

"I AM AT PEACE": A STANDPOINT FEMINIST INQUIRY INTO EMPOWERMENT,
IDENTITY, AND MENTAL WELL-BEING AMONG CANADIAN MUSLIM WOMEN
STUDYING THE QUR'ĀN

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Abstract

Background: Well-being encompasses physical, mental and social aspects of life. For Canadian Muslim women, the intersection of their identity, faith and contextual factors all shapes their well-being, now more than ever at a time when we see an increase in gendered Islamophobia. **Rationale:** The intersection between historical views of womanhood, modern feminist ideals and faith, especially within gender-traditional religious groups lacks critical qualitative methodologies and often includes Eurocentric perceptions of what it might mean to be a “minority” woman. The aim of this doctoral work was to better understand how Canadian Muslim women utilize their faith, grounded in the Qur’ān and Prophetic Tradition, to cope with mental health stressors, navigate their Canadian identity, as well as explore their understanding of empowerment. **Methods:** We conducted 38 in-depth, virtual interviews with Muslim women formally studying the Qur’ān at Al Huda Institute. Along with the interviews, we asked participants to bring an artifact that represents their journey of becoming a student of knowledge. Data were analyzed using constructivist grounded theory and arts-informed approaches, revealing three categories: Qur’ān and Spirituality, Qur’ān and Well-being, and Qur’ān and Identity. **Results:** Religious identity played a crucial role in Muslim women's wellness because it provided spiritual strength, resilience and meaning to life, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings also indicated the importance of religious learning institutes for Muslim women as third spaces, serving as sources of peer support for women of faith. **Discussion:** The study findings call for a

new perspective that acknowledges Qur'ānic knowledge as an empowering force to improve Muslim women's identity and well-being, while challenging widespread Orientalist as well as Western feminist ideas which tend to marginalize Muslim women within Canadian social structures. The proposed Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model supports culturally specific holistic religious education approaches which exemplifies the diverse contexts and experiences of Muslim women who self-define well-being, identity and empowerment.

Keywords: Faith, feminism, well-being, empowerment, identity formation, Islam, Muslim women, Qur'ānic learning

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Dissertation Overview

The following chapters will lay the theoretical foundation for the objectives of this dissertation, covering: a) An overview of the demographics of Muslims in the post-9/11 Canadian context, with a focus on public and personal sources of mental health (Chapter 1), b) An exploration of critical feminist scholarship and identity of Muslim women (Chapter 2), c) The theories of Islamic Psychology as well as critical Qur'ānic studies (Chapter 3), d) An examination of Islamic Psychology and its impact on Muslim women's well-being (Chapter 4), and e) Perspectives from Cosmopolitanism and Orientalism (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 will delve into my faith-based ontological and epistemological commitments, offering a thorough analysis of how reflexivity was utilized throughout my research. Chapter 7 will present the empirical study conducted with 38 Muslim women at Al Huda Institute, detailing the methodology, data collection, interpretation, and a discussion of findings in the context of critical feminist scholarship, as well as theories related to Cosmopolitanism and Orientalism. The concluding chapters will discuss how these findings contribute to the growing interest in Islamic Psychology and Muslim mental health, both in public and academic spheres, and will provide recommendations for future research and reflection.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Some of the reasons contributed to Islam's global growth, as one of the three Abrahamic religions, are immigration, relatively higher fertility rates compared to national averages, and a considerable number of conversions (Hamdani, 2004; Lipka & Hackett, 2017; Qasim & Hynie, 2019). The population of Muslims in Canada has more than doubled over the last two decades, going from 2.0% in 2001 to almost 5% in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022). The total population of Muslim women in Canada in 2011 consisted of 3% of the women in Canada, therefore a total of 513,380 was estimated. It is also pointed out that 63 % of the Muslim population of the country resides in Ontario. Moreover, the Greater Toronto Area has the highest concentration of Pakistanis (Hunt, 2019; Marcotte, 2010; Zine, 2012). The demographic scenario of the Canadian Muslim women is vibrant as, during the year 2011, the Canadian-born Muslim women outgrew the Arab Muslim women and are nearly the same as South Asians which account for 28.5% of the total population.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I am defining religion as a system of beliefs, practices, and ethical values that are a process of divine revelation, while spirituality is framed as a personal quest for meaning and well-being (Bonney, 2004; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). Such beliefs and practises, particular those from an institutionalized religion, connect individuals with a higher power or a set of spiritual principles, often guiding moral behavior and community belonging (McKay & Whitehouse, 2015). Though often contrasted, spirituality and religious education can complement each other in their psychological and social roles (Katz, 2012).

Furthermore, culture is defined as the collective customs, traditions, social norms, language, and shared values that shape and are shaped by the social behavior and identity of a group or society (Bonney, 2004). However, it is important to recognize that often, the line between culture and religion is blurred, as cultural customs are infused with religious significance and religious concepts and environments are woven into the fabric of culture (Abdulla, 2018).

Demographics, Diversity & Intersectionality

Muslims in Canada "originate from more than eighty-five nations and comprise dozens of ethno-racial and linguistic groups" (Moghissi, Rahnema & Goodman, 2009, p. 84). A 2007 survey found that the mean age of Muslims in Canada is 36.8 years (compared to 46.9 years for the general population), and both men and women in this group are more likely than the general population to have completed one or more university degrees (Adams, 2007).

Muslims form a predominantly urbanized demographic group, with their settlement choices influenced by factors such as ethnicity, bilingualism, and historical patterns of Muslim migration, such as where family and friends tend to reside when first arriving in Canada (Hamdani, 2014; Latif, Rodrigues, & Galley, 2020). Toronto and Montreal are home to 41.1% and 20.4% of the Muslim female population, respectively (Adams, 2007; Hamdani, 2014). In places like Montreal, London, and Windsor, the Muslim female population is primarily of Arab origin, while West Asians tend to favor Vancouver and Toronto. Additionally, Ottawa and Winnipeg have significant Black

Muslim communities, while South Asian Muslims tend to relocate to Toronto (Hamdani, 2014).

Sources of Mental Health Challenges & Distress

Previous research highlights various factors contributing to mental health challenges and stressors among Muslim women (Karasz et al., 2019; Latif et al., 2020). For the sake of brevity and dissertation scope, these challenges will be categorized into two distinct groups: Public and Personal. Public sources include structural and cultural stressors, specifically 1) Immigration and acculturation, and 2) Faith-based discrimination, including Islamophobia. In the personal realm, mental health challenges will be contextualized through the diverse roles women undertake in their lives, focusing on two aspects: the role of employment beyond the home and the impact and meaning of motherhood on Muslim women's mental health.

Public Sources of Mental Health Distress

Faith-Based Discrimination and Islamophobia. Faith-based discrimination is a series of prejudices, differential treatments, and harassment directed toward people due to their religious affiliation (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2015;2019). This form of discrimination can impact followers of any religion, including Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and others. Faith-based discrimination can also include verbal aggression, social ostracization, institutional biases, and physical violence (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2015). Faith-based discrimination is broad in scope, affecting multiple religious groups, and general in nature, covering various forms of discrimination and prejudice based on religious beliefs. It is often addressed in laws and policies designed to protect religious freedom and prevent discrimination.

A specific form of faith-based discrimination is Islamophobia, which is directed towards the faith of Islam and its followers. Islamophobia encompasses "negative stereotyping, bias, and discrimination targeted towards individuals who are, or are perceived to be, Muslim" (Canadian Heritage 2024, p. 130; Souissi 2023; Zine 2006). Islamophobia as some scholars argue, goes beyond an irrational fear or hatred of the religion, but an "ideological construct produced and reproduced at the intersection of imperial ideology, political expediency, and the exploitation of nationalist, racial, and religious insecurities" (Bakali, 2021; Hammer, 2013). This type of discrimination stems directly from anti-Muslim sentiment through social attitudes, sensationalized media images, hate crimes, and policy biases, that project negative views about Islam and Muslims (Souissi, 2023). The cultural context of Islamophobia is often influenced by political and social factors, such as terrorism, immigration, and debates on cultural assimilation (Samari, 2016). Islamophobia also includes both personal as well as systemic biases, such as verbal abuse in a parking lot, microaggressions at a workplace, social exclusion to institutional policies that marginalize the observance of faith.

Ontario and Quebec report the highest number of Islamophobic crimes in Canada, likely due to these provinces having the largest Muslim populations in the country (Moreau, 2018). For instance, over 7.5 percent of the Greater Toronto Area's population is Muslim. The concentration of the Muslim community in these regions may explain the higher incidence of Islamophobic crimes reported in these provinces (Moreau, 2018). Recent data from Statistics Canada reveals that in "2015, violent crimes targeting the Muslim population (70 incidents) increased the most from 2014

(+141%)” (Leber, 2017, p. 18). Tragically, these hate crimes now include attacks with multiple victims (Ndegwa & McDonald, 2023; Moreau, 2022).

The 2017 Québec Mosque shooting involved a self-proclaimed White supremacist opening fire on a group of worshippers (Nagra, 2018). Furthermore, in 2021, a man wearing a bulletproof vest, a military-style helmet, and swastika-designed clothing ran over a Muslim family of five with his truck, killing four of them in London, Ontario (Halabi, 2021). It is important to note that many incidents related to Islamophobia are never reported to authorities (Ndegwa & McDonald, 2023). Individuals perceived as Muslim, due to their clothing or physical appearance, are also at a higher risk of assault (Ahmed, 2021; Samari, 2016).

Islamophobia Post 9/11. Several factors contribute to the prevalence of Islamophobia, including the fear of Islam’s influence on Canadian society, particularly due to immigration, perceptions of regression in women’s rights, and misconceptions of religious values that incite violence (Canadian Heritage, 2024). However, the aftermath of 9/11 marked a pivotal juncture, intensifying biases and increasing discrimination against Muslim communities in North America and Europe (Environics, 2006; Hunt, 2019). Religious microaggressions experienced by Muslim people have led researchers and theorists to identify “a differential construct of religious microaggressions” (Husain & Howard, 2017, p.141). Moreover, Husain and Howard reported six themes specific to anti-Muslim microaggressions that emerged from their qualitative data. According to this framework, Islamophobic discrimination is often tied to: 1) Endorsement of religious stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists; 2) Pathology of the Muslim religion; 3) Assumptions of religious homogeneity, or the assumption that all Muslim people hold

the same religious beliefs and subscribe to the same religious practices; 4) Exoticization, wherein someone asks an individual an excessive number of questions regarding their religious or cultural background; 5) Islamophobic or mocking language; 6) Considering Muslim people alien, that is, when someone who is Muslim is assumed to be a foreigner, or is consistently asked about where they “actually” come from (Husain & Howard, 2017; Nadal et al., 2012).

Effects of Immigration & Acculturation on Canadian Muslim Women. The acculturation process, as defined by Acculturation Theory, involves cultural change resulting from prolonged contact between individuals of different cultural backgrounds (Redfield et al., 1936). This process influences individual values, attitudes, beliefs, and identities, as well as social and cultural systems at the group level (Berry, 1997). Acculturation conditions, such as characteristics of the receiving society, society of origin, immigrant group, and personal attributes, can also shape the context of acculturation (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2006b). Acculturation orientations, reflecting immigrants' preferences for cultural adoption or maintenance, are associated with two major theoretical perspectives: dimensionality and domain specificity (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2003). Dimensionality concerns the relationship between cultural adoption and maintenance, with the unidimensional model positing a polarized choice between maintaining the culture of origin or adapting to the new culture. Acculturation outcomes, encompassing psychological and behavioural adjustments, are linked to acculturation behaviours, shaping internal well-being and external adaptation (Berry, 1997).

In conjunction, acculturative stress, characterized by a decline in overall health encompassing psychological, somatic, and social aspects, is prevalent among individuals undergoing acculturation (Berry et al., 1987; Schwartz et al., 2010). It can manifest through the loss of social support, language challenges, financial hardships, and shifts in gender roles and family dynamics. Immigration processes often lead to disturbances in relationships and family dynamics, contributing to decreased communication and isolation during a vulnerable period (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

However, examining the acculturation process, as well as social inclusion and exclusion in Canada, France, and Québec reveal nuanced differences, challenging exceptionalism and highlighting potential institutionalized Islamophobia in various contexts (Reitz, Simon & Laxer, 2017). For example, Reitz et al. examined how religiosity influenced discrimination and social interactions among Muslims in France and Canada. They found that highly religious Muslims in France are less likely to form friendships outside their origin group and participate in voluntary associations compared to those in Canada. Both countries show similarities in discrimination and social trust, with higher reports of discrimination among non-European origin minorities, particularly Black Muslims in France. Surprisingly, Muslims in Québec reported to be better integrated socially (measured through indicators such as friendship networks, civic activity as well as trust and identification with mainstream culture) than those in France or other parts of Canada (Reitz et al., 2017). This suggests that national integration policies may not significantly affect the day-to-day social experiences of immigrants. Therefore, in addition to national integration policies, ethnicity and religion, along with

socio-economic conditions and local interactions, are more influential in determining integration outcomes (Reitz et al., 2017)¹.

In Canada, Muslim immigrant women report low levels of social support, higher levels of stigmatization relative to immigrant women of other faith backgrounds, and are more likely to endure intimate partner violence, often hesitating to report such incidents (Baobaid, 2002). Immigrant women's mental health determinants include cultural identity, social networks, and integration into the host country (Hynie et al., 2011). Female newcomers may also face increased social exclusion due to cultural gender² norm disparities and language barriers, leading to marginalization and lower socioeconomic status (Delara, 2016). Muslim women's experiences are further influenced by geopolitical and economic disparities, ethnicity, migration patterns, age, choice of modest dress, and generational norms, impacting their encounters with gendered Islamophobia (Delara, 2016).

The diverse realities of Muslim Canadians, refugees, and recent immigrants underscore the importance of considering socioeconomic mobility, employment, and privilege in understanding their experiences. Moreover, in Western academic spaces, Muslim women's positioning is influenced by a specific "social, political and economic location on the global landscape" (Zine, 2006a, p.11). This multifaceted perspective emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping Muslim women's encounters with gendered Islamophobia.

¹ The construct of race and racialization continues to be debated. In line with recent scientific research, I am operationalizing race as a social construct rather than a biological construct. This allows me to explore how race, gender and other demographics are being conceptualized in faith communities (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2023).

Gendered Islamophobia and Media Portrayals of Muslim Women

Ninety percent of Muslim women residing in Canada belong to visible minority categories which comprise individuals from South Asian to Middle Eastern and North African heritages (Marcotte, 2010). During the 1990s, Canadians welcomed numerous Muslim immigrants their territory which up to that point had been predominantly regulated by Catholic and Protestant beliefs particularly challenging to integrate with traditional Islamic practices familiar in their homeland (Latif, Rodrigues, & Galley, 2020; Marcotte, 2010).

The term Gendered Islamophobia defines a particular form of Islamophobia that holds Muslim women and girls to be victims needing rescue according to Zine (2017) as per Halabi (2021). Research studies show specific discriminatory treatment exists toward Muslim women and men separately in the United States. According to studies focused on the Greater Toronto Area Muslim women experience greater discrimination than Muslim men (Litchmore & Safdar, 2016). According to Nadal et al. (2012) people commonly assume female Muslims who wear face or head coverings do not possess agency because it confirms their beliefs about powerlessness. The *hijab* creates visible targets for anti-Muslim mistreatment and prejudice against Muslim women that reduces their job opportunities and harms their health (Perry, 2014). Anti-Muslim harassment takes place because Muslim women use *hijabs* to reveal their religious status (Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009). Research indicates that Muslim women in the North American and European regions independently choose modest clothing while taking their religion seriously (Bakali, 2021; Latif et al., 2020) yet Muslim women are extensively examined

for their body appearance and identity expressions when wearing religious garments (Hunt, 2019; Perry, 2014).

Nagra (2018) emphasizes three primary elements which work together to create mental health issues within the Muslim population: media portrayals along with political developments and Islamic prejudice. Various media presentations coupled with sensationalized stories about honor crimes targeting Muslim girls and forced marriages arranged by family males together with parent-led hijab regulation seem to make Muslim women appear backwards and harmed by cultural and faith traditions to non-Muslims (Gill, 2022; Terman, 2015). Since the start of the "War on Terror" Muslim women have been represented as cultural oppression victims which strengthens the inaccurate belief that Canada has overcome patriarchy (Nagra 2018; Terman 2015).

The intensified media interest along with political discussions about honor-based violence in Canadian racialized communities shows frequent reliance on stereotypical Orientalist depictions (Gill, 2022). The simplistic understanding of Western feminism toward Muslim women and their treatment of *hijabs* as oppressive symbols requires immediate adoption of a deeper understanding according to Nagra (2018).

This inaccurate generalized approach towards South Asian and Middle Eastern cultures creates a single unified view of communities while establishing false distinctions between Western progressiveness along with secularism against Eastern conservatism coupled with religiousness and underdevelopment (Chowdhury & Okazaki, 2020).

Stereotypes about men and women in these cultural groups form and thrive due to these oversimplified representations (Gill, 2022). The Canadian media focuses on how perpetrators of honor violence practice Islam as well as come from immigrant

backgrounds which stimulates negative reactions against both Islam and immigrants (Terman, 2015).

Muslim women experience heightened stress together with mental health distress because printed media provides incorrect and frequently violent interpretations about Islam (Riley, 2011). Muslim girls and women in Canada and beyond experience violence that Western media shows through pictures of men from their communities using forced veiling and honor killings and other aggressive actions against them according to Shier & Shor (2016). People view Islam by observing aggressive Muslim men in media, so they develop an image of violent Islam that harms girls through the risk of both family violence and conflicts about headscarves while participating in sports (Zine, 2009b). A wide range of violence affecting Muslim girls and women causes the study of their experiences to require analysis which extends beyond the examination of both Islam and Muslims (Zine, 2009). Due to the extensive violence experienced by Muslim girls and women because of racism, Islamophobia and poverty and other factors it remains inaccurate to analyze this violence through an Islamic or cultural Muslim lens (Zine, 2009).

Images of Muslim women wearing *hijabs* appeared too frequently during the U.S. military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan because they exhibited female oppression to explain U.S. military presence (Bakali, 2021). Several White American feminist groups approved this portrayal. The *hijab* remains a highly controversial topic across French territories and European political domains of the present day. Public limitations on Muslim women wearing *hijabs* have resulted in boosting their commitment to wearing the *hijab* in their daily lives. The Australian politician observed how the *hijab* serves

today as an emblem for cultural diversity further than its basic meaning as clothing. The media along with political debates produce continuous narratives about the *hijab* which form the basis of contemporary public views regarding it (Bakali, 2021).

Within the domain of Islamophobic discrimination Muslim women encounter dual difficulties since they experience prejudiced beliefs about religious practices that justify misogyny and misguided concepts about faith-based oppression. The Survey of Muslims in Canada reveals that discrimination targeting Muslims in Canada occurs to one-third of the Muslim population where head-covering women face higher rates compared to men (Neuman, 2016).

Interviews with Canadian Muslim women highlight the impact of stereotypical conceptions on their lives, especially regarding the hijab, which symbolizes religious identity and makes women vulnerable to hate crimes (Nagra, 2018). Furthermore, racial differences in gendered Islamophobia significantly impact the experiences of Muslim women, especially for Black Muslim women who navigate discrimination at the intersections of anti-Black racism, religious discrimination, and gender discrimination (Halabi, 2021). Anti-Black Islamophobia is a unique form of discrimination based on racial and religious identity (Nurein & Iqbal, 2021). As Black women's bodies have historically been a site for abuse and exploitation on small and large scales (hooks, 2014), it follows that Black Muslim women will experience further discrimination at the intersections of anti-Black racism, religious discrimination, and gender discrimination (Nurein & Iqbal, 2021).

For example, in a 2019 survey conducted by The Black Muslim Forum among 100 Black Muslims in Britain, 63.4% felt a lack of belonging in the UK Muslim

community, 53.9% in their local Mosque, and 84% in Islamic societies at their university (Muslim Census, 2020). McGuire et al. (2016) further illustrate this idea in their study, highlighting the challenges faced by a participant, Yasmin, on a predominantly White American university campus. Yasmin, an immigrant Black Muslim woman, expressed feeling excluded by the Black community due to her Islamic faith, leading her to navigate her identity by emphasizing or downplaying certain aspects to fit different social spaces. These results mirror Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of Intersectionality. Crenshaw proposed that the intersection of feminist and anti-racist theorizing with identity politics often bypass crucial “intra-group differences for the sake of a unified political cause” (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality has since been utilized as a framework that encompasses the layering of multiple identities—including ethnicity, class, gender, and citizenship, among others—and how the “combined effects of structural marginalization within and toward each of these social identity categories contributes to a unique and layered experience overall for those who identify with more than one marginalized group” (Crenshaw, 1989).

