting there, I felt so powerless and helpless. Something inside me wanted to do something to stop this daily annoyance, but I did not know what. In a flash, I got an idea. I started screaming in the middle of the street, calling on all the Muslim men passing by to come and talk to that crazy man to leave me alone. 'Oh Muslim men, our Prophet advised you to treat all Muslim women as your sisters in the faith. With Allah's love and the love of his Prophet, come and protect me from this man.'"

In a few minutes, as the men were gathering around, that man panicked, reversed his car, and drove so fast that his car left marks on that tree outside her house. He left, never to return again. (When I was leaving her house, she pointed to the marks on the tree with humor, pride, and relief.)

That spontaneity in facing and resisting overwhelming and difficult situations has been for me a bewildering fact of the lives of these women. I recalled many stories from my life and the lives of these women with fiery spirits. In each and every one I hear similar words, to the effect of "I knew I needed to do something, but I did not know what. Then a sudden idea came up, as if a hidden power was moving me from the inside out."

Tree and I met the first time at her beauty center, through a mutual woman friend. Her spirit was a source of admiration and intrigue for me years before my research began. Many shocking events erupted in her life, and many had shaken her life and existence. She grieved many losses over the years. Yet Tree remained standing tall, strong, and deeply rooted in her resistance, like the tree by her house. Those life events left marks on both trees.

Tree started unfolding her story with the statement, "From childhood I was different among my sisters. You could say I was the rebellious one. I did not accept just any rule." When her mother died, Tree was five years old. Remembering when her mother was alive, Tree said, "I used to fight and challenge her. She put me in preschool earlier than my other sisters. I was a lot to handle. I was very active and inquisitive about everything. I even cut my mother's hair one day when she was not looking."

When Tree reached her teen years, her family would not allow her to talk to any males outside her family. Tree considered talking to males in the neighborhood as normal, in spite of her social or family restriction. She shared stories of talking to male friends walking back from school. "I tried to make my family approve of that, but I could not. I wanted them to understand that I liked the company of boys for mere friendship--nothing more, nothing less."

Tree resisted wearing the veil imposed by her family. They bought her one, but she would hide it in her schoolbag. She was afraid that her father would discover that and feel pain that she was expressing her refusal behind his back. For Tree, "Resisting their orders behind their backs was a form of lying and hypocrisy. I prefer to resist in the open and

with honesty. But even fear of my father was not a reason for me to wear the veil over my head.”

When the first proposal for marriage came along, she was sixteen. She refused to be married. She told her elder sister and her father that she was young, “and I still have a lot of time ahead of me to meet somebody who I want and who I choose--not someone you choose for me, as if I have no power.”

When she graduated from high school, a man proposed whom she initially liked, and so did the family. The marriage took place, and they honeymooned in Beirut.

She felt something abnormal about him that month. “From the wedding day, his mother handed him some medicine to take. I did not know then what for.” As the following months revealed, he had some strange thoughts and behavior. He would drink heavily and had extreme mood swings. Tree consulted with a doctor who told her that the symptoms were of acute schizophrenia.

She tried to rescue the marriage. She got pregnant early. During the first year of that marriage Tree endured a variety of abuses: verbal, emotional, and at times physical. After the birth of her son, the husband started beating the newborn son. Tree would protect him and get the beatings instead. That is when she decided she had to do something.

She consulted with a doctor who told her, “We have one sick person now, and if you continue living with him, there will be three sick people in the family.” She asked for a divorce and, due to the harm in that marriage, she got a divorce with no legal complications.

Tree left that marriage with her son and moved to live with a married sister in a neighboring country. There, her brother-in-law tried to approach her, but she resisted his

indecent proposal. She would lock herself with her son in a room until the sister returned. She resisted running to her sister and causing a marital storm. As she further explained, that would have been ungratefulness on her part. As for the brother-in-law, she stressed that he was a coward, and he would not have dared to pursue his initial approaches any further.

She moved out and got a job with one of the oil companies in that country. That lasted for only two years, as she later traveled to the United States of America with her son to follow her heart's calling, to study to be a beautician. Upon her return, she started a beauty center business that became very successful in that area of the country.

Shortly after, she met a younger man from a different part of the country. After a long and deep relationship they decided to get married. His family did not particularly support the idea of intermarriage with women from the area of the country where Tree belongs. In addition, they believed that their son's first marriage should not be to a divorced older woman. Tree's family was not supportive of that marriage either.

Tree and her man decided then to leave the country, get married, and live in the United States of America, where he was planning to go to school. A few months after their arrival and before they were married, he was killed in a car accident. Tree collapsed. She spent months in a hospital there, healing from that shocking grief. Her biggest source of pain at the time was "a feeling of guilt that I encouraged him to disobey his family and leave them, and maybe Allah punished both of us." It was years later when she surrendered to Allah the merciful and realized that Allah would not punish us for love that He willed in our hearts.

The story that was central in her life at the time of our interviews was of a secret marriage to a man whom she loved.

When Tree returned to Arabia, following the car accident and death of her fiancé, she connected with D, a man she had met where she worked years before. After she left that job, their friendship continued, a friendship that extended over the span of many years. That man, D, was always there for her at times of need. Love and romance were never part of the equation in that friendship, all through these years. D was there as a close friend, offering any assistance she needed in her life. Suddenly that friendship took a sharp twist, to the love and romance stage. Because D had a wife and children in a neighboring country, Tree hesitated at the beginning, but he offered to marry her in secret. Tree married him, to the surprise of her family and friends. As she stated, "Even I was surprised. That was not something I would get into, but I did."

The first stage of that marriage was "the happiest time or, let me say, a dream," as Tree described it. D was a very wealthy man, and travels were part of his life as a businessman. Tree was hopping the globe with him on those trips. However, before the end of that first year, "He began to change. He started traveling alone, not calling or visiting often." One day Tree called his office. D's secretary mistook her for the "new woman." When she confronted him, he replied that his life was "never about focusing on one woman." At times, he said, he "needed many women in his life."

Tree turned to her close friends and her social network of support. However, her main source of healing through that time came from "dipping into the river of prayer and turning to Allah," as she stated. She spent months trying to heal and make sense of that situation. She spent months being torn between her hope that he would leave the other

woman and return to her and her inner intuition that she was following a mirage. At the time of our interviews, Tree was going through what seemed like the final stage of that ordeal.

Tree came out of that experience standing as a strong, deeply rooted tree. In a personal letter she sent me a year after her separation from D, Tree wrote, “I do not blame anyone. All events and stories happened in my life for a purpose. I am grateful to Allah for all. Each one of those events gave me new strength. Every loss gave my life deeper purpose and meaning. I have no regrets. It all brought me to where I am standing now.”

