

Muslimerica: Photos of Mom

As a five-year-old I would love to spread black and white pictures and portraits in sepia over my mother's beds and ask about the origins of the people that filled them. Women with dark features, almond-shaped eyes, and heads held proudly under muslin scarves. I wanted to know these women's stories. The idea of young brides set to marry arranged dapper men and then growing to know them as life happened was so romantic. And their stories seemed lush with mystery.

I seldom heard about the transition of these women in life but mostly I heard how the men became huge entrepreneurs from beggars or how their sons became doctors by studying under candlelight. The voices of these women who bred the entrepreneurs and doctors and the women who bred their children have been lost and muted. It seems that while the men conquer the world, women took a backseat to their success.

As a young woman embarking towards marriage Insha'Allah, I want to know those voices so my voice does not get lost in generations to come. Daisy Zamora, a Nicaraguan writer, in her poem "I Am Looking For The Women In My House" raises the question of the lost feminine voice, this shows that it is not just a Muslim community issue but an issue that is affecting most cultures of today.

During lunch at my mother's friend's house, I sat down with tea and some extremely spicy *chaat* and as usual was preoccupied with thoughts cluttered with marriage plans. It was then that one of my mother's friends asked me about my marriage plans and advised me about the initial struggle. During the conversation, many other ladies joined with stories of their first years in America that would blend into decades.

A common theme seemed to thread all tales together: the story of young girls getting married to young men overseas and leaving their family behind. At first these new brides just struggled with cooking a decent meal and fighting boredom. Having come from families that lived together it was hard for these women to assimilate to the isolated society of America. Not only that, but where as before they had cooks and maids to help them with the cooking and cleaning, now they had to rely on their survival instincts to cater to busy husbands. But before they knew, they were mothers and had spent most of their youth trying to cope with assimilation. It was my first time that I understood my mother's struggle. I realized that my mother spent so much time trying to make sure that I wasn't embarrassed by her accent or by making her version of hot dogs when she really wanted to make biryani, that she had inhibited so much of herself for me. Every time that she turned down the music when I opened the car door to go to school, she wasn't just lowering the volume, she was changing herself for me. Every time that she sat down to watch Beverly Hills 90210 and foregoing her Pakistani dramas, it was for me that she was muting her culture and her roots. My struggle is different than hers. Her struggle was finding an identity after being stripped of one.

Not a word is said about these martyrs, about their ordeal. In America, they will always be looked at as immigrants, and when they visit loved ones at home, they will be looked at as foreigners. In between both boundaries, these women have to find their voice. That is their eternal struggle.

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