Gendered Islamophobia, Identity and Mental Well-Being

Studies suggest that the lived realities and heterogeneous identities of Muslim women in Canada might be likened to a “Kaleidoscopic Islam,” in which Muslim women are confronted with the challenging decision of determining which aspects of Canadian society and culture they should accept, ignore, alter, or refuse altogether (Latif et al., 2020). Given that Muslim communities are highly collectivistic in nature, with close-knit community bonds, individual perceptions and practices around accommodation, acculturation, or isolation may be particularly challenging for Canadian Muslim women

compared to other visible minorities and women of different faith backgrounds and can have significant impacts on their mental well-being (Marcotte, 2010). A comprehensive approach, transcending cultural explanations and challenging Islamophobic narratives through personal and lived experiences, is thus crucial for understanding and addressing the unique mental health needs of Muslim women in Canada.

Personal Sources of Mental Health Distress

Role of Employment Outside the Home as a Source of Stress in Canadian Muslim Women. Previous literature indicates that Muslim women encounter employment challenges due to various intertwined factors (Tariq & Syed, 2017). Specifically, research underscores the significant links between unemployment, underemployment, and gendered Islamophobic discrimination, particularly for hijab-wearing women. Ghumman and Ryan's (2013) field experiment in the United States reveals formal and interpersonal discrimination against hijab-wearing women during hiring processes, leading to lower job offers. A report from the Canadian Council of Muslim Women in 2014 revealed that between 2001 and 2011, Muslim women faced more challenges in the labor market compared to other communities. Consistent with this finding, the 2011 Statistics Canada National Household Survey reported that the unemployment rate for Muslims was 14%, higher than the national average of 7.8%, despite their elevated levels of education. Qualitative research in the UK by Tariq and Syed (2017) emphasizes the importance of establishing social networks and promoting intersectionality awareness among policymakers and employers to address some of these challenges.

Dual-language proficiency does not shield them from obstacles like high unemployment rates and low full-time employment levels (Hamdani, 2004). Second and third generation Canadian Muslim women aspire to integrate work and family life, yet workplace challenges persist, particularly for those who wear the veil (Marcotte, 2010). The “veil” carries different meanings in different contexts (Safdar & Jassi, 2021), including modesty, religious devotion, social convention, empowerment, a shield in male-dominated public spaces, segregation of genders, and even the seclusion of women (Marcotte, 2010). Its significance is not inherently more threatening than the head covers of orthodox Jewish women or Sikhs’ turbans; however, those who choose to express their religious identity by wearing a khimaar or hijab (a veil or scarf that covers the hair, ears, neck, and chest, alongside an overall modest or loose-fitting outfit) can become targets of microaggression despite Canadian anti-discrimination laws against religious bias. This situation leads to challenges for religious Muslim women, despite their qualifications, in finding suitable employment, which may result in greater social isolation and increased mental health stressors.

Overall, the veil’s diverse meanings make it a target for microaggressions despite anti-discrimination laws, posing employment challenges for qualified religious Muslim women and potentially leading to social isolation and heightened mental health stressors.

The Role and Meaning of Motherhood in Muslim Women. Motherhood holds particular significance for Muslim women, impacting their overall mental well-being and identity (Hassan, Leavey, & Rooney, 2019). Several hadith (sayings, actions, or tacit approvals of Prophet Muhammad) remind Muslims about the elevated role and respect

that a mother deserves. For example, the Prophet Muhammad was reported to say to one of his companions, when asked, “Who amongst the people is most deserving of my good treatment?” The Prophet Muhammad replied: “Your mother, again your mother, again your mother, then your father, then your nearest relatives according to the order (of nearness)” (Sahih Muslim, Book Number 32, Number 6181).

The Qur’ān, in *Surah Luqman* (verse 14), also emphasizes the importance of indebtedness and gratitude to one’s mother for carrying a child for an average gestational period of nine months, enduring a painful labor and delivery process, and then nurturing a young baby, including breastfeeding. In one qualitative study, expectant mothers used an Islamic narrative to describe their pregnancy journey, using generally positive and affirming language such as “gift,” “blessing,” “reward,” “worship,” “heaven,” and “*Alhamdulillah*” (All praise to Allah) (Hassan, Leavey, & Rooney, 2019). Even in the realm of grief and loss, cultural norms, spiritual practices, and family dynamics play crucial roles in the bereavement process for mothers (Mahmoodi, Akhavan, & Virk, 2023). For instance, bereaved mothers in a study on Islamically integrated treatments for grief reported that the belief that deceased babies are under God’s care in Heaven provided comfort to them and their families. Muslim mothers also reported finding solace in religious practices like prayer and reciting the Qur’ān during times of grief and loss of a child (Mahmoodi et al., 2023). Moreover, highly gendered norms in some Muslim communities discourage employment for mothers, which contributes to lower labor force participation among Canadian Muslim women (Hamdani, 2004). This raises an interesting question about whether employment during motherhood could shift

women's attitudes towards traditional gender norms, especially in contexts where these norms are strongly ingrained.

Borrell-Porta and colleagues (2023) explored whether employment during motherhood influences women's beliefs, such as the idea that "pre-school children suffer if their mothers work" (Borrell-Porta et al., 2023). Analyzing data from a large, longitudinal UK study and using an instrumental variable strategy to address potential biases, the authors find that employment after motherhood generally does not alter women's values. Instead, it tends to reinforce existing attitudes, with working mothers often maintaining their pre-existing beliefs rather than adopting more liberal or traditional views (Borrell-Porta et al). This suggests that while employment might be perceived as a catalyst for changing gender norms, it frequently upholds the status quo, underscoring the enduring influence of cultural attitudes.

The work of Torres and colleagues (2024) refers to "motherhood penalty" as the impact of motherhood on women's career progression, highlighting barriers to leadership for mothers, such as societal expectations and identity conflicts in the workplace. Torres et al. emphasizes that mothers often face reduced job retention, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for leadership roles. Torres and colleagues (2024) discuss the "motherhood penalty," which describes the adverse effects of motherhood on women's career progression, such as reduced job retention, lower wages, and fewer leadership opportunities. This penalty often stems from societal expectations and identity conflicts in the workplace, creating significant barriers for mothers aspiring to leadership roles.

Building on this, authors using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1979 found that mothers who maintain full-time, steady employment after childbirth tend to have better health outcomes than those who work part-time, experience repeated unemployment, or stay at home (Frech & Damaske, 2012). The study further highlights that pre-birth factors like education and socioeconomic status play a crucial role in determining these work pathways and, consequently, long-term health outcomes. Together, these findings underscore the complex interplay between motherhood, career trajectories, and well-being, illustrating how systemic barriers and individual circumstances converge to shape mothers' experiences both in the workplace and beyond (Frech & Damaske, 2012).

Overall, a report conducted by Canadian Council of Muslim Women compared to Canadian women generally, Canadian Muslim mothers' employment was more adversely affected by having children, particularly for those without supportive family networks. Childcare, especially daycare, emerged as a key support, yet a need for additional services persists. While remote work and flexible hours enabled employment, the financial demands of raising children pushed many women to pursue paid work, limiting opportunities for unpaid roles like volunteering (Canadian Council of Muslim Women, 2024).

Conclusion

Canadian Muslim women grapple with the complex task of harmonizing their religious, ethnic, gender, and national identities within the Canadian societal framework. This diverse group of women faces unique challenges and vulnerabilities due to their shared experiences as visible minorities, particularly when their Muslim identity is

prominent. Considering the anticipated intake of immigrants and refugees in Canada, further research is needed to understand the mental health needs of Muslim women and to develop culturally relevant support systems (Amri & Bemak, 2013; Ciftci, Jones, & Corrigan, 2013; Karasz et al., 2016). Service providers must recognize the complex ways in which Muslims construct their identities, accounting for differences in , ethnicity, gender, ability, and migration narratives. An approach that is culturally sensitive and anti-oppressive is necessary, taking into consideration elements like modesty, privacy, dietary needs, and spiritual considerations (Rassool, 2015). Language barriers and other factors may also limit Muslim immigrant communities' access to mental health support (Ciftci et al., 2013).

It is also essential for service providers to address mistrust in healthcare systems, as Muslim communities may turn to their own faith-based institutions for solace due to hesitations in seeking broader community services (Abu-Ras et al., 2008; Keshavarzi et al., 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to delve into the ways in which Canadian Muslim women employ elements of their Islamic faith, coupled with their individual spiritual connections with God through learning the Qur'ān and the Prophetic Tradition.

Chapter 2

Critical Feminist Scholarship

The preceding chapters provided an overview of the Muslim landscape in Canada, and how it relates to the cultural diversity present among Canadian Muslim women. Furthermore, the preceding sections explored the impact of culture on defining and addressing mental health issues, considering socio-political determinants such as immigration and acculturation concerning the well-being of Muslim women. While acknowledging the unique health and well-being needs of Muslim women and recognizing the extensive literature on faith as a coping mechanism (Abu-Raiya, 2015; Ai et al., 2009; Keshavarzi & Ali, 2019; Qasim & Hynie, 2019), we have not scrutinized how foundational beliefs about Muslim women and their faith appear in academic writing especially as it relates to feminist research.

This section presents a condensed history of feminism, with a focus on critical feminist scholarship, while explaining its historical evolution and establishes the three primary feminist ways of understanding knowledge. These include: 1. Feminist Empiricism, 2. Feminist Standpoint Theory and 3. Feminist Social Constructionism. Subsequently the analysis will conduct an examination of standpoint feminism to demonstrate how researchers emphasize placing women at the forefront of their research methods.

Researchers supporting this latter approach argue women should use their lived experiences to develop new systems of knowledge where marginalized groups uniquely understand and experience what dominant groups might not perceive (Assiter, 2000; Harding, 1986). Finally, the chapter will explore the benefits and drawbacks of

standpoint feminism in the context of the diverse experiences of Muslim women, shedding light on how these theories can enhance our understanding of the various ways in which Muslim women unite in both their struggles and healing processes.

Introduction to Feminism

The definition of feminism as a multifaceted concept, proves difficult since it represents a socio-political history that defies a black-and-white classification for any group or person (Nagra, 2018). The feminist movement, both in advocacy and in academic literature, attempts to achieve gender equality. According to Biana (2020) and McAfee et al. (2023), advocacy under feminism involves defending female rights through pushing against gender-based oppressive systems while striving for full gender equality of freedoms and opportunities (Biana, 2020; hooks, 2015). The social advocacy definition of feminism describes the personal initiative to combat gender-based restrictions that limit freedom or civil rights (hooks, 2015).

This chapter examines three historical moments within feminism, yet all these events occur within specified historical periods and political settings. Feminism exists as a progressive continual movement which contains numerous objectives through multiple viewpoints (McAfee, 2023). Feminist mobilization has operated through global civil society activism throughout more than a century according to Weldon et al. (2023). The feminist movement has generated a more numerous networks of organizations within global civil society. Social activists work within feminist movements to achieve "collective efforts which enhance women's social standing" (Forester et al., 2022, p. 3).

The First Wave which operated during the late 19th and early 20th century made female suffrage and overall legal rights its focus especially regarding property and

voting rights (Eidinger, 2020). During the time period spanning from the 1960s through the 1980s the Second Wave increased its focus on addressing broader social as well as cultural inequalities (Eidinger, 2020). During the 1990s inception of the Third Wave feminist movement people in the movement learned about diverse experiences among women which depend on ethnicity along with sexual orientation and socioeconomic status (Mohajan, 2022), while the fourth wave emerged around 2012 with members from both Millennial and Generation Z groups who use Facebook and Twitter for online activism. This unofficial wave reflects some ideas of the Third Wave even though it maintains its foundation in social media networks. The movement has brought awareness to the public through hashtags #MeToo and #Timesup, although it still lacks substantial impact toward change (Munro, 2013). Various structures of liberal, socialist, radical, post-structural, and postmodern feminism shaped the development of feminist theory and its discipline. The core areas of equal opportunity and sex stereotyping under liberal feminism demonstrate how women experience unequal professional positions than men in different aspects (Russell et al., 2024). The detailed evidence recording of gender bias remains a positive aspect, yet this method receives criticism because it does not properly address social inequalities based on class status and ethnic background. The theories of socialist feminism together with radical feminism deliver comprehensive explanations about why women experience disadvantage in society. Socialist feminism analyzes economic systems and family patterns, but radical feminism focuses on destruction of patriarchal power structures in gender interactions (Policastro, 2015).

The explanations for women's subservience differ between liberal feminism which concentrates on psychological factors and socialist and radical feminism which address structural and systemic issues as pointed out in Acker's (1990) work. The equal opportunity policies championed by liberal feminism receive support from Acker yet socialist and radical feminism urges for disruptive changes like capitalist termination and patriarchal relationship alterations which Acker considers less achievable presently.

The third wave of feminism consists of post-structuralist and postmodern feminism that focus on power structures and identity construction in line with Davies & Gannon (2005). Butler (1990) shows how gender experiences emerge from both unstable and environment-linked social building processes which postmodern feminists emphasize. Bhopal and Preston (2012) describe poststructuralist efforts to eliminate conventional or natural thinking which supports power dominance. Poststructuralist concepts used strong influence on feminist speech throughout the 1990s to confront assumptions about essential female identity. Post-structuralism and feminism have overlapping intellectual foundations because they explore traditional power-based epistemology although feminism explicitly focuses on the suppression of women (Haw et al., 1998).

The French author Hélène Cixous used her poststructuralist feminist concepts and the *écriture féminine* theory to advocate for a unique writing method that battle male-controlled languages and reveals female perspectives (Kolozova 2020). Julia Kristeva established the semiotic and symbolic aspects of philosophy using her dual role of writer and philosopher. According to Kristeva women's experiences together with their voices regularly receive no importance within the prevailing symbolic order.

Kristeva's analysis of maternal experiences together with abject phenomena brought new insights to feminist understanding of how women construct their identity. According to Plain & Sellers (2007) Luce Irigaray explores gender and linguistic and personal identity elements in her psychoanalytic studies. Luce Irigaray expanded the discourse about maternal aspects together with the abject matter in her separate work. Through her studies Irigaray concentrates on understanding psychoanalysis when it explains gender matters together with usage of language and personal identity construction. She proposes to evaluate feminine subjectivity through criticism of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic frameworks (Plain & Sellers 2007). Irigaray dedicates many of her writings to exploring sexual differences while developing new language forms that help women express themselves outside of male-dominated norms according to Plain and Sellers (2007).

Luce Irigaray carried the maternal and abject discussion forward in her separate work. In her analysis, Irigaray examines how psychoanalytic theory approaches discussion of gender topics alongside language and self-identification processes. She promotes an evaluation of how feminine subjectivity emerges by examining different aspects of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic approaches (Plain & Sellers, 2007). Irigaray dedicates most of her work to highlight sexual differences alongside creating language which enables women to articulate themselves beyond masculine dictates (Plain & Sellers 2007). Poststructuralist feminism acknowledges subjectivity exists as discourse while having various dimensions and avoids permanent definitions of gender (Davies & Gannon, 2005). These theorists focus on studying power dynamics because they want to reveal how power differences exist within statements about truth and

knowledge. When contrasting liberal feminism and radical feminism with feminist post-structuralism, Davies and Gannon state that

“whereas liberal feminism mobilizes a discourse of individual rights in order to gain access to the public domain, and radical feminism celebrates and essentializes womanhood in order to counteract the negative constructions of women and girls in masculinist discourse, feminist post-structuralism troubles the binary categories male and female, making visible the constitutive force of linguistic practices, and dismantling their apparent inevitability” (p. 312).

Feminist Scholarship and Epistemologies

Feminist theory proposes that individuals, and organizations should be considered within the broader contexts of political, social, ethnic and economic worldviews, to address gender-based inequities. Feminist scholarship lays out three foundational epistemological frameworks: 1. Feminist Empiricism; 2. Feminist Standpoint Theory and 3. Feminist Social Constructionism.

Feminist empiricism is akin to empirical research methods, emphasizing that objective knowledge is based on observable experience. Scholars adhering to the empirical feminist framework argue that there is a reality ‘out there’ to be discovered (known as realism), and that researchers can be neutral, and detach themselves from the participants and the reality that they live in, observe, and study. Objectivity within this framework of realism, is defined based on ensuring the knower does not interfere with the observed reality and that sexism and androcentrism can be ‘managed/removed’ by applying more rigorous scientific methods (Harding, 1992). This onto-epistemological

framework allows for, and even encourages feminists to work within the system of traditional science by advocating for 'better' science (Campbell & Wasco, 2000).

The next two interconnected epistemologies within feminist scholarship, namely feminist standpoint theory and feminist social constructionism, have significantly shaped our understanding of gender and the ways in which gender is constructed, experienced and reproduced in cultures and overall society (Harding, 1986; Hartsock, 1983).

According to feminist standpoint theory established by Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock among other feminist sociologists and philosophers, women's marginalization generates a unique "standpoint" to comprehend social phenomena (Harding, 1986; Hartsock, 1983). Through powerful works like Harding (1986) and Harding (1991) as well as Collins (1991) feminist standpoint theory became a leading theme in the author's work on science and feminism.

The central challenge which prompted Standpoint Theory's emergence stemmed from the second-wave feminism's tendency to treat women's experiences as though they shared identical characteristics. The essentializing flaws of second-wave feminism became an issue that Collins (1990) explained by creating the concept of standpoints as "cognitive-emotional-political achievements crafted out of located social-historical-bodily experience" (p. 304). Feminist Standpoint theorists established their political stance by first adopting Marxist principles while recognizing the need to solve epistemological issues in feminist politics. Evolving debates from the late 1980s through early 1990s led to an assessment of feminist standpoint theory regarding how different women viewed one another. The second-wave feminist approach raises uncertainty because it assumes all women share identical social backgrounds which creates an automatic

preference of White middle-class female perspectives above the perspectives of other female groups who lack these demographic characteristics Becky Thompson (2002). Standpoint feminisms serve as fundamental tools for developing knowledge through the real-life experiences of marginalized individuals including Black women while they fight against social barriers (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Standpoint feminist theories state that knowledge is created through the first-hand stories of marginalized people and how they perceive and interact with their social realities (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Standpoint feminists suggest that minoritized women do not experience identical events with one another. The experiences two people share because of their identity such as being Muslim and a woman differ from their viewpoint based on various elements of identity and social positioning like nationality, ethnicity and religious beliefs and practices (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

Feminist standpoint theories developed by Collins (1991) and Harding (2004) guarantee women full authority over their personal experiences to produce knowledgeable insights. These theories enable women to define knowledge along with building their self-empowerment through knowledge creation. You need such frameworks to grasp patriarchal norms because they fight dominant beliefs while questioning fundamental assumptions within established knowledge systems (Baksh & Khan, 2023). The theoretical framework of feminist discourse creates opportunities to assess Muslim women's conduct from alternative perspectives while using various forms of knowledge development and validation methods that align with their interests. For many decades feminist scholars have stressed the importance of experiencing knowledge firsthand and believe that living experiences serve as established

foundations for written textual narratives (Puwar & Raghuram, 2003). According to feminist standpoint theories our identity and understanding of knowledge both transform through changes in material circumstances while all individuals exist across multiple life settings (Hirschmann, 1998). Dorothy Smith introduced the call for a "sociology for women" which starts with observing how women experience their daily activities (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019, p.4). Women who have a disadvantaged societal status produce unique perspectives which uncover both unequal power structures and social networking circles (Hekman 1997, Gurung 2021). A privileged standpoint emerges from women along with some who experience multiple identities of ethnicity and class which unveils truths hidden by dominant perspectives (Gurung 2021; Hekman, 1997). Through this theoretical method researchers explore how traditional knowledge fails to be objective while they advocate supporting various perspectives during knowledge generation. The essence of this knowledge involves women generating information for women (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

Standpoint feminism faced multiple criticisms between the late 1980s and early 1990s which triggered its decreased scholarly attention and intellectual discussions according to Harding (1991). Premature elimination of feminist standpoint theory might be mistaken because it poses an essential question to feminist theory related to establishing the validity of feminist claims regarding female oppression. The commitment to multiple truths faced criticism from analysts who worry this approach could weaken feminist arguments, yet advocates maintain it remains a vital tool for uncovering woman oppression and developing society without oppression (Collins, 1991; Harding, 1991). Feminist standpoint theory became the fundamental basis for

understanding knowledge through its ability to change feminist theory and shape epistemology (Harding 1991, Ruddick 1989).