During the last hour of our interviews, to conclude the two weeks of our heart-to-heart sharing of our stories, Tree articulated her own understanding of her spirit. Her articulation is valuable to highlight at the closing of her story. Tree said, in describing her spirit: “I call it ‘*tammarrud*,’ that is, when one goes beyond what is normal, what people around you expect you to follow. I do not mean being deviant, but rather not accepting the social setup that everybody accepts. I have that *mutamarreda* spirit. I was born with that spirit. I feel bored and suffocated when I follow a plan set by others. In spite of the high price I pay when I resist, that spark inside keeps on resisting. The approval of society is not important for me. What matters is that I follow what resonates inside. Yes, words of praise are nice. We all like to hear them said by people around us. Yet they have no taste or value if at the end I am forced into a situation. The approval that matters is that which comes from within.”

Inad

Inad was an eighteen-year-old woman. *Inad* is also the Arabic word for *stubbornness*. I chose this name for this woman not to imply in any way that she was stubborn, but

rather to respect the description she insisted on using for her fiery resistor spirit. I had pointed out the strength, determination, and resistance against oppression that moved her spirit and the spirits of women like her. In spite of her agreement, she insisted that she was stubborn. All through our interviews Inad used the word as a synonym for *resistance*.

“*Stubborn*” is a word that I heard most of my life from bewildered elders describing my spirit, too. It was an often-heard word in most childhoods of the other women of my research. I know that when I was around her age, I partially believed that I must be stubborn too. It was later in life that the word *inad* would induce me to understand that spirit further.

When Inad’s mother instructed her not to get involved in my research, Inad called her aunt the following day and requested my contact number. The interviews were held in her aunt’s house. Inad’s aunt was a woman I approached to interview for my research, but she declined due to health problems that took a lot of her energy then.

Interviewing Inad, her niece, opened a window for me into living with this spirit at her age. The ages of the other five women in my research ranged from midthirties to midsixties. Inad’s contribution provided a sense of hope that each generation had its share of women who bring the agitation necessary for change in their time.

Inad’s family had African roots. That put Inad in a multiplicity of oppressive situations. In addition to her being a female in a family that favored and gave power to males, she lived in a society that applied many culturally based restrictions that have no Islamic justifications. Inad’s family had African roots and she encountered racism against people of her color. She combated that by challenging others to tell her what was wrong with being black in a culture that values that color in their eyes.

For Inad to reframe their racism against the black color of her skin was in itself a form of resistance. She would not submit to the implied inferiority of her skin, but instead identified what was culturally valued, the dark color of Arab eyes, and used that to rebut and express her resistance to their racism.

Inad lived in a family who believed that daughters are fragile, weak, and in need of protection. Restrictions were the mode of life in that family: no relationships with friends outside the extended family, no right to choose even her own clothes, wear make-up or not, use the telephone to call a girlfriend from school. Any male in her family had power to make any of her life decisions, but she herself did not. If she wanted to go out to visit friends, her mother would instruct her to ask any of her brothers available at the time. Even younger brothers could decide, according to the “laws of the family,” as her mother would call these restrictions. There was a hierarchy in the family of those with whom Inad should consult. At the top of the hierarchy were the parents; the brothers were next, followed by Inad’s elder sister.

Inad’s attempts to understand or discuss these laws with her mother left her more confused and frustrated. “When I object, they say, ‘We are doing this to protect you,’ and I keep telling them I do not feel either protected or loved. My mother says that, in these days, one has to be cautious and protective of their daughters.” “Protection and love” were not how Inad described what was behind the family laws. *Restrictions* and *oppression* were the two words that Inad repeated in the first hour of our interview, in describing her life with her family.

The family had moved a few years earlier from a socially conservative city to a more open, cosmopolitan one on the Red Sea. They moved to a city where the social norms

were relatively more relaxed. The mother increased the restrictions on Inad, for fear of the new social norms. Inad now was permitted to socialize only if accompanied by her family.

In that city, in spite of the social segregation of men and woman in schools and work and public places (as in the rest of the country), young men and women used every possible means to meet. The telephone was the main way of connecting and meeting away from their families' supervision. Recently the Internet and e-mail have facilitated contacts as well.

Inad would describe her life with her family as a series of commands: "Study, go to sleep, wear this, eat that, wake up now. They wish to program me like a computer." Any breaking of the rules would bring insult, humiliation, and at times physical abuse.

Inad had a younger sister who was in her teens and considered the obedient one in the family, whereas Inad was considered the "stubborn troublemaker." Inad tried to encourage her sister to say no, to resist, and to make choices, but the sister considered such tactics of no use.

Inad used many strategies for her active and passive resistance. If they insisted on her wearing or not wearing certain outfits, she would decide to stay home and not join the family in their social visits to the extended family. That in turn would cause embarrassment to her family. If they insulted her, she would stay in her room for days and go on what she called a "talking strike." She would refuse to have any verbal communication with any member of her family for days at a time. "My mother gets very angry when I do not reply to her questions, so I do that. When she talks, I ignore her to

show them that I have power. If they are angry and stop talking to me, I simply ignore them. Their approval does not matter to me.”

Inad handled racism against her color with her deep faith that black “must be a precious color, just as is the black color of Arabs’ eyes.” When other women treated her with prejudice due to her color, she would turn around and not be interested in them. “Why would I want to know someone who would treat people differently according to the color of their skin? I would make sure to also treat them in a way that expressed I am not interested in them either.”

Education for women in her family was highly stressed. Her parents insisted that in those changing times a woman needed education and a degree as a guarantee for financial security in her future. Inad, with pride, announced one year to her family that she did not want to study. She failed that school year, as if she wanted to say to her family that she had power over that side of her life in spite of them.

One year Inad decide to wear a scarf on her head, a *hijab*. The reason was that her family thought then it was not a requirement in Islam to do so. A few years later, as a wave of extreme interpretations of modesty in women’s clothes became the acceptable norm across the kingdom, families began to require that their daughters wear the Islamic *hijab*. Inad decided then that she no longer desired to wear a cover over her head.

What did she want? Why did she resist their power over her? What mattered to her? Why did she not obey like her younger and older sisters and most of the women around her? Inad said, “I want to be able to make my own decisions. I want my opinions to be respected. I want them, when they disagree, to dialogue with me, exchange ideas, discuss- -not command and order. I had to fight back. I had to resist their oppression until they

treated me with humanity. I told my mother, ‘If I want to do something, I will do it, either with you knowing or behind your back, and in spite of any punishment you subject me to.’”

Besides the tears that she would hide in her room to shed, Inad would paint. “When I carry the brush in my hand, I let all the feelings come through to the white surface. It transfers me to a different world, out of which I come with more determination and energy to resist.” Her family considered it a waste of time that could be used in studying. “Even some of my teachers did not encourage me to paint. But I do paint, to survive and heal regardless of anyone’s approval.”

Inad managed to see humor even in a cruel situation. She chuckled as she recalled her mother’s reasoning. “I requested that I go shopping with my mother. My brothers were not around to drive us. I suggested we could take a taxi, but Mother was afraid we would be kidnapped. I said to her, ‘We would be kidnapped together, and you would protect me then.’” Her mother did not find that funny.

Would she surrender? Would she give up? “Not until the day I leave this earth. In fact, the more I endure, the more determined I become. Fighting back and resisting are what give me life.”

Inad spoke of other Saudi women of her age: “They have weak spirits. They allow others to dominate their lives. They surrender their power. They say that is our *waaki* [reality], and we have to accept it. Maybe I am not happy now, but I am resisting, I am fighting, I am trying. I will not surrender. I know I can make a difference in my *waaki*.”

Hopes

“Hopes” is the translation of my name in Arabic. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the women’s stories were in the order of their age in order to stay true to and congruent with the cultural emphasis on starting with the eldest. By leaving my stories to the last, although I am not the youngest, I am also staying with the spirit of my culture to attend to guests before attending to oneself.

In the early chapters I narrated at great length various autobiographical stories. Here in this section I am including only snapshots of personal stories. Each snapshot represents a story, manifesting the fiery rebellious spirit that propelled and nourished my interest to pursue this research and to attempt to understand living with such a spirit.

First Snapshot. The place was the *souk al khamees*, the open market on Thursdays, in the Eastern Province of our kingdom. This event took place during the early 1970s. I was accompanying a group of American teachers from ARAMCO’s school on a trip. I was the Arabic translator for that group.

An American woman, pointing to a shepherding stick, requested that I ask the shopkeeper about the stick and what he used it for. When I asked the shopkeeper, he in turn asked me if I were a local woman and I said yes. He then replied, “I would say that the stick would be of good use to beat local women who do not cover their faces in public places.”

In a spontaneous calm I replied, “In the part of the kingdom I come from, we use such a stick to beat men like you who forget the Islamic teachings of treating women with respect, mercy, and compassion.”

The shopkeeper, surprisingly enough, extended his apology and insisted that I take the stick as a present. I still keep that stick in my home in Canada, where I live now.

Second Snapshot. The place was my family's house. The time was during my last year in university. My father came one day from his office and called me to tell me that a Saudi man from a reputable *Makkan* family was coming to meet me and the family to discuss the possibility of marriage. His family was well respected for their Islamic knowledge and their following the teachings of Islam in treating their women. Also, the man went to school in England and was a pilot. That meant that if the marriage took place, I would be moving to live in the families' compound at the airbase where he was stationed at the time.

To make a long story short, the meeting with the man and the few discussions we had were not very encouraging. I later requested from my father that I go out with the man a few times--needless to say, while accompanied by one of my brothers, in respect of the social norms. My father reluctantly agreed. The few outings with him and my brother revealed more incompatibilities.

Because that man's proposal for marriage was number three, as I had rejected two marriage proposals before he came along, my rejection would not be easily received. I also knew that my family liked that man and his family and thought he was a good choice. So my battle to talk them out of that proposal would not be easy.

However, on one of these outings, my brother went to a nearby shop, and I hurriedly explained to the man that we were very different and that our marriage would end up with great pain for both of us. I requested that he reconsider the proposal.

A week afterwards, the two families picked a date for the engagement party. I desperately needed a way out of that calamity. However, a day before the assigned celebration day, his family called to inform mine that he had to go on a military assignment in a hurry and that the engagement had to be delayed.

A month later my father received a letter from him, explaining how different we were and how he had to reconsider. I still recall some of the wording of his letter. "Your daughter has ambitions in life that our marriage would block. From the few times of talking to her, I sensed a spirit that would fight strongly to achieve her dreams in life."

I smiled ten years later, when I was at the airport one day traveling with my younger brother. My brother met an acquaintance, and he started exchanging greetings with him. I did not recognize him, so I left them both and waited for their short talk to end. My brother later told me that it was the pilot who proposed to me years ago. When he heard that I had obtained a master's degree in the United States of America and that I was a lecturer in a local university at the time, he sent me his best wishes.

Third Snapshot. This snapshot focuses on my belief in my right to choose my life partner. How would one leave life decisions in others' hands? Resisting powers over me is not even a choice. It is a strong tendency, a tendency that those people who choose easily to submit often wonder about. As well, they wonder about the prices that tendency to resist has cost me. I see one pays a price if one chooses not to resist. I would rather resist and feel alive than submit. Pain is an inescapable part of living, and I choose life-giving pain over life-deadening pain.

This snapshot was during the time I met a non-Saudi man and we decided to get married. The regulation required that my father submit an application to obtain

government permission for that marriage. The regulation applies to any non-Saudi man, Arab Muslim or non-Arab Muslim.

The fact that the man had embraced Islam shortly after we met and that he was not an Arab complicated the process of obtaining the required government permission. The process included many steps. Had he been a non-Saudi Arab, the process would have been less complicated and exhausting.

The first step would be a letter written by my legal guardian, my father, requesting the approval of the Minister of Interior Affairs for the marriage. The letter of application would then be passed to the minister's office. My father had to submit many documents to confirm that the non-Saudi man was a Muslim and that he was of sound financial status, in order to ensure that he was not after my wealth and that he was capable of providing me with financial support.

By the second year of waiting, my father and the rest of the family were beginning to lose hope of obtaining the permission. Advice came from many friends of mine and my father's that the best thing would be for me to leave the country and get married and live abroad.

Leaving the country, disconnecting with my homeland, was a thought I would never entertain. Had I done that, my marriage would not have been recognized in my country. And later on I would not be able to request entry visas for my children to visit my land. Living abroad in order to hide a marriage from my government would have been living a lie, in hiding.

By deciding to marry a Muslim, I was adhering to the only requirement of Allah. I knew that by staying, waiting, and resisting the urge to leave, I was making that point.

The decision to wait was considered by many people as meaningless. They used to say, “Do not be stubborn. Why do it the difficult way? Just leave and marry him outside and live there, as some Saudi women choose to do.”

Almost three years later the permission was granted. To my knowledge it was the first marriage inside the country, then, of a Saudi woman to a non-Arab man. Many similar marriages have taken place during the following two decades. We lived for five years in my country, and both of my children were born there.