The feminist social constructionist approach identifies how gender develops through collective linguistic, symbolic and cultural practices according to Lorber (1994). Judith Lorber explains that gender exists as a manufactured construct through social moral standards and political elements over biological origin. Feminist social constructionism analyzes institutional structures plus linguistic elements and cultural expressions which both construct and sustain established gender boundaries (Kang, 2012). The elimination of essential gender ideas makes way for researchers to observe different ways people experience gender (Fiaccadori, 2006). Social constructionist scholars criticize empiricists because they disregard the political atmosphere and social environment of research processes as well as the interpretation of disputed gender and ethnicity distinctions (Kang et al., 2017). According to social constructionists', language functions as a critical tool that shapes human experiences because it serves as their main subject of investigation (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

The theories of Judith Butler and Donna Haraway guide Postmodern feminism to completely undermine all notions of fixed identities and stable categories particularly when discussing gender (Butler 1990, Haraway 1988). Gender performs through social interaction as people negotiate multiple identity expressions while existing in a dynamic social environment. Postmodern feminism evaluates essentialist assumptions within aspects of Feminist standpoint theory, yet endorsement happens for feminist social constructionism deconstructive mindset as per Butler 1990 and Hekman 1997.

Postmodern feminists identify how both male oppression exists among men and the oppression of women against male individuals.

In conclusion, feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory and feminist social constructionism all offer unique and valuable perspectives for understanding gender and society (Harding, 1986; Hartsock, 1983; Lorber, 1994). The first approach focuses on marginalized viewpoints alongside real-life experiences, yet the second method explores the social patterns which maintain gender-related norms. Postmodern feminism disrupts gender-related debates with its conceptual analysis of identity categories because it demonstrates how gender depends on performance and change in a dynamic way. These theoretical theories unite to establish a multi-dimensional comprehension of gender inside academic feminism research.

Emerging Critical Feminist Frameworks

There are several assumptions underlying a critical lens within Feminist scholarship, including intersectionality, being mindful of power dynamics in research, as well as being mindful of language usage and participant involvement throughout the research process (Table 1). Critical feminists perceive gender oppression as intricately linked to other forms of injustice, such as race, class, and sexuality, all collaborating to construct and perpetuate imbalanced power structures that are both produced, reproduced, and resisted (Qin, 2004).

It also means understanding how gender norms intersect with other social categories to produce complex systems of privilege and disadvantage. It emphasizes the examination of power structures, social inequalities, and systemic oppression, with a focus on economic and political factors (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Feminist Critical

Pedagogy also involves understanding how gender norms intersect with other social categories to produce complex systems of privilege and disadvantage. Feminist Critical Pedagogy works towards societal change, advocating for transformative practices that will dismantle oppressive structures and create a more equitable society.

While they share certain concerns such as critiquing traditional power structures, highlighting social constructions, and adopting an intersectional lens regarding identities, Postmodern Feminism and Critical Feminist theoretical frameworks do differ in their foundational principles, perspectives, and approaches to understanding and addressing issues related to gender and power (Cosgrove, 2003). For example, postmodern feminism emerged in response to the limitations and debates of earlier feminist movements and is influenced by poststructuralist and postmodern philosophy. It challenges fixed categories, rejects the idea of a universal female experience, and emphasizes the diversity and complexity of women's lives (Ebert, 1991; Fulfer, 2008; Hawkesworth, 1999). In addition, postmodern feminism questions the stability and coherence of identity categories, including gender. It challenges essentialist views that assume a singular, fixed meaning for terms like "woman." (Fulfer, 2008). Postmodern feminists deconstruct existing narratives and categories, highlighting the fluidity and multiplicity of identities (Ebert, 1991; Fulfer, 2008). While postmodern feminism acknowledges the need for social change, it is often critiqued for its perceived lack of a clear agenda for activism. For example, the emphasis on deconstruction and fluidity may pose challenges when formulating concrete strategies for social transformation (Fulfer, 2008).

Epistemologically, critical feminism often adheres to a more “objective” epistemology, seeking to uncover hidden structures of power (Fiorenza, 2013; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). In contrast, postmodern feminism questions the possibility of objective knowledge and highlights the subjectivity of experiences. Moreover, critical feminism focuses on analyzing and challenging existing structures, while postmodern feminism leans towards deconstructing traditional narratives and categories. Finally, with regards to activism, critical feminism tends to be more overtly activist-oriented, aiming to bring about systemic change. Postmodern feminism, while critical, may prioritize deconstruction and exploration of multiple perspectives over explicit activism.

Critical-Cultural Feminists. Some feminist scholars struggle to deconstruct Islam and Muslim women's identities without falling into Orientalist and colonialist tropes, but then inadvertently perpetuate Islamophobia (Hojati, 2011). Muslim women feminists often find themselves excluded from mainstream progress narratives and are instead seen as exceptions. When these topics are addressed, they are often treated in a tokenistic manner, framed within "diversity and multicultural discourses" that homogenize Muslim women based on gender sameness (Baksh & Khan, 2023, p. 674). For example, instead of recognizing the diverse and unique experiences of Muslim women, these frameworks tend to homogenize them, reducing their identities to a singular narrative centered solely around their gender (Baksh & Khan). This homogenization fails to account for the intersectionality of race, religion, culture, and other factors that shape Muslim women's lives (Crenshaw, 1989). Gender sameness in this context refers to the idea that Muslim women are often grouped under the broad category of "women" without a nuanced understanding of their distinct experiences.

This framing ignores the specific socio-political and cultural contexts that influence Muslim women's lives, thereby failing to capture the full complexity of their identities. Instead, Muslim women are expected to conform to a generalized narrative of womanhood that is often shaped by Western, secular, and non-Muslim perspectives (Abu-Lughod, 2013). This not only erases the diversity within Muslim women's experiences but also perpetuates a form of epistemic violence by denying them the agency to define their own identities and experiences (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Cultural feminists within the critical postmodern feminist space criticize the unitary claim that all women experience womanhood, femininity, freedom, empowerment, and oppression in similar ways. In addition, they decry the singular Western construction of woman as a contrast to the "Third World woman" and argue instead for multiple and culturally diverse lived experiences (Mohanty, 1998). Scholars like bell hooks emphasize the intersectionality of race, class, and gender (Biana, 2020). hooks challenges the perception that feminism is solely for women or is hostile to men, with the aim to make feminism a movement that seeks gender equality and challenges all forms of oppression (Biana, 2020).

bell hooks' work emphasizes the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. She was influenced by black feminist scholars like Audre Lorde and embraced the idea that various forms of oppression and identity are interconnected. hooks argued that feminism should not focus solely on the experiences of white middle-class women (Biana, 2020; Fitts, 2011) but should instead address the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds. In addition, hooks presents the idea that feminism should be accessible and relevant to all individuals, regardless of their background or gender

(Fitts, 2011). Furthermore, in 1984, in her ground-breaking critique of the existing feminist discourses during her time, hooks observed that while feminist theorists were writing on being oppressed by virtue of their sex or by simply being women, and while the feminist movements were fighting for rights that only men had access to, these same feminists neglected the plight of other women (Thompson, 2002). While feminists stress the importance of including other groups in philosophizing and theorizing, they seem to have deliberately neglected non-white, unprivileged women, especially those that belonged to a non-Western faith-group (Thompson, 2002).

Hyphenating Standpoint Feminism with Faith: Islamic-Standpoint Feminism

From a theoretical standpoint, this dissertation will aim to address how critical feminist theories' view Islam's varied interpretations on gender and women, power relations especially within unique faith-based spaces, as well as the multiple (re)constructions of religious knowledge through a critical, cosmopolitan lens. In her book, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Saba Mahmood, a post colonialist, and post-structuralist scholar, argues against secular feminism in an ethnographic account of the lives of Muslim women engaged in a piety movement in Egypt (2005). Bangstad (2011) agrees that critiques of secular feminism are necessary, in that a "problem for secular feminism – as both an analytical and prescriptive frame of thinking – has been its apparent inability to conceptualize female agency and freedom in any terms other than resistance or subordination to patriarchal societal norms" (Bangstad, 2011, p. 29). This feeds into anti-Muslim sentiment especially in Western nations. For example, secular feminism can come across as hypocritical when fighting for women to be able to wear the clothing they choose and be safe from violence, while

also fighting against religious clothing such as the *hijab* or *niqab*. It is true that no woman should be forced to wear clothing that they are uncomfortable with or find to be oppressive, but nor should women be forced to give up clothing they chose to wear for any reason such as religious expression, comfort or convenience, or self-expression. Many women do not identify themselves as feminist but still advocate feminist principles (Harnois, 2005). Some women of colour do not embrace feminism to be as important as focusing on power and dominance issues (Harnois, 2005; Pearson, 2007).

Within the realm of Critical Muslim feminism, as illuminated by Jasmine Zine, scholars and activists forge a path toward liberation from patriarchy without succumbing to colonial processes (Zine, 2004). This nuanced framework aims to address the intricacies of gender relations on both sides of the Orientalist divide, emphasizing its commitment to fostering an alternate space for Muslim female identity that resists both patriarchal fundamentalism and secular Islamophobia (Zine, 2006).

Zine (2006) challenges prevailing perceptions of Muslim identity, emphasizing the centrality of spirituality and religious commitment in shaping the self-perception and feminist engagement of Muslim women. This critical Muslim feminist perspective strategically positions itself to articulate an understanding of Islamophobic violence grounded in the lived experiences of Muslim women. Not only does it critique patriarchal structures within conservative Muslim discourses, but it also guards against the appropriation of this critique into Islamophobic narratives.

Zine (2004) delves into the complex predicament faced by Muslim feminists when addressing sexism within their communities, noting that such efforts often expose them to racism and oversimplified Islamophobia. To navigate this challenge, Zine

advocates for the disassembly of interconnected systems that perpetuate oppression against Muslim women. Her guiding principles include a holistic approach to identity, the incorporation of historical and cultural analyses into religious studies, recognition of religion's enduring impact on various aspects of life, acknowledgment of religious and spiritual identities as potential sites of oppression, understanding religion and spirituality as avenues for resistance, and integrating knowledge from Divine sources into secular research (Zine, 2001).

Furthermore, Medina (2010) argues that the Muslim woman's body becomes a battleground for ideological conflicts between religious and secular patriarchy and feminism. Discussions around liberating Muslim women are entangled with colonial rescue narratives, often urging a departure from Islam towards Western lifestyles. This dilemma forces Muslim women to choose between embracing a colonial narrative or accepting misogynistic interpretations imposed by Muslim patriarchies. It is therefore essential to recognize the inherent flaws in this binary opposition (Ahmad, 2018).

Feminist standpoint theory underscores the necessity of factoring in individual's social contexts and perspectives in the generation of knowledge. In examining the perceptions of Muslim women, this approach facilitates an exploration into how their distinctive experiences, influenced by elements like faith, culture, and gender, mold their comprehension of empowerment and mental health. Furthermore, Standpoint theorists advocate for commencing inquiries from the standpoint of those outside dominant groups. In the instance of Muslim women, this involves recognizing and prioritizing their voices, which might have historically been marginalized or inadequately represented in prevailing discourses. Such an approach fosters a more genuine examination of their

experiences and perspectives. Standpoint theory has also evolved to incorporate intersectionality, acknowledging that individuals occupy multiple social locations simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1991). Employing this perspective when studying Muslim women allows for an exploration of how their experiences of empowerment and mental health intersect with variables such as race, ethnicity, class, and religious identity.

Muslim Women and Identity: Social Identity and Behavioural Identity

An important aspect of understanding well-being is cultural safety and humility, as cultural factors impact how activities directed at well-being are taken up in diverse populations, as well as how well-being is expressed (Bhugra, 2005). Cultural nuances such as these form an essential basis for exploring the experiences of Muslim women, whose well-being in terms of mental health is predisposed by cultural and religious practices operating either as protective factors or as stressors. For example, social identity is derived from knowledge about membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel, 2010). Ethnic and cultural identities are particularly salient aspects of social identity. According to Phinney (1990) and Cameron (2004), the key components of these identities include: (1) self-identification (self-definition or self-labelling); (2) sense of belonging; (3) attitudes toward the in-group (an emotional evaluation, including ethnic pride); (4) centrality (subjective importance and the frequency with which group membership comes to mind); and (5) involvement (ethnic, cultural, and religious behaviours and practices, including language, friendships, and dress) (Jasperse et al., 2012).

Muslim identity encompasses various religious practices, including those that are performed privately, such as praying the five daily prayers or reciting the Qur'ān, and

others publicly, like attending the mosque or undertaking the pilgrimage to Makkah. In countries such as Canada, the *khimaar* and *jilbab* (known more commonly as *hijab*)—a head and body covering worn by Muslim women—stands out as a distinctive practice. This garment serves as a symbol of identity and a "tangible marker of difference" for Muslim women in these societies (Droogsma, 2007). Unlike other religious practices, the *hijab*'s public visibility subjects' Muslim women to identity ascription by members of the host culture (Weinreich, 1983), adding complexity to their social identity in diaspora contexts (Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007; Lalonde, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1992).

Ethnic identity significantly impacts mental health, with research indicating that pride and belongingness in one's ethnic group are beneficial (Brondolo et al., 2009). This positive correlation is well-supported by studies on ethnic minorities and immigrant groups (Phinney et al., 2001). For Muslim women, recent qualitative studies suggest a link between Muslim identity and subjective well-being (Droogsma, 2007; Whittaker et al., 2005). Additionally, religiosity, often measured by religious activity, is generally associated with better mental health, including for Muslim minorities (Abu-Rayya, H.M. & Abu-Rayya, M.H., 2009).

Emotional health, closely tied to mental health, is often measured by happiness, life satisfaction, and sense of purpose (Hodge, Zidan, & Husain, 2016). These concepts vary across cultures, influenced by multiple factors (Diener & Diener, 1995). Spiritual well-being predicts happiness and general well-being, with religion and spirituality generally enhancing emotional and mental health (Koenig & Shohaib, 2014). A meta-analysis of 147 studies found a mild association between religiosity and fewer depressive symptoms (Smith, McCullough, Poll, & Cooper, 2003).

Therefore, well-being and mental health are both connected and affected by factors such as gender, religion, and culture. An understanding of the interplay within well-being and mental health should be considered while developing interventions and policies sensitive to varied needs of women, including Muslim women, across diverse cultural contexts.

Islamic Standpoint Feminism, Higher Education and Academia: A Focus on Hijab and Complex Identities

International Muslim feminists have contributed to the discussion of an Islamic version of feminism, and what this can mean for Muslim women in higher education as well as how Islamic feminism is portrayed in academia (Alvi, 2004; Haddad et al., 2006; Zine, 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2007). They have argued that Western feminism is not capable of effectively dealing with the issues of all minority women (Khosroedi 2015). Abu-Lughod (1998) has also emphasized the need to work against universalizing discourses about patriarchy, Islam, and oppression, and the need to consider historical, regional, political, and economical specificities of women's lives. Gendered and Islamic feminist approaches share a common perspective, even though they remain distinct in many ways. Gendered perspectives are simply approaches that require the use of a gender lens in the process of analysis, while Islamic feminism is a movement and an ideological standpoint with a methodology and objectives that seek to promote gender equality through the re-interpretation of Islamic religious texts. Islamic feminism seeks to clarify misconceptions and cultural practices misconstrued as religious that are used to subjugate women in society (Anderson, 2011). In addition, third wave feminists are advocating for what Snyder-Hall (2010) calls "choice feminism," which views freedom

not as simply the capacity to make individual choices but rather the ability to determine your own life path. For Muslim women, these life choices are made alongside consultation with familial and community choices, as well as guidelines outlined in the Qur'ān and the Prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*).

The scholarly exploration of the experiences of Muslim women instructors in Canadian academia, particularly in higher education, reveals significant gaps in research into their experiences (Khosrojerdi, 2015; Salim, 2022). For example, there is limited research concentrated on the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and religion in the construction of Muslim women's experiences (Khosrojerdi, 2015). In addition, the term "Muslim feminist" continues to be controversial among certain feminist scholars and social work practitioners (Baksh & Khan, 2023). The notion of "progress" is frequently associated with ideologies from Northern nation-states such as Canada, historically fundamentalist Christian states in the USA, and the UK. These nations often use "progress" narratives to criticize Islamic states, evaluating them based on criteria like the institutionalization of LGBTQ and women's rights (Baksh & Khan, 2023).

Moreover, recent research highlights how race, racism, and the experience of being "othered" are significant factors affecting Muslim women in Canadian universities. For example, Khosrojerdi (2015) conducted case studies of 10 Muslim women at a Canadian university and found that although none of the study participants reported direct experiences of racism, many still felt othered by their predominantly white, non-Muslim peers. They pointed to accent discrimination and racial prejudices from professors and fellow students. Despite not labeling their experiences explicitly as

"racism," the sense of Othering and the biases they encountered underscore the presence of racism within higher education in Canada.

The *hijab* also played a crucial role in shaping the participants' experiences. Veiled participants reported more overt discriminatory behaviours from professors and peers compared to their unveiled counterparts. These women faced exclusion and invisibility in their interactions with the majority white, non-Muslim students and faculty, making it difficult for them to form and maintain friendships outside of immigrant or international student communities.

Khosrojerdi (2011) also examined the complexities of navigating multiple identities for Muslim women in Canadian universities. Participants experienced marginalization due to their gender, ethnicity, and religion. However, the participants also highlighted the supportive role of Muslim Student Associations (MSAs) on campus and the impact of the *hijab*, both of which facilitated Muslim women in navigating their identities and resisting marginalization. MSAs serve as a form of positive peer pressure and may assist Muslim female students by providing a safe space for expressing their identities through participation in advocacy, school programs and community programs (Khosrojerdi, 2011; Zine, 2000, 2001). Mir (2009b) states that "MSAs serve to represent, mobilize, educate, and connect Muslim students on campus, often becoming the public face of Islam for these students" (p. 242). While some women felt comfortable with their hyphenated identities, others experienced conflicts. Here I am referring to "hyphenated" as a blend or intersection of multiple aspects of identity, such as being both a woman of faith and identifying with some aspects of secular feminism, which can lead to both vulnerabilities and sources of strength. The concept highlights the

continuous negotiation between external stereotypes, internal community expectations, and the personal quest for self-definition (Dobson, 2012; Sirin, 2007). For example, one participant in the study mentioned:

But I feel like a lot of young women, our age, are really going through this confusing time, like this whole feminist thing. And even though like through the Qur'ān, we touch upon it, I don't feel like it's being conveyed in a way that is really making sense to the younger generation. So, maybe get more younger and more academic teachers involved, who know kind of what the students are facing in like secular universities and what they're hearing, what kind of debates they're having in class. So that when they come to places like Al-Huda, they are able to have their mind opened up to the other side as well. Because it's something I'm seeing again and again in so many young women, that they're not getting these questions answered on a lot of these issues that the whole feminist movement brings up. And even that in itself, how to balance that concept of, we're not anti-feminism, but again, what does it mean as a Muslim (Participant 18).

Overall, this and other studies, underscores the active agency of Muslim women in challenging stereotypes and fighting for equality in Canadian academia (Latif et al., 2018; Reitz et al., 2014). The study results call for a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and religion in shaping the experiences of Canadian Muslim women. The findings emphasize the need for more inclusive and equitable practices in higher education to address the unique challenges faced by Muslim women.

Navigating Hyphenated Identities in the Global Muslim World. Afshar and colleagues (2005) discuss the complexity of identities imposed upon Muslim women in Britain during the increased Islamophobia post-9/11. The paper draws on interviews with different generations of Muslim women in West Yorkshire to highlight how these women construct and negotiate their identities in these challenging times. The authors claim that Muslim communities feel marginalized (in part due to Islamophobia) forcing them to adopt a rigid and highly political form of identity. However, the paper highlights that many Muslim women, particularly those who choose to wear the *hijab*, navigate these pressures in nuanced ways. They often refuse the polarized option between their faith and national identity, instead embracing a multifaceted identity that includes elements of both.