To this day I never had any regrets, even when the marriage ended eleven years later and relatives blamed me for that decision. Every trip when I was able to take my children to visit my country confirmed that resisting and making my point were congruent with my inner spirit.

Was that decision to wait an instance of resistance? Yes. It required faith in one’s stand, a commitment to that stand, and a great deal of determination not to give up. In retrospect, I see living with these spirits requires a life of determination and commitment. Through the years of learning and relearning, a woman resistor hones her resistor skills. She concomitantly gains the wisdom of knowing when to resist and when to surrender or, in other words, when not to resist.

Fourth Snapshot. I was working for an oil company in the computer training division. I had at that time, after fifteen years of working for that company, achieved a position (and the financial privileges that went with it) that few women in the company had managed to achieve. I returned to my job after a short maternity leave to find that the company had reassigned my position to a male employee. The company, I was told, had received instructions to “slow down the professional development” of all Saudi female employees,

to avoid upsetting the religious authorities. Fifteen years of service in that company ended with me sitting in a side office writing reports and recommendations, doing all that the previous job required. However, the male incumbent of the position was the one whose name and signature were expected to appear on the cover letters of these reports.

For the first few months I was waiting for a change and hoping that this would be a temporary arrangement. As six months went by, I began to see the writing on the wall, so to speak. My career with that company had reached a dead end, and so had the careers of the few hundreds of female Saudi employees working for that company.

When I took my letter of resignation to the manager, he advised me to hang around, like so many hundreds of women were planning to do. As long as I was being paid so well, he could not understand why I would resign, considering that women's professional careers were so limited outside that company. I knew that my decision would not be easily understood by him or others, but my mind and heart knew I was in inner harmony.

When others asked if I had a clear idea of what I was going to do next, my reply was, "I have many directions I might experiment with. But one thing I am very clear about is that I have to resist what I am encountering here and now."

When the news spread in the company that I resigned, it was considered a crazy decision too. It was crazy, they thought, that I would leave a "guaranteed known" and choose to emigrate and move to many "unknowns." I remember saying to them then, "I make decisions that seem crazy to some, but my life is enriched with more authentic existence. Maybe it is a craziness that makes my life exciting."

During my years of living in the lands I immigrated to, there were many times when I felt deep longing for my motherland, many moments of feeling like a foreigner, an exile.

Never in these years had I any regret for resigning that job, with the financial certainty it offered, and choosing instead a life of many uncertainties. In the following entry from the research journal (1993) of those years, I wrote:

I am often told that I look for what is difficult instead of doing things the easy way. The truth, my truth, is that when I feel that inner urge to move in a direction, I move with passion, I move from the heart. It is that passion that moves me; I do not stop and evaluate the easiness or the difficulty. When I move, I do so with passion and rigor. At times I find that the harder what I am reaching for seems, the more determination and strength it ignites within me. The “easy way out” has no appeal in my life at those times.

Aspects of a Resistor Way of Being

During the years of working on the stories and staying open and present to allow the stories to work on me, some aspects kept presenting themselves to my awareness. Through living the life of a fiery resistor spirit and researching the lives of the six women over a number of years, I became aware of aspects of a resistor way of being. These aspects do not necessarily manifest themselves in the same form or details in the life of each woman. The creative fires of these spirits are, paradoxically, similar and not similar. From a distance they might look the same, but once we get close, each spirit reveals itself as intricate and unique.

As a resistor, I have lived an inner and unarticulated knowledge of this spirit. However, as an academic researcher, further articulation is called for. This articulation is not easy, particularly when it entails bridging cultural contexts. As stated by Elgin (cited in Chinn, 1995), “In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume that it is true and try to imagine what it could be true of” (p. 7). I invite my readers to hold this statement in mind, as I attempt here to articulate that inner implicit knowledge of living with this spirit.

The Arabic word for theory, *nazariya*, suggests the possibility that a theory is an insight. The verb form, *nazar*, means to have an insight. I need to remind my readers that I am considering *theory* as a way of looking at something, a lens to use in examining an issue, or a map to carry in your hands as you go down a path of understanding an issue. I am aware that a map is not the road itself, just as a recipe to prepare food is not the food itself.

Living Out a Destiny

Hillman and Ventura (1992) stated, “The soul knows who we are from the beginning” (p. 19). An adage in my Arab Muslim heritage also states that *kolen moyaussar lima sokhira laho*: “Each is given gifts to facilitate living his or her destiny.” I am proposing here that this knowing of *who* we are resides deep in our souls, beyond the reach of our minds. That knowing of who we are has been felt by these women from early childhood, rather than clearly known to their minds. During the interviews, that early soul-knowing was expressed in different words by these women, from saying, “I was a different child,” to saying “I was a trouble-maker,” to saying, “I asked many questions that exhausted adults.” In many words I sensed there was a knowing of something at work.

Hillman and Ventura’s (1992) words spoke about a way of being that is parallel to living with these resistors’ spirits. They stated, “Some things stay the same. They’re like rocks. There are rocks in the psyche. There are crystals. There’s iron ore; there’s a metallic level where *some* things don’t change” (p. 9). The spirits of these women reside in the “unchangeable core” that each has. It is pointless to try to change the resistor spirits of these women, as they reside deep inside the changeless cores of their spirits. At times these women would attempt to change their resistor way of being, only to find that their

lives became emptied of the inner energy that nourishes them and keeps them going. In other words, neither an inner nor an outer attempt will be able to change that which is changeless.

In my research journal (1999) I wrote this:

I am the site for the experiment. What experiment? Maybe a divine experiment, the experiment of creating a spirit that thrives on challenges. A spirit whose moving fires get ignited in intensity when encountering injustices or any humiliation. A spirit whose inner fire gets extinguished by attempts to live from within a place of conformity. A spirit whose dances are performed on its own tunes. All those fiery spirits are part of that experiment. What experiment? Maybe the experiment of existence. Some spirits find peace in conformity, I know that. But mine finds its peace always close to its center where I do not tire from expanding, resisting, and challenging. Borders that are feared by others seem so restrictive to those spirits. Pushing the borders and asking the unasked questions are what keep the fires of these resistor spirits going.

Gifts To Assist in Living Out That Destiny

Living with a resistor spirit, as much as it is a destiny, calls for great efforts and energy to honor that spirit and to live true to it. It is my belief that Allah the Merciful, who created me with that fiery resistor spirit, has also granted me and other women gifts that will assist us to live our destinies. Those gifts are not limited to women with these spirits, but I would say we are granted those gifts with an intensity that matches the intensity of the fiery spirits inside us.