This allows them to forge identities that are inclusive and fluid, challenging both an Islamophobic discourse intent on portraying all Muslims as threats and internal community pressures that work to silence women's voices. In this respect, Dobson (2012) considers some of the many complications in identity construction among settled Muslim women in New Zealand post the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The research explores narratives from Muslim women, focusing on their experiences with prejudice, discrimination, and public perception, particularly when visibly identifiable through attire like the *hijab*. Dobson's analysis is grounded in the concept of "hyphenated identities," where the women must reconcile their religious and cultural identities with their sense of belonging in New Zealand, demonstrating how their Muslim identity becomes both a site of vulnerability and a source of strength. Dobson found that

the women engaged in various forms of agency, such as participating in community dialogues and advocating for women's rights within the framework of Islamic teachings.

Rationale for Theorizing Critical Standpoint Feminism in Muslim Women's Mental Health.

Understanding the unique mental health needs of Muslim women in Canada requires a comprehensive approach that transcends cultural explanations. Critical Standpoint Feminism offers a valuable lens through which to explore the complexities of Muslim women's mental health (Collins, 2004). By emphasizing the importance of understanding experiences from the perspective of marginalized groups, this theoretical framework enables a nuanced examination of the intersectionality that shapes the lives of Muslim women (Baksh & Khan, 2023). When applied to mental health research, critical standpoint feminism encourages a departure from universalizing narratives and recognizes the diversity of factors influencing well-being within the Muslim female experience (Akram, 2023). It provides a platform to uncover the unique challenges faced by Muslim women and sheds light on the interplay between gender, religion, culture, and mental health (Saeidzadeh, 2023).

However, it is essential to acknowledge criticisms of this approach when situating Muslim women within broader feminist frameworks and goals. Some argue that the theory, in its pursuit of unique perspectives, may inadvertently perpetuate essentialism by reinforcing predetermined notions of Muslim women's experiences (Alghamdi, 2020). Critics caution against the risk of oversimplification and stress the need to avoid homogenizing diverse groups of Muslim women, as their experiences and challenges may vary widely (Collins, 1991).

For this dissertation, I will be hyphenating feminist frameworks, particularly in relation to Muslim identities. These frameworks will consider the participants' roles within Muslim communities, their connections to specific ethnic groups, and their identity as Canadian citizens. This intersectional approach acknowledges the complex, 'hyphenated' lived experiences where being Muslim holds significant social importance. I will specifically engage with Standpoint Feminism, integrating Muslim and Islamic perspectives, to emphasize the participants' deep commitment to their faith, which they will later describe.

Although some scholars do not ascribe to formally practising Islam as a means of defining Muslim identity, I will be interviewing Muslim women who do formally practice *Sunni* Islam as my primary means of defining Muslim identity. Finally, feminist standpoint theory views research as a catalyst for societal change. Unraveling how Muslim women interpret empowerment and mental health through the Qur'ān offers insights that can contribute to broader dialogues on gender, religion, and mental well-being, which challenges prevailing discourses around women, feminism and Islam. This aligns with the theory's emphasis on leveraging knowledge to challenge existing power structures (Mushtaq, 2010).

Chapter 3

Theories of Islamic Psychology

Islam: A Brief Overview

Muslims believe that the Arabic Qur'ān, which was revealed in Arabic to Prophet Muhammad over the span of 23 years (610–632 CE), is the actual Word of God. The Qur'ān is viewed as a guideline for life for many Muslims around the world, and it provides the purpose of life, legalities and laws, as well as a moral framework for living a good life. Correspondingly, the *hadith* are sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad that were recorded, authenticated and transmitted over centuries by various scholars. The *hadith* represent one of the major sources for understanding the legal and theological Islamic tradition.

While Muslim mental health may be an applied form of indigenous psychology, Islamic Psychology is an academic discipline that was originally based on indigenous Islamic thought. A central aspect of Islamic psychology is the concept of monotheism, known as *Tawḥīd* in Arabic, which serves as the cornerstone of Islam (Rassool, 2023). Tawhid emphasizes the oneness of God, underscoring the importance of maintaining the unity of Allah's worship without intercessors or intermediaries.

1. Belief in Allah (*Tawḥīd*)
2. Belief in His Angels (*Mala'ikah*)
3. Belief in Predestination (*Qadr*)
4. Belief in the Last Day (*Akhirah*)
5. Belief in His Books (*Kutub*)

6. Belief in the Prophets (*Nubwuwaah*)

There are three primary sources of knowledge in Islam. First, knowledge is derived from the Qur'ān and Sunnah (*Ilm Naqli*), which indicates Divine revelation (*wahy*) revealed to the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) through Angel *Jibreel* (Gabriel). A second source of knowledge in the Islamic tradition is rooted in rational knowledge, which is based on intellect (*Aql*) and refers to inferencing knowledge through the five senses (Huda et al., 2016). The final source of knowledge is derived from empirical evidence (*Ilm Aqli*), which refers to experimentation and the scientific pursuit of knowledge (Huda et al., 2016).

From an early age, Muslim children are taught the five pillars of Islam, which form the foundation of Islamic ontology (Husain & Hodge, 2016). These pillars are summarized in a hadith: "Islam is built upon five [pillars]: testifying that there is none worthy of worship except Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, establishing the prayers, giving zakat, making pilgrimage to the House, and fasting the month of Ramadan" (An-Nawawi, 1999). They represent a framework for daily worship and a sign of commitment to the faith (Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2019).

Defining Islamic Psychology and Islamically Integrated Psychotherapy

Traditionally, psychology has overlooked the significant role of religion as a central belief system shaping individuals' worldviews, with references to religion being infrequent in social psychology texts and in therapeutic practise (Abrams, 2023). It is crucial to recognize that religion is not solely an individual belief system; it is also a cultural phenomenon that binds people across various times and locations (Jensen, 2021). Religion goes beyond providing individual psychological benefits, such as coping

with death anxiety and creating meaning in life; it also offers solutions to broader social and ecological challenges faced by social groups (Shariff et al., 2014).

Religion is characterized as a system of shared beliefs, values, and norms transmitted across generations and places. Its cultural aspect is reinforced by customs, dress, and shared holidays (Hall, 1976). Consequently, religion should be viewed as both a belief system and a cultural identity. For example, Islam, like other major religions such as Judaism, Hinduism, or Christianity, is not only a set of beliefs but also a cultural identity (Beyers, 2017). It is important to note the diversity within religious cultures, such as variations in customs among Arab, Persian, Northern African, Asian, and North American versions of Islam. While there exists an overarching Islamic culture, there are also distinct cultures within this broader framework.

Islamic Psychology, often abbreviated as IP, involves studying and understanding the soul through the lens of the Qur'ān, Sunnah, and the works of early Muslim scholars (Isgandarova, 2024; Keshavarzi & Ali, 2019; Al-Karam, 2018). During the period when Islamic sciences became diversified under the influence of Indian, Greek, Christian and other thoughts, Islamic psychotherapy also became a highly complex field. Gradually, Muslim clinicians and therapists (*al tabib-al-ruhani*) or spiritual physicians (*tabib al-qalb*) also developed *al-ilaj al-nafsy* (psychological therapy) to cure or treat the soul and mind (Haque, 2004; Isgandarova, 2019). More specifically, Islamic Psychology can be divided into three broad themes: 1. *ilm-ul-Nafs* (theory of the soul), 2. *al-tibb al ruhani* (practical application of psychology), and 3. *tib al qalb* (the study of the heart) (Mahmoodi et al., 2023). It is important to note that Islamic Psychology is derived from a bottom up approach in that it is not about introducing religious ideas into

the pre-existing structure of modern Western psychology but rather “a turn within the depths of the Islamic tradition itself, applying its own ontological and epistemic principles in understanding the human being and its relationship to the sacred and utilizing its own treatment modalities” (Bendeck Sotillos, 2021).

Al-Karam (2018) defines Islamically integrated psychotherapy as “the integration of Islamic teachings, principles, philosophies and or interventions with Western therapeutic approaches” (Mahmoodi et al., 2023). Islamically integrated psychotherapy blends Islamic principles with Western therapeutic approaches and techniques.

Big P vs. Small p Psychology in Everyday Life

The conceptualization of Islamic Psychology involves differentiating between Big P and small p psychology. I am conceptualizing Islamic Psychology in three ways, using Big P and small p to denote the differences: 1. The academic discipline and study of Islamic Ppsychology 2. The clinical practice/application of Islamic Ppsychology and 3. Everyday ppsychology, which “refers to the state of the human being caught between ideals and realities” (Afsin, 2023). For the purposes of this dissertation, I am using the latter definition of psychology and how everyday Islamic psychology influences the everyday family dynamics, personal coping strategies, emotions, thought processes and behavioural patterns of Muslims. I also use this definition for myself, as the primary investigator in these series of studies to understand how the academic discipline of Psychology influences my everyday psychology as a Canadian Muslim woman, daughter, wife, mother, and doctoral student.

Situating Islamic Psychology within Indigenous Psychology

One needs to understand Islamic Psychology (IP) through its placement within Indigenous Psychologies (Jahoda, 2016). The practices belong to the wider Indigenizing Psychology movement which safeguards both teaching and practical components of the field. Psychologists who integrate holistic dimensions from cultural and spiritual perspectives create mental health knowledge which remains genuine to individual contexts (Haque et al., 2016; Azhar, 2001).

All the contested definitions of Indigenous Psychology strive to achieve the same fundamental goal of creating a scientific knowledge system that showcases psychological and behavioral activities in native contexts by using culture-specific reference frameworks and homegrown theories and categories (Yang, 2000, pp. 245-246).

Allwood (2002; Allwood, 2011) explains that Native Psychology refers to the outcome of cultural integration into academic psychology, yet indigenization involves ongoing cultural infusion into psychological research. As a concept related to Indigenizing Psychology it deals with academic practice modifications but also explains how individuals experienced psychological wellbeing develops culturally. Therapists using Islamic Psychology approach can help patients create connections between heart (*qalb*) understanding in the metaphysical healing segment. Such therapeutic practices localize therapeutic interventions to expand treatment practices further than the mental and emotional dimensions which Cognitive Behavioral Therapy mainly focuses on (Afsin, 2023; Haque & Keshavarzi, 2014).

The research of Islamic Psychotherapy depends on Qur'anic scriptures and Prophetic traditions to both direct intervention methods and transform how people perceive their psychological ways of living (Haque, 2004). The practice of employing sacred texts aims to link external assessments with the internal heart while it creates an all-encompassing method of well-being. People use contemplative reflection and prayer to experience a transformative process in which they can change their hearts and integrate them into their healing journey (Azhar, 2001). While the chapter established cultural influences on psychology through the faith example, practitioners must avoid restricting their practices based on cultural determinism (Afsin, 2023). By adopting this stance, the autonomous nature of psychology in its cultural environment becomes threatened while cultural differences between multiple perspectives get minimized (Afsin, 2023).

The Islamization of Knowledge concept demonstrates this phenomenon according to Haque (2018). According to Haque IOK represents a present-day Islamic effort dedicated to transforming conventional ways in which Muslims obtain knowledge from colonizers. Islamic Psychology shows integrative connections with Muslim mental health development yet maintaining different identity compared to IOK because secular academic research gradually blends into the Muslim context (Haque & Rothman, 2021). Scholars at large agree that Islamic Psychology constructs its theoretical foundation on human and spiritual elements per Islamic perspectives, yet Muslim mental health or Muslim psychology employs Western psychology and adds Islamic principles and cultural practices within its frameworks (Haque & Rothman, 2021).

Epistemology and Ontology: Critical Qur'ānic Studies and Islamic Psychology

The central issue in Islamic Psychology requires examination because it concerns the influence of the Qur'ān and critical Qur'ānic studies at Western secular universities. Joseph E. B. Lumbard together with other scholars criticize Euro-American academic Qur'ānic studies because they discard traditional Islamic scholarship and reject tafsīr and hadith literature as valid sources (Lumbard, 2022). The discipline has favorably used European interpretations throughout history by either rejecting or altering evidence which challenges these accepted views. Eurocentric bias creates multiple epistemological barriers that suppress native Muslim understanding of the Qur'ān while splitting its interpretation (Hamza, 2014; Lumbard, 2022).

The practice of questioning who wrote the Qur'ān and its origins differs from Islamic traditional perspectives which identify it as one unified text authored by a single figure (Sadeghi 2011). The traditional Islamic method grounded in historical research stands opposed to Biblical study methodologies since these approaches frequently fail to consider the extensive Islamic manuscript research and historical investigation (Lumbard, 2022). The methods of Biblical studies do not match the historical situations and interpretive communities of Islam according to Emran El-Badawi and Zadeh and other researchers.

The compilation processes of the Qur'ān receive completely different interpretations from scholars with Orientalist and Muslim backgrounds. During his trip between Syria and Medina Prophet Muhammad supposedly obtained Judeo-Christian verses which appear in the Qur'ān according to Orientalist scholars (Sadaqat, 2021). Various scholars maintain that the Qur'ān has suffered from corruption while contradicting Muslim beliefs about its preservation according to Saeed (2014).

Conversely, Muslims firmly believe that the Qur'ān is the true and accurate word of God, preserved without any corruption, as stated in the Qur'ān itself (15:9), which asserts that Allah is responsible for its preservation (Saeed, 2014). Different interpretations as well as Islamic sciences (i.e. *Ulūm al-Qur'ān*) regarding the history of the Qur'ān focus on its compilation process as well as its translation work and methods of preservation.

A decolonized field of Qur'ānic studies must unite Islamic and Euro-American methodologies through Islamic Scholarship and equal treatment of different knowledge systems.

Decolonizing Qur'ānic Studies: Epistemological Approaches

The Orientalism critique demonstrates the need to eliminate Western cultural hegemony by fostering inclusive knowledge about non-Western cultures which follows the cosmopolitan principles of worldwide interconnectedness and cultural respect. The academic discipline of Qur'ānic Studies requires this approach as Euro-American epistemological dominance usually subordinates non-Western knowledges. According to Lumbard (2024) along with Zadeh (2015) several scholars and theologians claim that Qur'ānic studies in Euro-American academic institutions are shaped by Western investigation frameworks. Euro-American paradigms rule supreme in academic discourse to the point that they push aside alternative epistemologies while treating non-Western forms of understanding as ancillary to cognitive practices (Lumbard, 2022). The development of equitable Qur'ānic Studies requires us to inspect and fight against entrenched analytical frameworks. This part discusses how decolonization of Qur'ānic Studies requires bringing together various epistemological frameworks while enabling different viewpoints to coexist.

Colonial Epistemological Reductionism

Academic research on the Qur'ān in Western institutions continues to display colonial reductionist methods. Such reductionism creates a conceptual orthodox framework which prevents non-Western peoples from using their intellectual traditions to explain their texts and history (Lumbard, 2022). To gain academic acceptance they must use Euro-American analytical methods. Western academic standards determine which non-Western epistemologies can exist by demanding their conformity to Western academic standards.

Euro-centric standards of academia fail to understand the biases from where it operates, which might be one of the factors leading to epistemological reductionism. For example, the secular underpinnings of analysis become evident in Qur'ānic Studies especially when scholars who support Islam fail to recognize these assumptions (Lumbard, 2022). The extensive presence of reductionist thinking reinforces Western epistemic models and excludes non-Western, dominant knowledge systems.

Orientalism and Epistemic Superiority

Western academic approaches to the Qur'ān demonstrate epistemic superiority through the Orientalist phenomenon. Modern approaches demonstrate better respect and tolerance, yet they maintain Euro-American epistemic superiority (Hallaq, 2018). Western secular paradigms maintain their universal validity in the minds of those who respect non-Western ways of knowing though this respect does not eliminate marginalization. Approaches which demonstrate sympathy toward Islamic interpretive traditions end up sustaining Euro-American epistemological dominance. Travis Zadeh (2015) criticizes Carl Ernst's (2011) *How to Read the Qur'ān* because Ernst presents a

non-theological reading of the Qur'ān that Zadeh believes undermines Islamic scholarship. The approach taken by Ernst seeks to broaden text accessibility through theological interpretation exclusion, but this method creates doubts about ancient Muslim civilization readings which have endured for over a thousand years.

The pursuit of secular interpretations of the Qur'ān rejects theological analysis which remains fundamental for faith communities whose most important sacred text is the Qur'ān. The omission of theological readings from academic studies about the Qur'ān dismisses fundamental Islamic traditions while silencing those religious communities whose understanding stems from theological interpretations (Lumbard, 2022). Secular approaches which dominate Qur'ānic Studies demonstrate a wider pattern of reducing non-Euro-American epistemological systems to Euro-American academic frameworks.

Alternative epistemologies become non-cognitive when they fail to match the dominant secular paradigms according to Lumbard (2024). The transformation of these epistemologies into Euro-American terminology results in a process that both changes their original meaning while using them for new purposes. The dominant paradigm determines the value of non-European epistemologies that contribute to its validation thus creating additional marginalization of their original perspectives.

Moving forward in Qur'ānic Studies research requires both an understanding of Western-centric thought's spatial location and the deconstruction of the dominant criteria which define the field (Lumbard, 2024). The process requires analysis of cultural alongside epistemological and ontological presuppositions which support Euro-American research approaches (Santos, 2014). The examination process creates

conditions that lead to emancipatory changes by integrating non-Western critical theory scripts and methodologies.

The objective of decolonizing Qur'ānic Studies aims to build a transmodern field which integrates various knowledge systems to develop new intellectual frameworks. The development of such space will allow different perspectives and methodologies to work together which results in an enhanced and complex understanding of the Qur'ān. Moving away from Euro-American paradigms will establish a field that represents all interpretation methods of the Qur'an throughout its historical development.

Contributions of Early Muslim Scholars and Situating Islamic Psychology in Western Psychology

The emerging literature on Islamic Psychology and Muslim Mental Health point to colonialism as partly to blame for the phenomenon of Muslim lands adopting Western, secular, colonized knowledge (Haque & Rothman, 2021). The movement for Islamic psychology was spearheaded by early Muslim scholars like the renowned Zayd al-Balkhi, who lived during the Islamic Golden Age in the 9th century and made significant contributions to psychology and mental health. His work provided insights into emotions, mental disorders, and the treatment of psychological distress. Other notable figures like Ibn Sina, Ibn Qayyim, and Ibn Taymiyyah have also influenced the development of Islamic psychology, focusing on the role of faith and spirituality in mental well-being.

Traditional models of Islamic counselling are derived from the Qur'an, the *Sunnah* and literatures of Muslim scholars. Al-Ghazali, one of the earliest and most prominent Islamic philosophers, describes human nature as an integration of bodily and spiritual forces. An individual's human nature is comprised of four elements, namely, the *Ruh*

(spirit), *Aql* (cognition), *Nafs* (tendencies) and the *Qalb* (heart) (Yaacob, 2013). Al-Ghazali defined spiritual/psychological illness as distance from God and the degree of health as a function of the degree to which one experiences proximity to God. This means that the ability to function positively in everyday life does not equate to sound mental health, but it is the development and presence of positive character traits, an important Islamic science called *tazkiyat-un-Nafs* (purification of the soul).

Al-Ghazali's approach has led to the creation of various models of Islamically integrated models of care, such as Islamic Cognitive Behaviour Therapy which includes cultivating close rapport with clients, identifying root causes of problems, combating desire, and exercising the soul (Zakaria & Akhir, 2017). Several other concepts have also been translated from the ideas of Al-Ghazali such as opposite therapy, contemplation, prayer, and the power of suggestion. The underlying principles for many of these techniques involves asking the client to separate themselves from the materialistic world (*dunya*) and to contemplate their relationship with God. The process of contemplating is aimed at helping the individual to create a strong connection of the intellect (*aql*) with the heart (*qalb*) (Nik Rosila, 2013).