Women with resistor spirits are gifted with a stamina and inner strength that keeps us going. I grew up hearing the questions: "Do you not get tired of challenging?" "Why not accept what is?" During our interviews the women related similar comments and questions by others, commenting on their tireless resistance. In writings (1982) from my youth, the years prior to this research, I wrote:

I do not know what to call that strength. Is it maybe stamina? I will describe it first, and maybe a word might come up for it. In all my thirty years I had pain, traumas,

sufferings, etc. Now I look back and feel an inner admiration for that strong determination to continue resisting, uncovering, challenging.

I have but little regrets, no “If . . .” or “I would not have . . .” In fact, if I am faced again with these challenges, I might resist and challenge all over again. The question I have is: Why do others give up and conform, while others like me re-energize when faced with challenges, and continue on their way?

Besides strength and stamina, these women are gifted with an inner intuition that works as a guiding compass, a guiding feeling that hints to them, to know when to stop and when to hang on. An inner source of knowing, it is attained at times without any evident rational thoughts. This intuition is also a source of an inner insight that enables them to see what is not seen by others and to follow directions that are not clear to others.

Resilience is another gift of Allah to these women. Their ability to recover from and adjust easily to difficult circumstances in their lives is a source of awe to them, as well as to others around them. When they are in the midst of an act of resistance, they stand firmly with emotional and mental strength and perseverance. Once convinced to take a stand, they demonstrate the courage and steadfastness that is called for in their hearts and that gives them the energy and strength to continue.

Places of Test

These women, who usually resist abuse, stand up against injustices, and tirelessly protect their boundaries, at times, when they are in love, behave uncharacteristically. They temporarily submit and endure great suffering.

The men they fall in love with generally appear during or following periods of struggle through personal crisis in these resisters' lives. At the outset, these men are welcomed as oases in the dry desert. However, the men tend to be domineering and the women experience a sense of helplessness and submission that is anathema to their spirits.

In spite of any justifications they come up with--“hang on longer” and “maybe he will change”--it becomes increasingly clear to them that they are living in mirages that are extinguishing the fire inside them. These experiences threaten to extinguish the fires that nourish their souls and provide them with their lives’ energy.

In an autobiographical writing (1996) during a similar personal story years ago, I wrote:

The question is: Where was my mind then? Could not I see all the characteristics of his abusive personality? Why did I chase a mirage, thinking that my love would change him? I welcomed him to my life, only to find that he was planting mines in every corner of it. The “me” I am familiar with is the one acting very strongly now to get him out of my life soon. However, the big question that remains is: Where was that me when I blindly chose to marry him?

While living these stories they endure for lengthy periods, to the women’s amazement and the amazement of people around who know them. Then, at the end, they wake up to what is happening and leave these relationships. They depart, usually in a surprising manner and with a speed similar to that with which they walked into these relationships.

In an entry of my research journal (1996) I wrote of a similar experience:

Is it possible that those experiences that are draining our energies are there to challenge us, to take us to an extreme where our resistance skills are sharpened and honed more than they would be during low-intensity challenges? We play with fire that could burn all corners of our lives and that could endanger it to the possibility of losing all. However, we seem to stop just at the point before losing it all. We always seem to return stronger and with more lessons in resistance.

Life has its joys, pain, warm summers, cruel winters, lovely breezes, and strong winds. I wonder if these stories are strong winds that blow purposely in these women’s lives. Is it due to what I have heard in the Arabian folklore, “Where you stumble and fall, there you find the gold”? The gold here might be our honed skills of resistance; it could

be humility that deepens our spirits. For me the real gold from these experiences was bringing me closer to Allah on the path of love.

Places of Rest

Living with these spirits demands a great deal of energy. The inner fires of these women seem to be depleted at times. In those times, a need for recharging that inner battery calls. In those times, women with resistor spirits search inward for their sources of nourishment. In these places of rest, these women resort to different rivers that nourish them and recharge their reservoir of energy, the reservoir that I refer to at times as the *inner battery*. Some dive into the inner river of their faith, and others find a source of energy in withdrawing and living in solitude, or they use writing, painting, or other forms of creative expressions.

What is interesting here is not the variety of resources they utilize, but the appearances of these places of rest to the world around them. In these places they seem to be in a state of outer idleness. In my own life I heard comments from others around me at such times, describing how calm I was and how I must have mellowed down or surrendered. In these places these women and I become like some trees in winter, with no leaves or flowers. Nothing seems to be happening on the outside. Yet it is in these times that the roots go deeper and grow stronger, searching for the stored nourishment down in the earth, to energize and prepare for the next season of leaves, flowers, and fruits.

Purposeful Spirits

Earlier I invited my readers to imagine that women living with these spirits live out their destinies. They live it out assisted with gifts, and they recharge the inner energy in places of rest. In this final section I will focus on the possible purpose of all of that.

In this section I am theorizing on what women with these spirits produce or offer as they live their lives. It is my theory, my insight into my life and the other women's lives, that what these women offer is the tilling of the earth and the planting of new seeds. They offer the ability to see when "the emperor has no clothes" and the strength to point at that and speak out. They are positive agitators who bring change.

I admit here that my awareness of this insight was not so deep in my youthful years. In fact I used to be perplexed when others said, "You never leave things at rest," or when they said, "When you come into someone's life, it is never the same afterward." I was perplexed many times when I heard, years following encounters with other women, how those encounters helped them see and become aware of issues that were not clear before. I add here that I heard many statements from these women and people around me regarding the impacts, the fingerprints, and the seeds we unintentionally leave down the paths of our lives.

Chapter 5: Reflecting on the Journey

Return Journey

Oh sturdy woman
 in the soothing cry of a gentle
 breeze
 return from your journey
 with a knowledge
 that will renew you.
 Say to the broken-hearted:
 In my desire to be made whole
 I have been there with you. . . .

(Curteis, 1993, n.p.)

As the research journey comes to an end, in this chapter I will address the five phases of my research journey: chaos with order, challenges of research, writing as an act of resistance and hope, openness, and my heart signaling the end. As stated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “As we begin work on a [narrative] research project, we are beginning a new story” (p. 71).

As early as I could remember, my heart’s calling has been to understand the gift of living a life with a *rouh abiya*, a rebellious and resistor spirit. That spirit has complexity, joys, mysteries, and contradictions, yet with all its intricate details, it is the source of life energy or, as I refer to it at times, the inner fire.