As recent as 1948, Muhammad 'Uthman Nagati (1914-2000) used the term '*ilm al-nafs al-Islami* (the study of the soul from an Islamic perspective) in his writings, but his earlier definitions did not reflect the sophistication and maturity used in his later works. Nagati was born in 1910 in Nagaa Hammadi, Egypt, and passed away in 1979 (Haque & Rothman, 2021). Nagati was instrumental in developing the field of psychology in the Arab region by supervising countless graduate dissertations, writing authoritative texts on various disciplines of psychology in the Arabic language, and

translating key English psychological texts (Haque & Rothman, 2021). Furthermore, Nagati presented an overview of the Islamic epistemological foundations of sciences and proposed that Islamic Psychology should adopt a moderate position regarding Western psychology in terms of acceptance versus rejection (Haque & Rothman, 2021).

Integration of Islamic History, Philosophical Thought, and Modern Psychology

Islamic psychology today encompasses a framework regarding human thought, emotion, and behavior that originates from traditional Muslim thinkers, such as Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, and Abu Zayd al-Balkhi, and how this knowledge interacts with and even informs Western models of therapy (Keshavarzi et al., 2020). Islamically-integrated models of psychotherapy are embedded within this specific ontological and epistemological paradigm, which then guides practitioners' and researchers' understanding of health and pathology (Khan & Keshavarzi, 2023).

However, it is important to situate the growth of Islamic Psychology in North America and especially in Canada. Dr. Malik Badri was the first psychologist who reportedly recognized the need for a uniquely Islamic perspective on psychology (Ahmed, Awaad, & Rothman, 2022). Dr. Badri gained global recognition as the pioneering psychologist who vocally opposed the unquestioning acceptance of the Western approaches to studying the field of psychology by Muslim scholars (Ahmed, Awaad, & Rothman, 2022).

Dr. Badri's ideas were first embraced in the West, specifically in the United States, at the annual conference of the Association of Islamic Social Scientists, but it would take another 40 years before Islamic Psychology would find a momentum among the American Muslim community. During the early 1990s, the International Association of

Muslim Psychologists was also formed, and several conferences were held around the Muslim world. Within the last three decades, Dr. Malik Badri's publications and academic and public talks have garnered interest in the Psychology community for a revised look at the role of spirituality in modern-day streams of psychology.

A number of Western therapeutic approaches are easily aligned with Islamic teachings and principles. Talk therapy, for example, has long been a part of the Islamic tradition (M. Badri, 2013, Trans.). In his book *Sustenance for Bodies and Souls*, Abu Zayd al-Balkhi, a prominent 9th century physician, described in detail various forms of therapies, including talk therapy, cognitive-based therapy and psychodynamic approaches (M. Badri, 2013, Trans.). Al-Balkhi described that an external form of nourishment is that one can listen to the advice of another "whose discussion would calm the agitated soul and treat its abnormality" (M. Badri, 2013, Trans., p. 35). In addition, he utilized many modern-day clinical terms when explaining behavioural phenomena, such as symptoms, endogenous vs. exogenous causes of depression and personality styles (M. Badri, 2013, Trans.).

For example, Keshavarzi et al. (2020) have described a model called Traditional Islamically Integrated Psychotherapy (TIIP) that includes defining the components of the psyche rooted in Islamic theology, and identifying the drivers of thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Fig. 1). The five components, including the *aql* (cognition), *nafs* (behavioural inclination), *ruh* (spirit), *ihsaas* (emotion) and *qalb* (heart). The *nafs*, in its uncontrolled state is like the Freudian concept of the id, acting primarily on hedonistic desires. However, with refinement, the *nafs* can progress from a state of restlessness to being at peace and find joy in virtuous behaviours such as praying (Khan & Keshavarzi,

2023). The *aq/* is likened to the brain, which is the rational faculty of a person. It possesses intelligence and acts from a place of logic (Keshavarzi et al., 2020). The *ruh* is seen “as the part of the soul where God’s imprint resides within the *fitrah* (human innateness) ...unchanging and pure [and] as a direct access point to God, where the human being can potentially receive divine knowledge, guidance, and healing” (Rothman & Coyle, 2018, p. 1736). The *qalb* (heart) is at the center of this model, and both receives and provides feedback to the other components of the psyche. In a *hadith* (statement of Prophet Muhammad), the heart is described as something that changes more frequently than boiling water. It is important to note the dynamic nature of this model, in that all components are interrelated (Keshavarzi et al., 2020). For example, a behavioral addiction, such as alcohol abuse, can lead to dysfunctional thinking, as well as incorrect beliefs about God’s mercy for example, leading to a decrease in spirituality (i.e. a prayer cannot be performed in the state of drunkenness) and then finally resulting in a “darkness” over the heart (Keshavarzi et al., 2020). These five components are then linked to the four principles of change for the patient, through the four mechanisms of change from the practitioner (see Fig. 2).

Chapter 4

The Role of Islamic Psychology in Muslim Women's Well-Being

The concept of well-being includes physical aspects alongside emotional aspects as well as social aspects and psychological aspects (Diener & Lucas, 1999; Ryff, 1989). The identification of well-being patterns enables proper attention towards diverse human requirements across different cultural settings. The research examines how well-being elements interact among groups including women and Muslim women while analyzing their mental health connections. Studies have continuously demonstrated that well-being displays gender differences which reveal distinct social barriers that affect women's life quality (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Women face significant determinants to their well-being including rigid gender roles, discrimination and socioeconomic differences (Stavropoulou, 2019). Muslim women in particular, experience specific barriers to well-being because their identity combines elements of gender, religion and cultural traditions (Mir-Hosseini, 2013). Cultural and religious elements strongly influence the way Muslim women experience their well-being because these elements shape their views and life circumstances (Siraj et al., 2019).

Crenshaw (1989) introduced intersectionality as a framework which demonstrates how different social categories create combined effects on personal experiences by merging elements such as gender with race and religion. The framework proves essential for understanding the mental and emotional state of Muslim women. Mental health and well-being form a complex relationship in which each element impacts the other according to Keyes (2005). The state of well-being functions both as a result of sound mental health and as an important factor in mental health

resilience (Huppert & So, 2013). The impact of stressors together with social support elements creates essential conditions that affect mental health results. The condition of being emotionally positive leads Muslim women to demonstrate reduced psychological distress and lowers their risk of developing mental health disorders (Keyes, 2005).

According to Islamic scholar Al Ghazzali, *tawakkul* leads Muslims to develop favorable beliefs about God together with feelings of security throughout hard times and experiences of inner peace. (Saritoprak & Abu-Raiya, 2022). During trying times the Qur'ān exhorts Muslims to put their trust in God as stated in the verse “Put your trust in Allah: Allah is sufficient as Guardian” (3:33). According to Huda et al (2016) *tawakkul* is the essential principle that people need when facing adverse life events while serving as the foundation for receiving blessings in worldly existence and in everlasting life. Through his divine revelation Prophet Muhammad declared that “If you trusted Allah with due *tawakkul* He would provide you sustenance as He provides for the birds; they go out in the morning with empty stomachs and come back in the evening with full stomachs” [*Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2344, *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic) according to al-Tirmidhi] (Tahir, 2024).

Several qualitative studies about *tawakkul* among Muslims have been conducted but the data shows that Muslims rely on *tawakkul* frequently when facing adversity. The qualitative research study by Hammoudeh et al. (2017) investigated Palestinian Muslim women with breast cancer and discovered that *tawakkul* served as a critical factor in their successful illness management and acceptance of the disease. *Tawakkul* helped Iranian Muslims suffering from end-stage renal disease develop stronger peace alongside better tolerance toward their medical challenges (Shahgholian & Yousefi,

2015). The practice of *tawakkul* helped Iranian Muslim patients with hemophilia in their problem solving and coping processes according to Rambod et al. (2019).

Utilization of Mental Health Services, Social Support and Well-Being

North American Muslim women tend to avoid using traditional mental health services even though they experience elevated risk elements including hijab-related discrimination (Ali et al., 2022; Awaad et al., 2019; Sheridan & North, 2004). The lack of formal mental health service utilization among Muslim women stems from multiple interconnected factors consisting of religious practices, cultural traditions along with social stigmas and lack of comfort with professional services (Ali et al., 2021; Aloud & Rathur, 2009; Tanhan & Young, 2021). Research indicates that Muslim women face declining mental health because of Islamophobic experiences which lead to elevated internalizing symptoms according to Samari (2016). Therefore, both community-based interventions and culturally competent mental health services might be beneficial in improving mental health outcomes for Muslim women (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007; Haque, 2004; Rassool, 2015). The combination of peer support programs with guidance from religious leaders can play a crucial role in bridging the gap between mental health services and Muslim women (Amer & Bagasra, 2013).

Muslim women prefer to use informal social networks instead of formal mental health services despite their underutilization because these networks help them manage everyday life challenges affecting their mental health. Social support functions as an essential indicator of life satisfaction and social well-being while it consists of life satisfaction and positive affect and absence of negative affect (Joshanloo & Afshari, 2011). Research has confirmed that social support leads to better mental and physical

health outcomes since Cohen (1988) and Koenig and Larson (2001) and Schumaker (1992). Social support functions as a protective element against stress and promotes healthy conduct while delivering essential resources (Cohen, 1988; Koenig & Larson, 2001). The support network's negative effects emerge when it encourages unhealthy actions while encouraging excessive faith-based coping and elevating caregiver pressure (Schumaker, 1992). The satisfaction levels of people in collectivistic cultures which dominate numerous Muslim countries heavily depend on social support according to Diener & Diener (1995). Family support stands as the most important factor for Muslims (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007; Bjorck & Maslim, 2011). The connection between religious devotion and social support exists among Muslims across the United States and worldwide based on research findings (Bjorck & Maslim, 2011; Koenig & Shohaib, 2014). The participation in religious activities demonstrates positive effects on SWB according to research by Dolan et al. (2008) and George et al. (2002).

Studies demonstrate that religion and spirituality create positive impacts on social support for Muslim women yet researchers have documented some negative effects. Social support suffers from adverse effects through religion because religious beliefs create feelings of guilt combined with fear and shame (Koenig & Larson, 2001). Muslim women who decide against wearing Muslim religious garments face negative judgment from other Muslim women regarding their religious fidelity through their physical appearance. People develop lowered self-esteem because they cannot satisfy demanding religious requirements (Koenig & Larson, 2001). The practice of religion often leads people toward authoritarianism as well as dogmatism and dependency and rigid behavior patterns (Seybold & Hill, 2001). Most research demonstrates that religion

creates beneficial social support systems and functioning (Koenig & Larson, 2001; Seybold & Hill, 2001) which serves as one protective mechanism for mental health (Sherkat & Reed, 1992; Hovey et al., 2014).

Research demonstrates that religion and spirituality (R/S) create positive impacts on social support among Muslim women yet reveals some instances of negative effects. According to Koenig and Larson (2001) religious involvement creates negative social support through the development of guilt feelings together with fear and shame emotions. Other female members of Muslim communities judge their religious sisters based on how they present themselves through their attire like the decision not to wear a scarf or modest clothing (Syahrivar, 2021). The act of judgment creates social tension which produces feelings of isolation or diminished social support from fellow religious members (Syahrivar, 2021). These social pressures enhance feelings of religious inadequacy while also causing failure to satisfy religious expectations thus leading to lower self-esteem and increased stress (Koenig & Larson, 2001).

Religion can sometimes result in authoritarian behaviors together with dogmatism and rigidity and dependency when religious interpretations restrict personal freedom and demand conformity (Seybold & Hill, 2001). The application of strict religious interpretation produces negative effects by blocking both critical examination and open communication which creates a judgmental and closed atmosphere within communities (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015). Religious interpretations that display inflexible standards create tension in social bonds because those who fail to follow strict guidelines experience social exclusion (Jenkins, 2008).

Religion creates mostly positive effects on social support and functioning but some potential negative consequences should be considered (Koenig & Larson, 2001; Seybold & Hill, 2001). Religious practices with their communal features function as support networks that protect against stress and enhance psychological wellness according to Hovey et al. (2014) and Sherkat & Reed (1992). Through religious activities Muslim women find security and identity and a feeling of belonging that becomes more essential when external discrimination or social difficulties arise (Ali, Liu, & Humedian, 2004). The mental health protection provided by religion stems from the powerful social networks and spiritual reasons that emerge from religious beliefs and rituals (Hodge, 2005).

Self-Esteem and Well-Being

The connection between self-esteem and mental health is positive because it functions as an essential factor in determining subjective well-being assessments (Diener & Diener, 1995). Religion and spirituality often produce both self-esteem enhancement and feelings of mastery according to Ellison et al. (2001). Self-esteem shows weaker correlations to mental health measurements in collectivist cultures than it does in individualistic cultures according to Diener & Diener (1995). The prediction of mental health results in individualistic cultures depends heavily on self-esteem because these societies value personal achievement and independence (Heine et al., 1999). The cultural contexts where high self-esteem exists correlate with better life satisfaction levels and decreased depression symptoms and stronger psychological resistance (Diener & Diener, 1995). Self-esteem does not display a robust relationship with mental health in cultures which prioritize group harmony above individual achievement and

interdependence. Social relationships with family and membership in groups alongside successful social role performance serve better than individual self-perception in determining mental health status across collectivist cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Research indicates that self-esteem in collectivist societies depends on social situations because people measure their worth through their ability to fulfill societal requirements and maintain good relationships (Heine, 2001). The collective plays a central role in determining self-worth expressions in collectivist societies thus limiting the predictive power of self-esteem assessments for mental health outcomes (Heine 2001). Self-esteem interventions for collectivist populations should recognize cultural values that prioritize collective well-being because such approaches might not produce effective results if they neglect the communal perspective. The promotion of social support and group cohesion together with communal values seems better suited for improving mental health outcomes within such populations. Religious beliefs and spiritual teachings have a strong influence on shaping how people in collectivist societies understand their self-worth and their self-concept while self-esteem plays a changing role in mental health across diverse cultural backgrounds. The Qur'an alongside other Islamic texts demonstrates an absolute acknowledgment of women's inherent value which exists independently from men and directly connects them to God (Barlas, 2002; Haddad et al., 2006; Mohr, 2010; Wadud, 1999, 2006). Muslim women scholars who interpret Qur'anic verses demonstrate that women's rights exist because God created them equal to men instead of creating them from men thus strengthening their faith-based dignity and self-worth (Barlas, 2002; Haddad et al., 2006; Mohr, 2010; Wadud, 1999). According to Islamic theology *fitra* and positive self-concept development occurs

amongst Muslims (Abdullah, 2014; & Joshanloo & Daemi, 2015). The Islamic principle of *khilaafah* (Wadud, 2006) which establishes men and women as equal earth stewards along with the principle of piety as the basis for personal worth (Wadud, 1999) reinforce a positive perception of women in relation to men and God. Muslim women receive their fundamental belief in worth through religious teachings and early Islamic traditions that granted women substantial honor and social respect (Jawad, 2003; Mernissi, 1975). Islam both enables and advocates for a powerful and positive self-image which derives from spiritual and moral values that surpass cultural standards and societal expectations.

According to Koenig and Shohaib (2014) who reviewed 15 studies on Muslims found 11 studies which presented significant correlations between self-esteem and religiosity. Negative self-esteem was associated with religious and spiritual discrimination according to research that did not detect a positive relationship. The research shows self-esteem increases as religiosity grows particularly when people face discrimination (Ghaffari & Çiftçi, 2010). The research conducted by Joshanloo and Afshari (2011) across Iran and other countries established that self-esteem generates positive effects on life satisfaction among Muslim women. Joshanloo and Daemi (2015) discovered that self-esteem acted as a mediator between religion and well-being for Iranian undergraduate students. The correlation between religiosity and optimism and self-esteem and mental health in the Kuwaiti undergraduate population also existed in the American Muslim undergraduate population alongside the mental health and self-esteem correlation (Abdel-Khalek & Lester, 2012). Religiosity and self-esteem together created positive effects on social well-being and simultaneously produced negative

results for anxiety among Muslim Kuwaiti adolescents. Many Muslim women connect their personal esteem to wearing the headscarf known as *hijab*. Muslim women tend to view the *hijab* as a form of protection which moves attention from physical appearance towards their personality and actions, contributing to positive self-esteem (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007; Gulamhussein & Eaton, 2015; Haddad et al., 2006; Hyder et al., 2015; Yaqoob, 2008).

Muslim Women, Purpose in Life and Well-Being

The core Islamic teachings direct believers towards Divine Will which creates strong meaning and purpose for Muslims. Research shows that religious practices correlate positively with the sense of meaning and purpose in life especially when Muslims trust God during difficult times (Aflakseir, 2012; Khan et al., 2015; Koenig & Shohaib, 2014). The research by Koenig and Shohaib (2014) demonstrated that religion and spirituality and purpose in life shared positive relationships. Different population groups including Pakistani Muslim women and English Muslim students demonstrated these relationships through higher well-being scores (Aflakseir, 2012; Khan et al., 2015).

The Islamic faith encourages the practise of *Tawakkul* as a coping strategy for psychological well-being. According to Yucel (2017) *Tawakkul* represents an active type of trust in God's wisdom and mercy during challenging times that helps believers achieve contentment and resilience. *Tawakkul* alongside the five daily prayers and remembrance of God (*Dhikr*) serve as religious coping mechanisms that reduce stress and anxiety effects thereby strengthening the relationship between spiritual activities and mental health (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2011).

Furthermore, the research by Dengate (2009) demonstrates that individual religious devotion creates deeper well-being effects than public worship activities particularly in mental health and emotional aspects, yet public religious acts provide social networks and adaptive coping mechanisms. The research is supported Allport and Ross's work (1967) to explain intrinsic religiosity as a foundation of better mental health results but shows that extrinsic religious orientation leads to increased anxiety levels (Koenig, 2005). This is line with Keyes' (2002) tripartite well-being framework which consists of psychological (Ryff, 1989), social (Keyes, 1998) and emotional well-being (Diener, 1985).

Through Islamic communal activities such as *Salah* (daily prayers) and Ramadan fasting Muslims develop shared community purposes that strengthen both social support and psychological resilience. Religious practices that unite the community create an environment of support which protects people from daily life stresses (Greasley & Chiu, 2014; El Azayem & Hedayat-Diba, 1994).

Muslims use spiritual beliefs in their daily lives to interpret life events in a spiritual manner which provides comfort and control during unpredictable situations (Pargament, 1997). Muslims use their belief in Divine planning to view all life actions as connected parts of a whole thus creating positive outlooks and personal and social responsibility which leads to increased overall well-being (Sedaghat, Niazi, & Memaryan, 2014).

The relationship between gender alongside religious beliefs and cultural elements influences Muslim women's mental health status. Research needs to understand how religion interacts with gender and culture because it helps create targeted intervention and policy strategies for Muslim women in various cultural settings.

Studies show that social support together with self-esteem and religious beliefs serves as essential factors for enhancing mental health status among Muslim women.

Chapter 5

Cosmopolitanism, Orientalism: A Shift from Othering to Coming Together

I have thus far introduced the topics of Islamic Psychology and Islamization of Knowledge by providing a brief historical overview of these movements, as well as the relationship between the practice of psychology, faith and well-being. In the Introductory chapter, I also outlined my chosen theoretical framework to situate my findings and to guide my thinking around the proposed research questions. The following chapter will discuss the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism and Cosmopolitanism, decolonizing Qur'ānic studies and how it relates to the rationale of my study with participants in my doctoral work.

For the non-Western world, there is an implication that once we refer to the indigenous understandings in our culture, we automatically or naturally incorporate these values into our academic practice; in a sense we directly indigenize our discipline. For example, Islam prescribes relational understandings in human beings' relationship with the universe (Hamdani, 2004), as well as a holistic perspective on the individual's mental and physical health. Beyond introducing these faith-based values and Islamic teachings, the important question in the context of Indigenous psychology is whether and how these Islamic understandings or values transform the way Muslim psychologists do psychology in an academic or professional manner. This is now a matter of debate by a group of Muslim psychologists under the banner of Islamic Psychology (e.g., AlKaram, 2018; Seedat, 2021).

Second, as Bilal Afsin (2023) points to in his doctoral work that there is a necessity in indigenizing academic psychology, focusing on bridging the gaps between

Western and non-Western perspectives. According to Lee (2016) there exist two fundamental gaps between cultures and between psychological theory and personal experiences. One is the horizontal gap, which is the understandings of different cultural perspectives and the second is a vertical gap, which exists between academia and theoretical knowledge versus lived experiences. The goal of indigenous psychology, as Lee suggests, is to develop sophisticated methods that understand cultural differences without assuming that practical or theoretical connections exist between academic research techniques and the local environment especially in Western contexts where such a presumption can reinforce dominant hegemonies.

This perspective is important for the analysis of the Qur'ān's influence on Muslim women's identity and empowerment, which require a detailed examination from both Islamic Psychology and standpoint feminist theories. The indigenizing psychology movement matches the requirement to add Islamic cultural and religious principles into psychological theories which addresses horizontal and vertical gaps identified by Lee (2016). Standpoint feminism shares a similar viewpoint with indigenizing psychology since it requires psychological concepts to adapt and better match the unique cultural needs of communities. Islamic Psychology seeks to merge Islamic religious and cultural concepts into psychology through an approach that fixes recognized shortcomings in mainstream psychological interventions as described by Lee. Lee (2016) demonstrates that psychological practice needs to follow spiritual and cultural beliefs, so the delivered psychological support becomes effective and suitable for both cultural and religious contexts.

Both approaches share similar priorities regarding the empowered evaluation of personal experiences held by individuals from disadvantaged communities. Standpoint Feminists state that knowledge originates from social interactions and marginalized groups especially women hold essential insights to understand and fight against established power structures (Harding, 2004). The indigenizing process of psychology requires attention to both contextual factors and cultural distinctions and multiple points of view in a similar manner to Standpoint Feminism in knowledge creation and implementation.

The two approaches have distinct fundamental variations between them. Standpoint feminism focuses on gender and power dynamics to establish knowledge production frameworks which integrate women's views particularly those of the most oppressed women. These discourses fight against male-dominated social as well as academic systems that have shaped history. The goal of indigenizing psychology with Islamic elements places its main priority on the incorporation of religious and cultural principles into psychological procedures. The main purpose of indigenizing psychology involves maintaining psychological practices which conform to spiritual and cultural beliefs of the local community despite its gender-oriented aspects.

The approach to psychological practice is shaped by different fundamental guidelines that serve as basis for each method. Standpoint Feminism finds its foundation in feminist theory that works to eliminate patriarchal oppression and fights for equal rights between women and men (Brooks, 2007). Indigenizing psychology follows cultural and religious integrity principles to maintain respect for community cultural and spiritual traditions (Lee, 2016).

The method allows researchers to comprehend Muslim women's psychological situations and empowerment through their religious and cultural perspectives rather than using potentially dominant Western academic theories (Akram, 2023).

Psychological research requires an evaluation of how academic theories manifest within the genuine experiences of Muslim women to guarantee their genuine voices emerge throughout scholarly investigations. The examination of Islam as a religion together with its historical development shapes the study within Islamic Studies while exploring social effects of Islamic principles on communities. The study of Islam has undergone changes throughout the years due to different intellectual and social movements.

Cosmopolitanism, Globalization & History

The broad definition of cosmopolitanism bases its principles around the fundamental value of every person regardless of cultural or ethnic or national affiliations. The approach advocates that human beings have a fundamental connection which leads to establishing global communities beyond national boundaries to build mutual understanding (Yon, 2021). Through cosmopolitanism humans develop a global perspective which both honors different cultures and recognizes worldwide human connections (Yon, 2021).

While this concept has many positive and idealistic features Cosmopolitanism exists as a collection of various and occasionally opposing ideas and practices throughout moral cultural and political domains (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002b; Delanty, 2009). The intricate history of cosmopolitanism affects our comprehension of fundamental ideas including home, patriotism, affiliation and citizenship. The practice and theory of Cosmopolitanism exceeds the basic principles of globalization. Martin

(2018) rejects the idea that Brexit and Donald Trump's election mark the finish of globalization by calling it "a reversal of the globalization process." The historical model described by this perspective shows deglobalization working against globalization to achieve its conclusion (Gao & Teo, 2023). Irwin (2020) explains that contemporary political and social issues lead to some globalization rollback yet do not indicate total globalization termination (Kurt, Sofuoğlu, & Alver, 2020). The study of globalization benefits most from treating it as an enduring concept rather than an accomplished state (Gao & Teo, 2023).

History exists as a pluralistic phenomenon because it advances through multiple economic and social and political and cultural aspects which frequently oppose one another (Gao & Teo, 2023). The dialectical relationship between globalization and deglobalization allows them to operate together or switch positions. A pluralistic and nonlinear approach helps us understand that deglobalization happened previously so we must acknowledge its presence during subsequent globalization phases. Our ontology places us in a current historical moment instead of a post-historical condition. The proactive method allows us to study the quick psychological and social challenges which are currently arising (Gao & Teo, 2023).

Orientalism, Globalization & History

Edward Said (1978) introduced the concept of Orientalism to study Western constructions of the Orient as a mysterious and exotic Other which includes the Middle East Asia and North Africa (Gran 2013). The concept of Orientalism consists of three distinct meanings according to Koefoed and Haldrup (2020).

Firstly, it refers to art forms that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which were supposedly inspired from 'Oriental' motifs, patterns and themes following the French conquest of Egypt (Koefoed and Haldrup, 2020). Secondly, Orientalism was popularized within academia to explore how various European countries related to nations of the “Orient” in terms of trade and scientific exploration (Koefoed and Haldrup, 2020). Orientalist studies, as an established discipline in the 19th century, and through its inherent power dynamics and cultural stereotypes, frequently depicted the Orient as exotic, backward, and irrational, while positioning the West as superior and rational (Gran, 2013). Moreover, the exotic Orient became a subject of theses for many majors including, anthropology, sociology, economics, biology, and linguistics (Koefoed & Haldrup, 2020).

Thirdly, Orientalism denotes a specific discourse of knowledge and practice about 'oriental culture,' as it relates to Muslim dominant nations. This final representation of Orientalism continues to influence the relationships forged between countries following Islamic law, including strategies around foreign policy such as immigration and more broadly, attitudes towards people and cultures from these parts of the world (Ernst & Martin, 2010; Koefoed & Haldrup, 2020).

Said's conceptualization of Orientalism follows from Michel Foucault's notion of discourse production – namely, how words, ideas and images can intersect to produce discourse. Within this constructionist viewpoint, Said's works stressed that “Orientalism is not a false knowledge construction, but a power relationship with political implications. Orientalism as discourse was not just an innocent attachment to colonialism; it was politically useful when colonial powers, such as Britain and France, were conquering

their colonies...[and] that the Western discursive system of dominance and authority in the unequal relationship between the Orient and the Occident can be understood as a regime of knowledge—a disciplined system of power—that not only describes, teaches, and rules, but also “produces” the Orient” (Ernst & Martin, 2010; Koefoed & Haldrup, 2020).

Cosmopolitanism & Islam

Cosmopolitan Islam can be likened to the concept of "home everywhere" in that it transcends geographical and temporal boundaries, and its teachings do not belong to anyone group (Khan, Alkiek, and Chowdhury (2019). The founder of Al Huda, even before its emergence as a worldwide phenomenon with hundreds of international (onsite and online) classes, programs, workshops and community outreach programs, was a proponent of this idea of cosmopolitanism. I, as a student of Al Huda, precisely remember Dr. Farhat Hashmi stating that the Qur’ān is not just for the scholars, it is for all of us; we are all students of knowledge that can understand the Qur’ān. Staff and students at Al Huda emphasize its role as a center for Islamic knowledge that welcomes people from all backgrounds. The participants in this study do not ascribe to belonging to a particular place and felt that they could call Al Huda their second home or home away from home.

Unlike traditional titles like "*Alimaah*", (women scholars of knowledge) graduates prefer to be known simply as “students of knowledge”, highlighting an ongoing journey of lifetime learning rather than a final state of knowing and complete knowledge. The Qur’ān itself speaks to this notion in verse: “We have made its recital easy” (Khan, Alkiek, & Chowdhury, 2019).

Traditionally, the *Madrassah* system has been responsible for disseminating Islamic knowledge and providing a top-down approach to interpreting the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*. However, in modern times, the concept of "lived Islam" is more appropriate (and even welcomed) for Muslim women navigating modern feminist perspectives. It allows for the integration of traditional teachings with the realities of today's multicultural societies, demonstrating flexibility and appreciation of difference of opinions in some matters of Islamic law and practise.

This perspective on Cosmopolitan Islam challenges traditional boundaries, offering a nuanced understanding of how Islamic teachings can be both universal and situated in today's globalized world. The connection between Cosmopolitanism and Orientalism lies in their exploration of cultural differences and the power dynamics involved in interactions between different societies. Cosmopolitanism strives to transcend cultural boundaries, nation states and embrace diversity, promoting dialogue and understanding between cultures (Dan Yon, 2021). It challenges ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism by acknowledging the equal worth of all cultures and nurturing a sense of human citizenship (Dan Yon 2021).

Conversely, Orientalism critiques how dominant Western societies historically positioned themselves in relation to other cultures, especially those in the East. It highlights power imbalances and biases resulting from the Orientalist perspective and advocates for a more nuanced and respectful understanding of non-Western cultures. By challenging Orientalist stereotypes and representations, Orientalism contributes to the Cosmopolitan ideal by promoting a more inclusive and equitable global perspective.

Overall, the theory of Cosmopolitanism and Orientalism can be linked through their examination of cultural difference, global interconnectedness, and power dynamics. While they approach these concepts from different angles, they both contribute to understanding how societies and cultures interact on a global scale, and how this relates especially to communities that come together through a shared faith system.

Chapter 6: Reflexivity & Methodology

Following a discussion of the theoretical frameworks in the preceding chapter, the focus now shifts towards elucidating the methodology and reflexivity that served as the backdrop for the empirical study that will be detailed in Chapter 7. In this chapter, I will discuss my reflexivity regarding the selection of data collection and interpretation methods for the empirical study outlined in Chapter in the which I will now discuss Through critical reflection as well as through an overview of my own positionality,

Methodological Considerations for Critical Feminist Research

There are key methodological considerations in critical feminist research. Wigginton and Lafrance (2019) outline 5 crucial features of conducting critical feminist scholarship (Table 1): 1. The politics of asking questions; 2. Attention to language/discourse; 3. Reflexivity; 4. Representation and intersectionality and 5. Mobilizing research for social change. In the following section, I will utilize “disciplined self-reflection” to discuss some of these considerations and in which ways they showed up in my study and during my overall doctoral work.

Reflexivity & Positionality

Reflexivity and positionality play pivotal roles in challenging colonialist-infused research methodologies. Reflexive practice involves consciously reflecting on one's identity and assumptions throughout the research, whereas positionality requires an awareness of personal biographies shaping research choices (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020). Furthermore, emphasizing critical reflexivity in scientific practice involves questioning one's assumptions throughout the research process, fostering a continual critical consciousness (Finlay, 2002; Lunn et al., 2017). Despite the importance of these

aspects, there remains a relative lack of discussion on ethical issues, positionality, and reflexivity in research publications. When accounts of reflexive processes are either non-existent or left out of research publications, there is no guarantee that academic researchers have taken care to fully explore who they are, how they understand the people they collaborate with, and how they ensure that issues relating to power, racism and discrimination across other variables that are not influencing the research process (Ahmad, 2018). My own reflexivity and positionality, as will be discussed through my life history, has impacted the types of research questions that I have asked throughout my doctoral work, and these questions of interest were asked for a reason, with certain assumptions (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

In 1996, my parents, younger brother, and I immigrated from Karachi, Pakistan to Toronto, Canada, during a period of significant immigration. Our initial plan was to stay in Canada just long enough for our visas to be processed before returning “home.” However, due to financial constraints and family dynamics in Pakistan, Canada became our permanent home the following year, and my parents were unable to return to their homeland.

During my childhood, I was often described (not always endearingly) as “highly sensitive” and quick to cry, as well as “chronically shy, observant, and quiet.” One story my parents love to recount is how, when I was around 4 or 5 years old, they took me to a pediatrician in Karachi to have my voice box examined, concerned about my lack of speech and expression. To their surprise (and mine), I began to come out of my shell in Grade 7. I won a public speaking contest in my class and later joined a Toastmasters club in high school, thanks largely to the encouragement of my French teacher, with

whom I still stay in touch. I engaged in improv, debate, and public speaking competitions across Ontario. My parents supported this newfound skill wholeheartedly; my father drove me to numerous competitions, cheering me on and celebrating my achievements, whether I received medals for top three placements or certificates of participation.

I know now that I might be somewhat of an empath (at least according to my Pastoral Counselling classes and the personality tools that we used). In the context of this research, however, this empathetic quality emerged as a strength. I approached research participants with an open heart, allowing myself to be genuinely affected by their stories, leading to a transformative experience for me, one that I am thankful for.

Additionally, my personal journey as a visibly Muslim individual has profoundly shaped this thesis. I began wearing the hijab in Grade 7 with the intention of keeping it for life. However, after the life-altering 9/11 attacks the following year, and our move to Oklahoma, my parents and uncle, concerned for my safety, asked me to remove it at the start of my 8th grade year. In a predominantly white school, where students were surprised by my appearance, at least two peers touched my hair, remarking that they had never seen "dark colored hair" before. Due to safety concerns related to my father's business, we moved back to Toronto when I was 14. There, in a more diverse, predominantly brown-skinned, and brown-eyed school, I happily resumed wearing my hijab, which I have continued to do ever since.

During my time as a visible Muslim, I faced various forms of Islamophobia, including gendered Islamophobia. I frequently encountered stares, whispers, and the occasional "go back where you came from" and "do you shower with that thing on your

head?” remarks. More recently, I've witnessed anti-Palestinian racism, which intersects with Islamophobia, anti-Arab racism, and aims to silence, erase, and dehumanize Palestinians and their allies. This form of racism intersects with colonialism, sexism, xenophobia, and cultural appropriation, seeking to justify and normalize Palestinian dispossession and oppression while isolating diaspora Palestinians and discouraging advocacy for Palestinian liberation.

These experiences of racism and the broader climate of hostility significantly impacted both my mental well-being and that of the Muslim community. While writing my dissertation, the constant barrage of anti-Palestinian sentiment and its intersection with various forms of discrimination added layers of emotional and psychological strain. This environment not only affected my own mental health but also contributed to a collective sense of anxiety and disillusionment within the Muslim community. Navigating these challenges while striving to contribute meaningfully to the academic discourse was a deeply taxing experience, underscoring the urgent need for support and resilience in the face of such adversity. Throughout my upbringing, I experienced concern from community members, friends, and acquaintances regarding my academic choices, as I pursued an undergraduate degree in Psychology followed by a Master's in Neuroscience within a non-medical stream. Remarks like “What will you do with research?” “You’ll become a psycho and lose your religion,” or “Don’t study too much or it will be hard to get married” were common. However, as I continued working in the mental health field, raising young children, and receiving support from my family, these comments gradually diminished.

Interestingly, I felt a strong need to balance my personal, spiritual, and academic life to avoid being labeled as a “tradition-hating career woman,” “Muslim apologist,” or “progressive feminist.” This pressure also came with the expectation of being a role model for young girls in the community pursuing higher education. Despite these labels, I remained committed to my faith and family values while integrating a data-driven, evidence-based approach to my work. In this process, I discovered a rich blend of nuance and creativity. Although this is a qualitative dissertation, I am acutely aware of my strong quantitative biases based on my earlier educational experiences as well as well-meaning questions from family and friends about how the I am doing a scientific study looking at factors like religion, spirituality, mental well-being and using interviews as a data collection method and words to analyze data. The choice to use what might be considered “highly positivist” terms in a qualitative dissertation is indeed a reflection of my academic journey and personal experiences. My earlier education was heavily rooted in quantitative research methods, where data-driven, evidence-based approaches were emphasized. This background has inevitably influenced my thinking and language (in enriching ways, I hope!), even as I transitioned into qualitative research. These terms reflect my view that qualitative research, though different in both methodology and purpose, is by no means less rigorous and systematic in nature than quantitative research. My faith and commitment to family values match my dedication to diligence and integrity in research, irrespective of the method. In integrating these approaches, I have discovered a research practice where nuance, creativity, and systematic analysis can all coexist, allowing me to honor both my quantitative training and my qualitative inquiry.

In essence, my language choice reflects an ongoing journey to bridge these two paradigms, recognizing that qualitative research can also be rigorous, systematic, and evidence-based, albeit in different ways than quantitative research. This intersection allows me to explore complex human experiences with the depth and sensitivity they require, while still maintaining a respect for the systematic nature of inquiry that my background has instilled in me.

I received my formal Qur'ānic studies at Al Huda Institute. Prior to this, I went to an afterschool *Madrassah* like many other school aged children, to learn the basics of reading the Qur'ān, memorizing *duas* (invocations), learning how to pray 5 times a day, and having the occasional pizza party on Islamic holidays. I remember being curious as a child, and thankfully had parents and teachers in my early Islamic education who held space for questions even though they did not always have the answers.

Through the *Ta'leem ul Qur'ān* diploma course at Al Huda Institute, I was able to have all my questions answered in a satisfactory way (until new questions emerged). I felt my convictions as a Muslim woman also grow during my time studying and deeply reflecting on the Qur'ān full-time for almost two years with other women. My very first (and thankfully, well-received) psychoeducational workshops were also held at Al Huda Institute, and I also completed my Level I pastoral counselling training within its premises, offering Islamically-integrated psychotherapy. Not surprisingly, Al Huda Institute was a cornerstone in shaping my Muslim identity, graduating from the course and the pursuing graduate studies, and returning with this doctoral study felt like a full circle moment, something peaceful, like returning home and being welcomed by open arms.

Community Engagement & Research

Throughout the past decade, my work as a community advocate and researcher has remained intimately tied to my commitment to varied individual needs in Muslim communities. Workshop and talk involvement for me serves not only as an avenue for knowledge dissemination but also as a venue for important research interests and methods. The workshops I have led range from mental health stigma among members of Muslim communities to support in addiction recovery. Each session is proof that bringing people together in community-driven initiatives really matters for overall wellness.

One of the most important workshops, "Prophetic Parenting," in collaboration with Darul Iman and Khalil Centre, included religious knowledge combined with psychological research into the challenges of raising resilient children with exemplary character. The search for parenting strategies via an Islamic perspective aims to empower parents with pragmatic tools while salvaging the cultural and religious fabric of their upbringing. The workshops "Social Media & Family Connection" and "Using Art in Therapy" also focused on how current issues interact with traditional ways of coping. The interactive nature of the session allowed the participants to experience a new approach to strengthening family bonding and resilience to different mental health disorders. My participation in workshops on specific demographics, such as "Mental Health in Muslim Women" and "Seniors Healthy Active Living," brought forth the need for tailored interventions regarding unique experiences and needs for various members

within society. Such sessions, which created a safe and open environment for discussion, had allowed sharing and solidarity among participants.

Clearly, these community engagements could not have failed to influence my research trajectory. Each workshop represented a microcosm of experiences that offered unique insight into how human behavior and social dynamics work. Delving through anxiety management sessions to career development, I found myself increasingly drawn toward research methods at the level of the community that emphasize collaboration and participation. Further, being a panelist and facilitator at career fairs and academic conferences did reinforce the community engagement-scholarly pursuits reciprocal relationship. By narrowing the gap between theory and practice, I was able to contextualize academic discourse within the lived realities of people who sought guidance and support.

In other words, my community-based engagement process has not only contributed to the evolvement of my research interests but also instilled meaning and relevance within the work. Within my faith-based framework, I am called to be present for the issues, struggles, and wins of my community, as well as humanity at large. While attending doctoral studies, I was not directly involved in activism regarding the global issues that kept cropping up, such as the Syrian refugee crisis and the war on Gaza, to name but a few. I did try community education and mental health education as my really meager way of making a difference in a sincere and consistent manner. The two Prophetic traditions that shaped this portion of my community-based research included: "Ibn Umar reported: The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "The most beloved people to Allah are those who are most beneficial to people. The most beloved

deed to Allah is to make a Muslim happy, or remove one of his troubles, or forgive his debt, or feed his hunger. That I walk with a brother regarding a need is more beloved to me than that I seclude myself in this mosque of Medina for a month" al-Mu'jam al-Awsat lil-Ṭabarānī 6026 Grade: Sahih according to Al-Albani.

On the authority of Abu Sa`eed al-Khudree - may Allah be pleased with him - who said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon Him) say, "Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart and that is the weakest of faith" (An-Nawawi, 1999). I remain committed to forging a path of knowledge at the intersection of academia and activism-one that is academically rigorous with much potential for social impact-and fostered by the tenets of empathy, inclusivity, and cultural humility.