As the journey comes to one kind of end, I am aware of the number of years I spent along the path, a journey during which I changed the academic field and the degree I had started. There are some people around me who were perplexed with the number of years that journey has lasted. To them I quote Rilke (1986):

There is no measuring with time, no year matters, and ten years are nothing. Being an artist means not reckoning and counting, but ripening like the tree, which does not force its sap and stands confident in the storms of spring without the fear that after them may come no summer. But it comes only to the patient. (p. 30)

From that inner place of resistance, I refused the outer pressures of putting down a plan and carrying it out fast “to get on with life.” My research journey has been my way of getting on with my life. It has been my way of deepening my understanding of living through my life journey with that resistor spirit.

This chapter title, “Reflecting on the Journey,” speaks of what departing means to me. I refrain from calling it a conclusion. In my departing I intend to leave questions, answers, and thoughts open. In my departing notes here I do not intend to close, but to emphasize my openness along the continuing journey.

In the three parts of this chapter I will trace my research journey by writing my reflections on that journey as I see the end of the dissertation process approaching. In the first part I will focus on the stage I called “chaos with order” at the beginning of the journey. The second part will speak of the story of both the challenges and the openness (*faraj*) reached in my research journey, as a resistor researcher from the Arab Muslim world in the academe of North America. In this part I will also describe the process of writing as an act of resistance, as well as an act of hope. In the third part of this chapter I will explain how I reached the end of the dissertation while “not looking” and before I noticed that I had done so. As I reach the dissertation end, I feel, observe, and live the impacts of the journey in my life and the lives of the women in my research. As I revisit different places in that journey, I include excerpts from the research journey.

In each and every step of the journey as a researcher I moved from within the resistor spirit--a spirit that does not leave paved roads at rest, a spirit that get its life energy not

from following clear maps but from staying with its own pace and questions. No stone was left at rest on the path.

Chaos With Order

As the journey began, I sensed a chaotic approach in the readings of books, writings, and dialogues. It is my understanding that while the sciences of chaos and complexity are new to the West, they have always been indigenous to non-Western societies. In attempting to understand our realities, the Eastern mind has relied on the complex, contradictory, and chaotic as tools for understanding. It is how non-Westerners have seen themselves, their world, their place in that world and what they have traditionally done.

Hearing my parents repeat *al dunya bil aks*, “Life is contradictory,” seemed puzzling to my mind as a child. As I reached high school, I found short-lived moments doing experiments in the school’s chemistry, biology, and physics laboratory that helped in understanding elements of the world around me, but failed to provide me with tools for understanding the complex realities of my world.

In my university undergraduate years, the ironed out, exact, and simplified “partial truths” provided by instructors and textbooks gave some sense of order to that understanding, but did not erase the culturally embedded sense of chaos and complexity. I grew up accepting the cultural knowledge that in chaos there is order, in order there lies chaos, and the two are closely connected. In retrospect, it was no coincidence that I chose the openness available in the qualitative research approach.

It was also no surprise that, as I entered the research journey, I was a new seeker in the Sufi path. In the Muslim Sufi path contradictory statements are used to take the minds of students to the edge of chaos and then through enlightenment and wisdom. Thus a

movement is set up in the mind's understanding of truth and illusion, where they continually zigzag and fold back on each other. In the following journal excerpt (1994) from early on the journey, the chaotic order is obvious:

I am grabbing books from here and there--books on qualitative research, on Arab women, on philosophy. I am not reading just any book. For example, I am reading a book by Moustakas on love and loneliness. As I read the book, my mind is wandering wondering about the connections of love, honesty, compassion, and truth with the journey to understand the self.

Later on down the road my research journal (1997) writing began to take a different tone regarding my sense of chaos:

I am so perplexed where this chaos beginning is taking me. No clear path. No map in hand, and no known destination. . . . But I do have a compass that I sense in my heart. That compass is leading me to a destination known to the compass, but unknown to me at this stage. When I read a book that is not related to that destination, that compass indicates that I am off the path toward that destination.

During that chaotic stage I was like a traveler standing at the edge of a cliff, embarking on a journey with no map, but with a deep sense of direction, knowing I am on the path. At the time, I read Oberg et al. (1997), speaking beautifully of that stage:

“Sojourning” is chosen, instead of “journeying” or “questioning,” to indicate that neither the goal nor the method of movement is known in advance. This does not mean the inquiry is aimless or formless, but rather that it is undetermined, producing itself according to its own requirements. (p. 231)

The path was slippery and at times frightening, and had two sides: risk and adventure on one side and joy on the other. Down that path I, the traveler, could encounter a big rock blocking the path. With the commitment and determination to keep my feet grounded, I knew I could discover a cave inside the rock with wonderful gems to examine, as well as discover a route through or around that rock. On the other side was where the joy of the process was found. That side of joy was reached only after I

surrendered and resisted retreating. The inner compass, when I surrendered, indicated the necessary directions. I needed to move toward the joy of finding the gems as well.

While going on that journey, I read details of what others found on their journeys. Some of these readings resonated with my experience or even moved me from within to take a temporary or permanent turn on my journey. However, I always eventually returned to the path of my journey. Reading dozens of books in both Arabic and English had its beauty and its challenges. In the research journal (1997) I wrote the following excerpt:

Coming from a nation where poetry is our daily bread, I know how language could be passionate or cold, honest or full of trickery and illusions. I also know how language could lead one to openness or thicken the dark veil around. I found that some of the academic language denies the self as an authority and legitimizes the “experts” as the voice of truth. But do the “experts of knowledge” really *know* or only possess fragments of illusions? I resist the writing of those clever parrots that walk like peacocks and pretend that with their knowledge they have reached the moon. They have reached the moon, but have they really reached the peak of knowledge? I wonder if they might still be skimming the surface.

Reaching to the depths requires a fearless powerful/powerless soul. The paradox of being powerful/powerless is as long as my life itself. Needing always to be in a place of power and in full control is one of the most illusive human traps.

As I write this I remember when I was in my early youth battling with issues around *power* and the multiple meaning of that word. I remember my parents jokingly suggesting that I prove how powerful and in charge I am by starting with my body. For example, order your eyes not to blink or your mouth not to produce saliva. I admit these suggestions were not funny in those years, yet years later I reflect on the value of the awareness, from that early age, of the paradox in my life. The paradox is that we become powerful only when we surrender to being powerless.

Courage, in my opinion, is a basic requirement for any true seeker of any knowledge, particularly at the early stage on the path: the courage to ask the unasked, to challenge the rules, to think the unthinkable, to trip on new ground with no map in hand, and to let go with an open heart, with arms that reach for the gems with a great deal of humility. It was courage to stay the course in the midst of that chaotic beginning that helped me through, patiently knowing that order would emerge.