The writing process of this dissertation has been influenced by stages in my life: from reading articles while nursing my son, to attending lab meetings with my daughter playing in the background, searching out different coffee shops to go sit and think and write, working on it in all settings imaginable, including a plane, before, during, and after family gatherings, through health and sickness, preparation of food, taking family members to appointments, integrating research and critical thinking into our home-schooling, and watching my father-in-law get diagnosed with supranuclear palsy.

Ethics

My faith based, social-critical framework also informs the types of procedural and practice ethics that I should be mindful of for my study (i& Gillam, 2004). One such consideration includes the relationship Muslim communities have with researchers. The

post-9/11 social climate has changed drastically for Muslim communities in Canada, due to an increase in acts of Islamophobia and surveillance policies targeting mosques. Therefore, there may be a mistrust of government funded, health-related research “owing to a history of research abuses and disenfranchisement” (Killawi et al., p.2,2015).

In further thinking reflexively about ethics in practice, the concept of “fuzzy boundaries” comes up (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Within the communities I work with, I have had multiple positions, and I am thus identified through several roles: teacher, volunteer, workshop coordinator and pastoral counsellor. I provided free therapy to Al Huda Institute staff and students for two years during my time as a trainee in pastoral counselling. Therefore, the boundaries of my role and purpose in relation to the research risked becoming distorted, and during a research interview, there were some unanticipated disclosures by participants (Liamputtong, 2011), such as of certain mental diagnoses or personal family problems. Although I remained empathetic and validated the struggles of such participants, I continued to work on shedding the 'therapist' skin, at least during my time as a researcher (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) and would frequently bring the conversation back to the research study.

Finally, I anticipated several ethically important moments and mapped out different scenarios. One such interaction was when university-going participants asked me for a reference letter for a graduate program they were interested in, because they wanted to 'be like me' and do Muslim mental health research. In this case, I was not in a dilemma per se; rather, the decision on how to proceed could have had either positive or negative ramifications for the participant, as well as the community members (Guillemin

& Gillam, 2004). As a starting point, I paused and asked myself: What was my role here?"

Methodological Choices

Several aspects of my methodology were shaped by the theoretical frameworks I applied in this work. For example, I chose to conduct 1-hour long in-depth qualitative interviews to give participants time and space to respond to questions, to reflect alongside the researcher, and to revise any responses or go back to a question. However, I also asked participants to select and share an artifact that represented their personal journeys with faith, formalized Islamic education and mental well-being. This was especially important (and appreciated) by participants whose first language was not English, and who were able to use a more concrete visual cue to better represent their ideas and experiences.

Taking inspiration from Jasmine Zine's (2001) work on Muslim praxis, the research interviews followed feminist interviewing principles. I ensured interviewees had control over the process, a crucial aspect when interviewing minority or marginalized communities. I met them at chosen times and locations, affirmed their right to skip questions or end the interview, and utilized feminist practices to minimize power dynamics and disclose my own experience as a survivor of Islamophobic violence. Ensuring a non-judgmental environment, I paid attention to non-verbal cues, paused if participants seemed upset, and provided contact information for a Muslim feminist support network at the interview's end.

Engaging Muslim feminist praxis, I created a space for faith-based reasoning, acknowledging the validity of faith and spirituality in shaping worldviews, beliefs, and

practices (Zine, 2004). Welcoming the use of faith-centered language, I mirrored participants' references to Qur'ānic verses or Islamic concepts, fostering a sense of trust and immediate 'sisterhood' due to my visible Muslim identity.

Finally, in navigating the application of critical standpoint feminism to the study of Muslim women's mental health, it is crucial to strike a balance between recognizing the specificity of their experiences and avoiding the imposition of essentialized narratives that could obscure the rich diversity within this demographic. By addressing these considerations, researchers can harness the insights offered by critical standpoint feminism while remaining attentive to its limitations to contribute meaningfully to both feminist scholarship and mental health discourse. As Smith (1992) articulated, while working on her sociological theories:

“...sociology claims to speak of the same lived world I inhabited with my children and yet somehow I could not find the world I knew at home with my children in the texts of sociological discourse. The sociologies and psychologies I had learned were not capable of speaking of what I knew as a matter of my life” (p. 157) (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

I am drawn to this quote as a mother of two young children myself, in that many of the early childhood developmental and other psychological theories, and research studies conducted on families are not a reflection of what I experience at home every day with an 8-year-old and a 3-year-old as we navigate homeschooling, house chores, extended family responsibilities, the ever burgeoning pressure to enrol young children in extra-curricular activities and sports and of course having “mommy me-time”.

Finally, I employed a participant-centered approach during the semi-structured interviews, giving participants ample time to share their thoughts, even if it meant exceeding the proposed time limit. I also provided breaks if participants needed time for prayer or to attend to a young child. Feminist Standpoint Theory highlights the importance of recognizing and prioritizing the experiences of marginalized groups. By adopting this approach in the interviews, I ensured that participants had the opportunity to fully express their perspectives and that their voices were heard.

Connection between Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology

Feminist standpoint theory and Orientalism shaped my approach to semi-structured interviews and artifact elicitation, particularly in examining how faith, formalized Qur'ān education, and a sense of belonging influence identity and mental well-being (see Chapters 2 and 3). First, Standpoint feminist theory, posits that individuals situated within a particular social location, in this case Muslim women engaging in faith-based activities in a female-centric safe space, possess unique insights that can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of empowerment. The research questions were also framed to capture the diverse perspectives of women actively engaged in studying the Qur'ān, as it recognizes that the participants hold valuable insights into the community dynamics and their individual interpretations of empowerment. This question expands the inquiry to investigate the broader impacts of Qur'ān study on women's well-being. It considers the spiritual, psychological, and family dimensions, acknowledging that women's perspectives on empowerment encompass multifaceted aspects of their lives.

Orientalism as a theoretical framework shapes the research questions by highlighting the influence of cultural representations and biases in constructing knowledge about the East, including Muslim women and their empowerment. For example, the question regarding perceptions of empowerment, is shaped by Orientalism as it seeks to explore how Muslim women within the Al Huda Institute navigate and respond to external representations and stereotypes regarding women's empowerment within their community.

In summary, Orientalism as a theoretical framework shapes these questions by emphasizing the impact of external cultural narratives and biases on the conceptualization and interpretation of women's empowerment within an Islamic context. It prompts a critical examination of how Western perspectives may influence the understanding of empowerment in Muslim communities.

Artifact Elicitation

Feminist standpoint theory encourages an exploration of knowledge rooted in the lived experiences of women. Analyzing artifacts, in this context, becomes a method for participants to represent their personal journeys visually and narratively, adding depth to their stories. Moreover, participants bringing artifacts that represent their personal Qur'ān study journeys aligns with Feminist standpoint theory by giving them a platform to articulate their unique experiences. It allows for a more holistic understanding of the impact of faith and Qur'ān education on their identity and well-being. By incorporating artifact elicitation, I hoped to provide a tangible means for participants to challenge underlying assumptions. This method allowed participants to present a narrative counter

to potential external biases, fostering a deeper understanding of their personal experiences with faith and Qur'ānic education (Alghamdi, 2020).

As Said explains, Orientalism is “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (Said, 1978, p. 3). Orientalism has shaped our paradigms towards the region and the peoples of the Arab. A distorted view of the Arab world has been created in a way to fit within this Orientalist paradigm; these misrepresentations may romanticize the region, demonize its people, or otherwise create a distorted depiction of reality. Orientalism produces images, stories, and political discourses, which shape the geopolitical policy directions that countries take. These misrepresentations often serve as justification for Euro-American military and neo-imperialist interventions in the region. Therefore, we must critically analyse the discourse of Orientalism to rectify these misrepresentations and the adverse political choices they inspire.

Reflexivity in Data Interpretation: Chosen Analysis and Themes

By committing to reflexivity as a process across the research process, and not just prior to or after a certain constituent part of the study, I continued with reflexive practices, more appropriately, keeping reflexive journals once interviews with participants were complete in order to transcribe the transcripts and, finally, interpret data. This journaling included my immediate emotions, thoughts and impressions of myself and the participant after each interview, my reasons for undertaking the research and the framing of certain questions, assumptions about gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, my position in the power hierarchy of the research itself

as well as my personal faith-based value system (Hanson, 1994). For this reflexive exercise, I followed two tools: 1. Cultural Integrity, and 2. Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer (2012) use the term cultural integrity to describe researchers building cultural trust by respecting participants' cultural values. The connection between methodology and culture is often overlooked, raising concerns about whether studies conducted by researchers lacking cultural knowledge meet standards of cultural integrity. The challenge arises from the fact that criteria effective in one cultural setting may not be easily transferable to another, necessitating adaptation. Particularly, the researcher's difficulty in developing a culturally nuanced approach, especially without a grasp of local sociocultural and political values, poses a significant threat to achieving cultural integrity.

I was mindful of cultural integrity because of my perhaps too close connection to my participants – over half of the participants in this study were also Pakistani immigrants from middle class families, in addition to being former colleagues and peers. Therefore, a certain level of trust had been established. However, I did become worried when I would catch myself saying things like “Yes, I totally get what you mean, sister!” instead of providing space and time to the participants to express their unique standpoint on a shared experience. Overall, I was able to use my knowledge of the culture of Al Huda Institute as well as the socio-cultural nuances of being a first-generation immigrant from Pakistan to delve deeper into certain topics like religious expectations, managing parental expectations, as well as navigating one’s identity as a Canadian-Muslim-woman of colour.

With regards to the method of coding, conceptualizing categories and analyzing themes, I considered utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis, which they describe as independent of theory and epistemology (Campbell et al., 2021). I was drawn to thematic analysis which involves identifying patterns in the data and grouping them into themes or codes, which are then used to analyze the material. This method recognizes that the whole can only be understood by studying its parts, but the parts can only be comprehended in relation to the whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke have categorized different types of thematic analyses. These would include: (1) reflexive thematic analysis, which takes an organic approach to analysis and is classified as Big Q thematic analysis; (2) codebook thematic analysis, which uses a structured coding process for analysis and is referred to as medium Q thematic analysis; and (3) coding reliability thematic analysis, which emphasizes reliability and accuracy of the coding and is classified as small q thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Although I was not adhering to a specific theory, I decided on a faith-based epistemology so as to understand mental health and the history of mental health across Muslim communities. I then narrowed down to reflexive thematic analysis because this approach gives the researcher the freedom to decide what the outcome and focus of the work are, rather than being confined by a specific theoretical approach.

In addition to my theoretical approaches, I decided on a faith-based epistemology for understanding mental health and the history of mental health within Muslim communities. I focused on reflexive thematic analysis because it allows the researcher to determine the outcome and focus of the work as opposed to being bound to a specific theoretical framework. The flexibility of reflexive thematic analysis stems not

only from its applicability to a range of theory and epistemologies, but also from the possible choices made available to the researcher within the approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These choices require the researcher to make some key decisions related to what counts as a theme, as well as the type, approach, and level of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Reflecting on the chosen analysis and themes, two undergraduate researchers (A.K.), and (D.R.) collaborated with me on coding the data. and I decided on themes based on their recurrence across the data set. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended assessing the “keyness” of a theme, as well as how prevalent it is within the text (i.e., the ability of the theme to capture what is important considering the research question) and applying the same criteria consistently across the data). My team and I were cautious not to equate higher mentions with theme importance, evaluating their *keyness* in addressing the overall research question. Our reflection extended to the choice between an inductive or theoretical approach, considering whether themes should be derived directly from the data or align with a priori theoretical interests. Additionally, we deliberated on identifying semantic (descriptive) or latent (interpretive) themes, recognizing that thematic analysis typically focuses on one level but opting to consider both in our applied qualitative health research. Providing a robust description of the analytic process, aligned with theoretical and methodological literature on thematic analysis, became crucial in ensuring clarity (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The subsequent phase involved familiarizing ourselves with the dataset through immersion, aiming to comprehend the depth and breadth of the content. In group discussions, our reflexive dialogue expanded, exploring power dynamics and privilege

in our reading. The research assistants and I continued to discuss and debate their understanding of the data set as we commenced the reflexive thematic analysis process, reading and re-reading transcripts individually for an overall sense of the data before collaborative coding.

Example of Reflexivity in Action: Uncertainty and Fear During Data Collection

I will now present an excerpt from one of the participants that was exported from the much larger dataset regarding her appreciation during data collection. Below the quote are some of the memos that I wrote down during this interview, and especially after this comment, as a “halfie researcher”, a concept used by Binaya Subed (2006), to theorize how one can be open about their identities yet also be complicit in the research process.

Throughout some of the interviews, participants felt the pressure to give me a “good answer” or were feeling uncertain about the accuracy of their responses:

One thing is that like in Qur’ān I don’t remember the [17:21 inaudible], but it says the Qur’ān is the book which gives peace to your hearts...one is the inner peace we get only with the recitation. And then one step ahead. If we start understanding what the Qur’ān says, we get answers for our questions, like our everyday daily routine questions (Participant 6).

Researcher KQ Memo 1: But I am just a “halfie researcher.” So, according to one study that I had come across, the term ‘halfie’ is handy when it comes to talking about researchers who have a mix of national or cultural identities due to things like moving around, studying overseas, or having parents from different places. The women at Al-Huda are mostly women with a Pakistani background, and they see themselves as

part of the educated urban crowd in Pakistani communities and beyond. Because they share the same class, culture, ethnicity, and gender as the Al-Huda followers, I feel like they're insiders giving us the lowdown on what's going on.

Research KQ Memo 2: I hope that I can offer a unique perspective into the Al Huda experience as a long-term member of the community before pursuing research. I hope they still trust me...I feel like I am just gazing or peering into their lives just because I have a signature on a consent form.

In conclusion, reflexivity and positionality are essential components of my research, serving to challenge and deconstruct colonialist-infused methodologies. By continuously reflecting on my identity and how my personal history—shaped by my experiences as an immigrant from Karachi, Pakistan, and my journey as a visibly Muslim individual—has influenced my research, I have been able to approach this work with a deeper level of empathy and awareness. These reflections have not only shaped the research questions I pursued but also allowed me to navigate the complexities of power, ethnicity, and identity with a critical consciousness. This personal journey has been transformative, underscoring the importance of bringing one's full self into the research process to foster a more nuanced and authentic understanding of the subjects at hand. I have discussed the theoretical frameworks that underpin my research, focusing on critical feminist and post-modern perspectives. These frameworks serve as the foundation for understanding how Muslim women at Al Huda Institute perceive and experience well-being and identity through their engagement with the Qur'ān. Moving forward, the next chapter will delve into the methodology and reflexivity that shaped my research process. I will explore how diverse qualitative approaches were employed to

address evolving research questions, and I will reflect on the ethical considerations, positionality, and the methodological choices that guided my empirical studies. This will include a detailed discussion of how these approaches were applied in the study of Muslim women's perceptions of well-being and identity through recitation, reflection, and reclamation of the Qur'ān.

Chapter 7

Muslim Women's Perceptions and Experiences of Well-Being and Identity at Al Huda Institute through Recitation, Reflection and Reclamation of the Qur'ān

In the previous chapters, I discussed theoretical approaches linked to critical feminist scholarship, orientalism, and Cosmopolitanism. I have also probed and prodded my individual onto-epistemological commitments especially as they relate to my identity as a Muslim woman, and my background in both pastoral counselling and formal Qur'ānic studies.

The current chapter will describe the empirical study conducted within my program of doctoral research. The primary objective of this study was to explore how women at Al Huda Institute, who are deeply committed to learning a traditional interpretation of the Qur'ān, engage with both the word-for-word messages in specific chapters and the Qur'ān's holistic meaning. This research seeks to understand the impact of their interpretations on their perceptions and experiences of mental health, examined through a critical standpoint feminist framework.

A secondary objective is to investigate how women from diverse backgrounds use their understandings of sacred scripture to form close-knit social groups within their ethnicities. The tension between the shared Qur'ānic message that encourages these Muslim "sisters" to connect despite differences in skin color and language, and their inclination to stay within familiar groups, is theorized through a cosmopolitan lens of shared humanity versus alienation (Dan Yon, 2021). Lastly, this study will assess whether and how the study of the Qur'ān fosters cosmopolitan ideals within the Muslim community, particularly among Muslim women.

Background

The Qur'ān, along with the Prophetic Tradition encompassing the teachings, sayings, and tacit approvals of Prophet Muhammad, provides Divine guidance with implications for both men and women, at times delineating distinct regulations for each gender. Scholars within the Islamic tradition emphasize the nuanced difference between fairness and sameness in interpreting these regulations (Khan, Alkiek and Chowdhury, 2019). While principles such as modesty in dress are recommended for individuals of all genders, the specific guidelines related to modest attire recognize the psychological and physiological distinctions in how men and women perceive and approach sexual attraction (Khan et al., 2019). Concurrently, the Prophetic teachings aimed at eradicating pre-Islamic Meccan cultural practices underscore the commitment to gender equality, challenging historical practices like the burial of female infants and the treating of women as property (Khan, Alkiek and Chowdhury, 2019).

However, certain Qur'ānic verses, notably in *Surah Baqarah* (The Chapter of the Cow) and *Surah An Nisa* (The Chapter of the Women), present interpretational challenges. Misunderstandings of these verses, often arising from a lack of Arabic proficiency among non-Arabic speaking clergy or those with limited knowledge of Arabic grammar and syntax, contribute to contentious issues. For example, verses related to inheritance and the testimony of women are susceptible to misinterpretation, with claims that women are granted only half of the inheritance shares of men and that a woman's testimony is considered less credible than a man's within the judicial system (Khan et al., 2019). These interpretations, deeply ingrained within Islamic academic circles for centuries, extend into average Muslim communities, fostering patriarchal family

structures, rigid gender roles, and the marginalization of Muslim women in participatory and leadership roles.

Reinterpretation and reclamation of the Qur'ān by various sects of Islam has a long history (Masoud, Jamal & Nugent, 2016; Mernissi. 1975). Furthermore, an increasing sentiment amongst some Islamic scholars, as well as women's advocacy groups in both the Muslim world and the West, is to reconsider some of the interpretations to the aforementioned verses mentioned in the Qur'ān relating to women, rulings around veiling, and family life (Masoud et al., 2016; Mernissi, 1975). Therefore, it might be meaningful to explore how women at faith-based institutes, who are deeply invested in learning a conservative and classic understanding of the Qur'ān, are interpreting such verses as well as its impact on their perceptions and experiences of empowerment, without a radical re-interpretation of the sacred Arabic text.

Hermeneutics in Re-Interpretation of the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān is the most holy book in Islam and has a central place within the lives of Muslims; meaning, form, and function have been interpreted, adapted, and contested for centuries. The first English translation by Alexander Ross, which was completed in 1649, is radically different from more contemporary translations by Muslims. The Qur'ān is difficult to translate because Arabic carries so many nuances with it; this must be weighed against linguistic accuracy and theological insight. As El-Hussein Aly (2018) comments, these choices of translation support and challenge conventional interpretations and shape the way women in the Qur'an have been represented.

Muslim women have played an active role in engaging with the Qur'ān, challenging traditional norms, and offering alternative perspectives. This also reflects in their notable role in revising existing translations to meet contemporary, gender-inclusive perspectives. Presently, several translators actively employ gender-inclusive language in their revisions, among whom is Laleh Bakhtiar with her *Sublime Qur'ān*. By such processes, they attempt to surmount and counteract patriarchal interpretations that have been used to oppress women.

The reclamation of the Qur'ān by Muslim women as a source of empowerment is evident in the work of scholars such as Fatema Mernissi, who critically analyzed patriarchal biases entrenched in historic commentaries. However, conservative voices hold fast to the view that gender-inclusive translations (without historical context) betray traditional understandings and thus create tension within the Muslim community on matters such as the role of women, modesty, and family dynamics.