Challenges of a Resistor's Research

This part of the chapter will focus on the particular challenges of a researcher who is a resistor. Living with a resistor spirit, as stated earlier, a woman lives with the sense of not belonging. Being “different” and “an outsider,” and not feeling at home or living in an exile, are shared feelings among the seven women of this research. Only two of the women in my research have traveled outside the Arab world or outside Saudi Arabia, yet these feelings occurred among them.

However, for me as a resistor researcher from the Arab Muslim world living in the West, the feeling of *not belonging* was intensified due to geographical and cultural distance in the outer circle and being a resistor in the inner circle.

When I embarked on the research journey, it was my belief that the years I spent studying in the United States of America and later the fifteen years I spent working for an American company in my country would decrease the sense of not belonging, at least the geographical side of it. In retrospect, the years of living in a North American context have facilitated one aspect of the journey, yet in another way they have increased my awareness of that state of not belonging. In an early research journal (1996) excerpt I wrote:

Oh my dear friends, I left home at an early age. Every country where I lived in the Arab world, I was the Saudi Arabian woman. Every country I lived in, in the Western world--England, Ireland, the United States of America--I was the Middle-Eastern. A very tiring and yet stimulating constant state of "not belonging." No matter what description I want to attach to my life as a wanderer/wonderer, it is my life.

I speak my mother tongue in many dialects. It is at times perplexing for some Arabs to place me--in which Arab country do I belong? I do not quite belong totally to any, but have the fingerprints of each place I have lived.

From the Arabian spices to the Irish bread, from the native carving to the forests of British Columbia, it has been a life of wandering/wondering. This was neither a coincidence nor a purposeless existence, as I believe in neither. The purpose of this path, the wandering/wondering path, is fluid, unclear, and changeable. The purpose of living in this part of the world might be to pose the question: What is the curriculum of my life?

That feeling of foreignness increases with the years. As mysterious or confusing as my world seems to some of these students around me, so does their world seem to me at times.

When a resistor researcher is engaged in and negotiating from a particular worldview that is foreign to the dominant cultural space in North America, she or he is positioned in a double intensity of marginality and not belonging, so to speak.

To illustrate further the cultural foreignness felt in some classes, I recall in a research methodology class when the instructor suggested that the class participants listen to some classical music and then write of our lived experience in listening. In my years living in North America, I was introduced to classical music of the West on many occasions. However, I became increasingly aware over the years that my ears and my heart were unable to decode that music as they do the Arabic classical music. The former moves me to some depth, but never to the depth and intensity of the latter. In my research journal (1996) writing in that class, I described some moments in those twenty minutes of listening:

For a few minutes I felt the music stirring my feelings of sadness, anger or rebelliousness. In other moments I felt bored and unable to decipher that music. This experience is in a way like a metaphor of my life in the West. Some aspects of the Western life I am able to engage in and feel a temporary feeling of belonging. Yet there are other aspects where I am unable to belong, decode, or understand, and it is during these moments that my feeling of not belonging intensifies.

The following quote from Freire and Faundez (1989) describes that state of exile:

Exiles have to learn to live with the tension, without on the one hand denying their original environment, as if it is possible to disown it, as if in anger at having to leave it behind, they were trying to punish it by saying "I do not remember you," and on the other without rejecting their borrowed environment. If they do succeed in doing so, then their time of waiting in exile, actively waiting, will become for them a time of hope. (pp. 10-11)

Many wars and various military attacks on parts of my Arab world have temporarily interrupted the years of my research journey. When one's homeland is in a state of war, a researcher is called upon to reflect, reposition, write, and research from the midst of the interconnectedness of our world. After one of many attacks on a neighboring Arab country in 2001, I wrote:

My research is interrupted by the bloody events of the last few days. How could one research when my Arab world bleeds? How could one write when bombs are targeting many Muslims in the world?

Yesterday I read a book on creative writing, suggested by my doctoral supervisor to assist me in resuming my writing. I read a story in the book of two golf players. A player who missed a shot said, "Sorry, I was not paying attention. I got distracted by the passing train." The other one said, "What train?" I got the point, but struggled with it. When a train is passing from a distance, one can keep the focus on writing. However, when the distracting train is a high-speed train loaded with "smart weapons" that are aimed at my people back home, I wonder how could one write.

During many political events that interrupted my research journey, I lived days--or weeks, at times--unable to engage or focus on my research. However, I kept writing and reflecting on my life process in order to further move the research journey. Writing was a process I engaged in to make sense of such events. I found that when those tormenting

times were paid attention to and honored, only then was I able to come to a clear and peaceful place and to re-engage with my research process. Through writing, I resisted the tendency in those times to live in the despair of dark days and the loss of hope for a tomorrow that will bring the sun again.

In 2003, prior to the last Gulf War, I wrote the following inner dialogue between two voices within, D, the determined, and DR, the doubtful resistor:

D: So keep on writing, advise the experts on writing, in spite of all the fear and doubt.

DR: How could one be a resistor in the face of an angry merciless supermonster?

D: I need to remind you of the knowing of your life. Once a resistor, you are always a resistor.

DR: I know. I know that yet I wonder: Where are you, the determined resistor that is within me right now? In the midst of the overwhelming last two years and the critical times ahead, am I a determined or a frightened resistor?

D: So we are getting somewhere. I mean that a resistor does not have to be a determined one all the time. You are still a resistor, frightened, or determined.

DR: You have a point. But how is it possible to keep my research focus on the women resistors, who are full of fearless strength and determination? How could I immerse myself in their life stories from a place of doubts, fears, and overwhelming helplessness?

D: You can simply write from that place. I am sure in their lives these women lived in the midst of a similar place.

DR: I agree. But there is almost an agreement among Arabs and non-Arabs, politicians, and other experts that the dark days in the Arab world are there to stay for years to come. I hold the tears as I imagine the different scenarios of possibilities during the reshaping of our map. How much "collateral damage"--I mean, how many innocent civilians will be killed? How many men, women, children, or elders will be liberated from their lives? How many will stop not only resisting but living?

D: I know all of that, Amal. I am a voice from within. I am aware of all of these details. But we need to keep the writing going in the midst of many dark days or years. Many writers kept on writing, and it was the writing that gave them *hope*. Is not that what your name means in Arabic?

DR: I know that actually all during last week my fingers were resisting coming near a keyboard or a pen. My fingers were reaching for more news sources: Internet sites, channels, and newspapers. This morning I resisted and decided to write from that frightened resistor space. I remembered the saying that “the woods would be silent if no birds sang there except the ones that sang best.” To situate that in the woods of resistance, the songs of all resistors need to be heard.

In retrospect, and illuminated by Oberg (personal communication, 2001), those events heightened my awareness of another subtle dimension of living the life of resistance.

They brought to the surface the ways in which I have lived with fear, in the face of the insurmountable odds and unavoidable danger. I continued to live as a resistor, enduring the pain and fear engendered by the political situation.

When Writing Becomes an Act of Resistance As Well As an Act of Hope

By continuing to write as an act of resistance, the process of writing itself was a kind of alchemical transformation of resistance into writing. In the following excerpt from my research journal (2001) I wrote on writing as an act of resistance:

Writers in my Arab land are as many as the grains of sand of our desert. However, in my opinion, few crossed the borders from the repetitive to the creative resistance. When writing is done as an act of resistance, it becomes dangerous work, writing done to take one to deeper places beyond one’s comfort. Only when I stay true to the process are possibilities, growth, and new knowledge revealed.

When writing is done as an act of resistance, the writer is then engaged in a difficult, dangerous, and dedicated act. In that act all roots and assumptions are being shaken. One’s writing reaches the roots of all current systems, historical and national, spiritual and political.

The main condition I demand of myself when writing, in order for the writing to be creative, is to create a forward movement to that which is being sought. To do that, it has to be an act of resistance. That is a condition not to be negotiated or compromised.

As a writer I am a free spirit, a painter who paints with words. With words my hands draw pictures that sometimes move and frighten others. When words replace tears, writing becomes an act of hope. When writing takes one deeper and deeper, searching for

that silent place inside where one finds peace and inner silence, then it becomes an act of hope. In my opinion, writing becomes an escape when one writes from the mind only. When the act of writing as a holistic process is honored--one in which the words pour from the heart, mind, body, and that resistor spirit--only then it is possible to visit that place of peaceful stillness inside.

To borrow Rilke's (1986) words: "Find out the reason that bids you write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart" (p. 18). I wonder if in "the very depths" of my heart is where that peaceful stillness place is found. In early 2003, I wrote the following excerpt in my research journal on writing as an act of hope:

As of today my research writing is a process of hope. My Arab world is expecting lots of dark days, fears, bloodshed, and pain. When in the darkness of the nights, I would be weeping, raging, or even frozen by fears of what is coming next. Since I discovered writing, it has been my space of heart-pouring and healing. In other words, writing has discovered me.

But what does that have to do with researching resistance? Well, it has everything to do with it. Where else could tears be transformed to words on pages? Maybe deep painful sighs could be transformed into sentences. Words and sentences would be the voice of my resistance. Yes, they would. For years I had been determined to make the pen my friend, my voice, and my act and method of resistance. I had experimented with and was engaged in many forms of activism. It was writing that worked best in enriching my life and strengthening and deepening my resistance.

This brings me to the issue of activism in Islam. Islam requires activism from its followers. The *Koran* and our prophetic teaching repeatedly call on Muslims to be actively engaged in resisting oppression and speaking against it. The Prophet encouraged Muslims to move against oppression physically if they can, or verbally if they can not act

against it, or in one's heart, which is, in his words, "the weakest faith." Activism may include religious, social, political, and intellectual means. All means of activism have to be done with good intentions. Writing would fall under intellectual activism in Islam. Writing, reading, researching, and dialoguing are all encouraged in Islam. The Prophet's saying illuminated the value of such activism: "One hour of thinking, reflecting in seeking knowledge, may be as valuable as the worshipping of one hundred years."

The Openness: Faraj

Faraj in Arabic is a time of divine gift, of mystical openness, that comes at unexpected times and when unexpected events occur. It is often preceded by an interval of living in a metaphorical deep dark hole. What is that deep black hole?

Two weeks before the next war, next but not last: It is the second Gulf War. Is it the second? Is it a war? Call it by any names; it is an invasion. Two weeks before the invasion I was in a spiral down to a deep black hole. I fell without knowing how deep I would go or how to climb out. (Research journal, 2003)

In those times when the pain of living in that hole is unbearable, when one surrenders, only then will the stairs to climb out appear. *Faraj* arrived, the place of openness that I reached when the tears transformed into words and writing became my act of resistance and hope.

In the face of very painful political events in my Arab world, I became aware that paying attention to those events depleted me. Knowing that these political events would extend for many years in this century, a choice had to be made. I had to choose whether to reserve and focus my energy into what I had been called to do or to deplete it in the deep black hole. The openness occurred when I chose to focus on my research, and on that I wrote in my research journal (2003):

Resistance in any form and shape has informed my research. My research is my life, and my life is a research journey. Inspired by Rilke, I would say I am living my way, from birth, into the answers of my research question. While staying in that dark, deep hole and surrendering to the experience with all its pain and anguish, something got broken open inside me. Only then the ladder appeared for me to climb out.

“Something Got Broken Open” is also the title of an Arabic song by one of my favorite Egyptian singers, Ali Al Hajjar. That particular song pointed to the direction of the ladder, in order to climb out of that hole. One portion of the song lyrics moved me to that place of surrender and from there to writing as an act of resistance and an act of hope. As I translated those lines into English, I was aware that the act of translation might take some of the magic away--or maybe not:

Something got broken inside.
 Feelings began to depart.
 Years began to change what is there.
 Soft breezes turned into storms.
 In the midst of our sad feelings,
 something got broken inside.
 What is it that got broken?
 A heart attempting to forgive,
 it got broken.
 The sighs got louder.
 Speech became silence.
 We strayed.
 We forgot the path.
 The heart that got broken opened.

My Heart Signaled the End

In the Sufi teaching, the heart is our compass on the path. Earlier in the journey the compass was guiding me to more books to read, more writings to do, and many places to visit on the journey. In contrast, as the end approached, that compass--my heart--was

signaling that I had reached the end. In an excerpt from my research journal in the fall of 2003, I wrote:

In this seminar I want to gather all the collected threads, I want to start the final weaving of the quilt. I feel it is time to stop collecting and to start the construction of the final quilt called "dissertation." There were some fear and doubts, but those come with the territory, so to speak. Yet I feel a sense of surrender, that the time has come. From the here and now I know that, if Allah wills it, the end is here.

Many indications were pointing to the opening of the gates. Many indications and signals intuitively told me that the completion was near. I also remember my beloved Prophet saying, "When one embarks to accomplish something, give it your best to completion."

At the end I would leave my readers with my written text, my dissertation, to decide if, how, and when it makes sense. Clifford (1988) argues that "the ability of a text to make sense in a coherent way depends less on the willed intentions of an originating author than on the creative activity of a reader" (p. 52).

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