In this regard, Rim Hassen (2020) presents the challenges faced by female translators of maintaining gender balance in translations. Their struggles are shaped by social and cultural environments in which they work—a tug-of-war between faithfulness to the original text and a need to take into consideration contemporary gender issues. Egalitarian hermeneutics of the Qur'an uncovers the injustice perpetuated by an interpretation that sidelines women. Interestingly, contemporary feminist scholars view the Qur'ān as an egalitarian text, ahead of its time and one that challenges normative gender roles. For example, in Kecia Ali's work, *"Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'ān, Hadith, and Jurisprudence"* (2006), she critically rethinks the Qur'ānic verses regarding sexuality and gender within a feminist framework, thus

attempting to overturn the more traditional explanations of the same verses. However, Ali also tries to point out some criticisms towards the feminist exegetes-that they are at times as dogmatic in their commitment to equality as the classical exegetes were to male superiority. She tries to strike a balance between respect for the integrity of the Qur'anic text and its historical context, with the interpreter's subjectivities. Also, Ali says it would be wrong to consider the Qur'an a feminist text, as it was revealed within the framework of a patriarchal society. On the other hand, failure or refusal to recognize the Qur'ān's reformist and revolutionary potential would be equally misleading (Abou El Fadl, 2021).

As Abou El Fadl talks about in his work, the interpreter, just like the historian, is moulded by their era, personality, and life experiences, all of which offer hermeneutic tools with which to engage the Qur'ān. An example of this is Amina Wadud's translation, *Qur'ān and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999), which dares to challenge patriarchal understandings and goes on to offer controversial insights into gender roles and women's rights. Therefore, standpoint theory and critical feminist theory offer useful frameworks where processes of knowledge production and interpretation are appreciated considering power and social structure. The work of Barlas, Ali, and other feminist interpreters of the Qur'ān certainly challenges patriarchal renditions and brings new light to the conceptions of gender in Islam.

On the other hand, conservative interpretations-as one sees in the teachings of Dr. Farhat Hashmi-usually reinforce traditional gender roles that can be critiqued from a standpoint and critical feminist perspective. In all, the translation, revision, and reclamation of the Qur'ān by Muslim women reflect changing roles and perspectives

that females have gained within the religion of Islam. Such efforts continue to open up space for more inclusive understandings of the Qur'ān, which resonates with lived realities of Muslim women.

Feminist scholarship must engage in critical concern with these realities beyond mere tokenism if it is to genuinely support and align itself with identities and struggles of Muslim women. A more inclusive understanding of Islamic teachings, regarding ethnicity, religion, and social justice, stems from the differentiations that feminist discourse can produce within Muslim experiences.

Rationale

The feminist discourses on womanhood and femininity theorize within the Western notions of culture and the self, and power between men and women. The Islamic beliefs on female empowerment have only been superficially touched, with preconceived labels and notions such as "the veiled woman", or over-generalized ethnic categories such as "Arab women". For many Muslim women, the practice of specific Islamic teachings, such as personal prayer and invocation of the Prophetic Sunnah, is the foremost outlet in enacting agency through resisting patriarchal values and policies within their religious spaces, including mosques, and other culture-based injustices within their very own families. However, the secularist and often Western-based women's movements are very wary of organized religion or religious traditions on the ground that participation in gender-traditional religious groups-for example, Orthodox Judaism, Catholicism, and conservative streams of Islam-is considered submissive and feeding into misogynistic social powers. The latter ideals reduce to a minimum "the

efforts of those women for whom religious identity is a source of empowerment and their greatest tool in the rectification of gender oppression and misogyny" (Burke, 2012).

Muslim identities in Western countries are complex and multifaceted (Bhimji, 2009; Hutnik & Street, 2010; Verkuyten, 2007). These identities are shaped by various factors, including ethnicity, culture, and religion. Hall and Du Gay (1996) argues that identities emerge within the play of specific modalities of power and are more the product of marking difference and exclusion than a sign of identical unity. Neider (2009) discusses the framing of identity as both a cultural process and a political endeavor, highlighting the constant flux of identities due to the power of others to inscribe meaning.

In the diversity of the Canadian Muslim community, religiosity as part of one's identity plays a large part. Stockemer & Teodoro (2022) assessed the findings from the Environics 2016 Survey of Muslims in Canada, which demonstrated that 84 percent of Canadian Muslims described their religious identity as a "very important" part of their personal identity, and 81 percent indicated that their national (Canadian) identity is a very important part of that identity, showing a positive identification with their lives in Canada (Stockemer & Teodoro, 2022). Recognizing that individuals exhibit multiple intersecting identities, religious identities rank as an important aspect of individual identity for Canadian Muslims (McCoy, Kirova, & Knight, 2016).

Please refer to the Appendix for a comprehensive list of research questions that guided the study, including emergent questions from participant interactions, refining the research focus.

Research Questions:

- A) What is the impact of a formalized Qur'ānic study on the spiritual, psychological, and family well-being of Muslim women?
- B) How do women participating in a formal Qur'ānic educational program perceive and experience empowerment within their community?
- C) How do faith-based activities undertaken within a formal educational program, such as recitation, reflection, and translation of the Qur'ān, influence Muslim women's sense of identity in a gendered and faith-centered community?

For the artifact elicitation, I asked participants the following questions: a) What does the artifact mean to you b) How does this artifact represent mental health to you? and c) In what ways does this artifact represent your experience at Al Huda? For the purposes of this dissertation, identity will refer to the multifaceted and interconnected answer to the question "Who are you?" encompassing personal attributes, social roles, material possessions, and cultural affiliations, shaped through ongoing interactions and self-perceptions within a sociocultural context.

Participant Recruitment & Data Collection

Ethics for conducting a study with human participants was obtained from the York University Research Ethics Board. Participants provided written consent and were recruited online from both campuses of Al Huda, a Qur'ānic study centre: Al Huda Mississauga, and Al Huda Scarborough. Al Huda Institute is a community-based organization, founded by a female Islamic scholar, Dr. Farhat Hashmi, with the vision of "Qur'ān for All, In Every Hand, In Every Heart". Staff and students are trained in formal

Islamic studies and strive to serve humanity by imparting knowledge of the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* (Prophetic tradition).

Although focused primarily on women's education, Al Huda Institute Canada offers a range of classes for men, women, and children, both onsite and online. Programs include full-time and part-time Qur'anic learning, *hadith*, and specialized Islamic studies courses. From time to time, the Institute also hosts career panels, special talks by international scholars and workshops on various topics such as mental health. The women-focused classes such as *Taleem al Qur'an* costs around \$200.00 per month. Other courses are offered for nominal fees, and scholarships and sponsorships of students are also encouraged.

For grounded theory, the recommended sample size ranges from 20-50 (Morse, 1994; Creswell, 2013). Therefore, we aimed to recruit between 30-40 current and former faculty, support staff, students, and alumni (18+, self-identifying as Muslim women) from Al Huda Institute from various ethnicities to obtain representation of Arab, South Asian, and East African participants. Participants were eligible to partake in the study if they have attended Al Huda classes online or in-person for any period. Women who had attended other types of events such as a community workshop or a graduation ceremony of a friend/family member at Al Huda Institute were not eligible. Participants were also required to have an active internet connection and be able to join the interview via a personal device with built-in or external audio/video capabilities (i.e. desktop, laptop, tablet or phone). The interviews were conducted virtually during COVID-19, where social distancing guidelines were still in place in Ontario.

Methodology

Recruitment took place from January 2021 until March 2021, and data collection was completed by March 2021. The study was advertised through word of mouth (from 2020-2021), through informal WhatsApp messages, as well as through formal announcements made in the Live Zoom classes that are held almost daily through Al Huda Institute. Prospective participants were assured that their choice to participate would not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship that they may have with Al Huda Institute. After obtaining consent, I conducted 37 semi-structured individual video interviews with each participant over Zoom. I also conducted one interview over the phone, due to technical difficulties.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour and were scheduled at the convenience of the participants. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Verses from the Qur'ān and commonly understood Arabic terms were kept in their original language. Participants' sociodemographic characteristics were collected at the end of the interview. The participant demographics at the Qur'ānic institute reflect a predominantly (84%) South Asian group, while 16% identified as East African.

The ages of participants range from 23 to 62, with most falling between their late twenties and late thirties. This age span represents a mix of younger women starting their academic and professional journeys, alongside others who are balancing family responsibilities. Marital status among the participants was diverse: 61% are married,

while the rest of the women reported as being single (29%), divorced (8%), or widowed (2%). More than half of the participants (58%) were also mothers.

Participants were provided with a \$10 gift card. Participant demographic information is presented in Table 2. The interview questions are provided in the Appendix. During the semi-structured interviews, I also gathered data using elicited artifacts (Douglas, Jordan, Lande & Bumbaco, 2015). The literature describes several techniques that use artifacts to enhance interviews (Reischauer, 2015). For example, photo elicitation interviews involve asking a few predetermined general questions about the topic, but primarily focus on questions related to the photographs that interviewees bring to the interview (Douglas et al., 2015). Photographs serve to elicit responses and explore different interpretations related to their content. They help to uncover information, feelings, and memories associated with the photographs, bridging various understandings of the topic. This method stimulates latent memories, reduces misunderstandings, and provides more comprehensive accounts of ideas, values, and beliefs, while connecting personal identity to broader societal, cultural, and historical contexts (Douglas et al., 2015).

To better understand how Muslim women at Al Huda perceive and materialize the concepts of mental well-being, empowerment, and identity, I asked participants to share an object that might more concretely represent these ideas. Examples included a favourite pen used for notetaking, a specific course book, the Al Huda uniform-colored hijab, a Post-It note with a personal reflection, a written verse from the Qur'ān, and some form of artwork or calligraphy.

I also drew from the work of Jasmine Zine as I co-created the codebook with my fellow coders (D.) and (A.). Zine theorizes her findings within a critical faith-centered vantage point, which she spells out in terms of seven key principles. Linking her work to that of theorists of anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and post- structural feminism, she examines the way Muslim girls' identities are constructed in response to pervasive Islamophobia in the post-9/11 environment in Canada. These principles are: (1) a principle of holism, that is, spiritual aspects of identity are connected to its physical and intellectual aspects; (2) historically and culturally situated analyses of religion and spirituality must be incorporated into the analysis of social, historical, and personal factors; (3) religious and spiritual worldviews continue to shape social, cultural, and political development today; (4) religion and spirituality should occupy a central place in the academic study of economics, politics, and other disciplines; (5) religious and spiritual identities are sometimes sites of oppression, connected to discrimination based on ethnicity, class, gender, and so on; (6) religion and spirituality can be sites of resistance to injustice; and (7) not all knowledge is socially constructed. Knowledge from divine sources must be incorporated into research and knowledge production of a secular nature.

Data Analysis

Classical grounded theory, as established by Glaser and Strauss (1967), advocates for the development of theory directly from the data, free from the influence of preconceived notions or existing theoretical frameworks. This approach operates under the principle of a "tabula rasa," where the researcher is expected to approach the data collection and analysis without prior knowledge or biases that could shape the

findings. The goal is to allow the data to naturally reveal the emergent theory, ensuring it is grounded entirely in empirical evidence.

In the context of this study, however, such an approach was neither practical nor desirable. My existing familiarity with the substantial body of literature on the intersections of faith, identity, and mental health made it impossible to engage with the data as a blank slate. Attempting to do so would have required an artificial and, frankly, unrealistic suppression of the theoretical insights and empirical knowledge that informed my understanding of the research context. This awareness necessitated a departure from the classical grounded theory approach and led to the adoption of constructivist grounded theory, which is better suited to the epistemological and methodological needs of this study. My rationale for using a grounded theory approach is that it is “most suitable for research where there is little prior knowledge and lacks exploration” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I aimed to generate a framework by identifying inductively analytical categories and themes emerging from the data to understand how Muslim women at Al Huda perceive and experience mental health, through their voices, constructed meanings and multiples realities (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I elicited artifacts using by asking participants: a) What does the artifact mean to you b) How does this artifact represent mental health to you? and c) In what ways does this artifact represent your experience at Al Huda?

Constructivist grounded theory, as articulated by Charmaz (2006), provides a more flexible and reflexive framework that acknowledges the researcher's role in co-constructing meaning with participants. Unlike classical grounded theory, this approach does not require the researcher to disregard prior knowledge; rather, it recognizes that

the researcher's existing understanding and theoretical background contribute to the analytical process. This perspective aligns with the constructivist epistemology, which holds that knowledge is socially constructed and that both the researcher and participants play active roles in shaping the interpretation of the data.

The decision to use constructivist grounded theory was driven by several factors. First, the study's focus on the lived experiences of Muslim women in Canada, particularly in relation to their engagement with Qur'ānic study, required an approach that could accommodate the nuances and complexities of these experiences. Constructivist grounded theory allowed for the integration of existing theoretical frameworks with the emergent data, facilitating a deeper exploration of how these women navigate their faith, identity, and mental well-being in a Western context.

Furthermore, constructivist grounded theory's emphasis on reflexivity was crucial in this research. As someone with a background in the study of faith and mental health, it was important to engage in continuous reflexive practices to critically examine how my prior knowledge influenced the coding and interpretation of the data. This reflexivity ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' lived experiences while being informed by relevant theoretical insights. The choice to move away from classical grounded theory was also influenced by the specific needs and goals of this research. Classical grounded theory's insistence on theoretical neutrality would have constrained the study, limiting its capacity to explore the rich and complex interplay between Qur'ānic learning, identity, and well-being among Muslim women. Moreover, the pre-existing theoretical knowledge I brought to the research was not only unavoidable but also essential in shaping a more informed and nuanced analysis.

By employing constructivist grounded theory, the research was able to balance the incorporation of existing knowledge with the discovery of new insights. This approach facilitated a dynamic interplay between theory and data, where the literature informed the analysis, and the findings, in turn, offered new perspectives that could refine and extend existing theoretical frameworks. This iterative process of theory development was integral to the study's ability to contribute meaningfully to the academic discourse on faith and mental health.

The practical application of constructivist grounded theory in this study involved several key steps. The research team, including myself and two undergraduate coders, engaged in open, axial, and selective coding, followed by the constant comparison method to create and refine core categories. These categories were then abstracted into more comprehensive themes, culminating in the development of a substantive theory that accurately reflected the participants' experiences. Throughout this process, we maintained a flexible approach to data collection and analysis, allowing for the integration of new insights as they emerged. This flexibility was critical in addressing the specific research questions while also remaining open to unexpected findings that enriched the study's overall contribution.

When examining and sorting through the data set, I was guided by the research questions, especially during the initial open-ended questions and creation of the codebook. Grounded theory instills a reiterative process of coding, in which data collection and data analysis happen simultaneously (Walker & Myrick, 2006). Classical scholars of grounded theory state that conducting analysis through grounded theory can be divided into substantive coding, theoretical coding and then development of a robust

theory (Walker & Myrick, 2006). I, along with two other coders, first began with raw or open coding. We decided on coding through meaning units, and coding through context, and when a complete thought was finished instead of line-by-line coding. The analysis primarily followed an inductive approach, coding themes as they emerged in the transcripts, but also incorporated themes already identified in literature through a deductive approach. The goal was to capture new themes while also understanding how women's experiences relate to existing factors in the literature.

An important point to note here is that questions related to identity were kept open. For example, participants were not asked to describe whether their behavioural, social or any other form of identity was impacted by studying the Qur'ān. Rather the word identity was kept as open as possible, allowing participants to define identity from their perspective.

Phase I - Open Coding

We first conducted open coding which involved breaking down and analyzing specific quotes and patterns in the data (Sebastian, 2019). This process generated various common themes, which were eventually grouped into categories (Sebastian, 2019).

My research assistants and I started off by conducting open coding independently on the first ten transcripts. This was done using three methods: (a) coding within the margins of hard copies of transcripts, (b) coding electronic versions in Microsoft Word, and (c) coding in a memoing journal. These methods were used interchangeably, depending on the need to physically mark up the text, and to better

visualize emerging patterns between codes. Figure 3 represents the initial open codes through a code cloud, generated in Dedoose.

After a couple of weeks, I met with the research assistants to discuss the codes, addressing any differences in how we selected the codes, and clarify any questions before creating a finalized codebook. The codebook included several codes, their definitions, as well as participant quotes that served as examples for each code definition.

I then randomly assigned five transcripts to myself and two research assistants. We independently tested the codebook using consensus coding, identifying any confusion regarding code definitions, child codes, and how codes were being interpreted. As a last step, we conducted split coding, by coding the rest of the transcripts through dividing the remaining transcripts among ourselves (Richards & Hemphill, 2019).

Phase II – Axial Coding

After completing open coding of all the transcripts and becoming more familiar with the data, we then continued with axial coding, in which we connected the concepts into larger and more focused categories (Simmons, 2010). My research assistants and I moved between open coding and axial coding many times before moving onto selective and substantive coding, which allowed for more abstraction of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Participant descriptions and choice of words, such as health, resilience and healing were related to the code “Qur’ān and Well-being”. This code was then related to

four other axial codes. These included 1. Spirituality, 2. Women's Identity, 3. Peer Support and 4. Empowerment (Figure 4).

Phase III – Theoretical Coding

Once we had reached saturation with substantive coding, we continued with theoretical coding. Theoretical coding happened at the conceptual level and required integration of substantive codes, and through a constant comparative method, drawing connections between patterns, and developing them into a theoretical framework. At times, codes were also compared to data to see how well they matched, as well as to see if a lower-order or child code could fit neatly under a higher-order code or be a stand-alone code. Memos during the theoretical coding process allowed me to construct three primary conceptual categories:

1. Qur'ānic Learning, Spirituality and Mental Well-Being: In this category, we conceptualized participant quotes and codes that demonstrated the interconnectedness between the Qur'ān (Islamic law, stories in the Qur'ān, metaphors, imagery and lessons drawn) and its influence on the mental well-being of Muslim women, including coping during the COVID pandemic.

2. Qur'ānic Learning and Identity: This code explored how Muslim women perceive and reconcile the teachings of the Qur'ān with feminist ideologies, shedding light on the intersection of Islamic beliefs and gender equity in the context of mental well-being.

3. Qur'ānic Learning and Peer Support: In this code, themes were connected relating to how diverse groups of Muslim women converge for the purpose of learning their faith, and in the process providing and receiving mutual support. Themes relating

to how participants navigated their personal and spiritual journeys together were also included in this category.

Phase IV – Selective Codes and Conceptual Categories

After completing first-order, second order, and axial coding, we carried out theoretical coding to conceptualize the primary emerging themes. These higher-order themes provided a deeper understanding of the transformative and multifaceted nature of Qur'ānic education, including its spiritual, empowering and identity-affirming aspects and its impact on one's overall well-being. The process involved writing memos, sorting themes, and developing a theoretical outline in a recursive manner.

We used the constant comparative method, as described by Glaser, 2002, to determine the relationship between the categories we were constructing using participant quotes, as well as the emerging themes. The research assistants and I continued to code until we believed that there were no theoretical gaps, and we had reached saturation in coding the responses of our participants.

After much discussion and review of the open coding, the coders agreed to the following three conceptual categories (Table 3). Peer support and empowerment were combined into one concept as the codes were often co-occurring with participants stating that learning the Qur'ān with the support and understanding from other women provided them with resilience and added a unique layer to their religious learnings.

Phase V – Core Category and Development of a Theory

In grounded theory methodology, the core category is the central concept that ties together the selective codes and provides the overarching theme or storyline of the

research (Makri & Neely, 2021). It represents the main phenomenon or process under study. After revising the conceptual categories, and re-engaging with the data (reading through participant codes), the process reached a place of stability, and the findings were articulated as an emergent theory and a potential core category emerged: **"Peace and Empowerment Through Qur'ānic Learning and Spirituality"**.

This core category encompassed and unified several of the given categories (see Table 2) by highlighting how Qur'ānic learning, and spirituality contribute to different forms of empowerment and identity formation, leading to a sense of peace and well-being.

Memo writing and Rigour

Reflexivity is a core practise of qualitative research that demands researchers address their bias and be critical of their positionality by situating themselves within the overall research process. This means acknowledging and understanding their own subjective influences on data collection and interpretation. While positivist paradigms tend to view subjectivity as hindering the search for a single truth, qualitative research values the interplay between researcher and data, which enriches our understanding of human experiences. Although complete objectivity is neither possible nor desirable in qualitative research, reflexive auditing provides a clear narrative of the researchers' role, in the research process.

Throughout the research process, I engaged in memo writing before, during, and after coding sessions (Birks, Chapman & Francis, 2008). Memoing allowed me to have a more nuanced understanding of participant experiences, map my thoughts and beliefs throughout the data collection as well as differentiate between semantic and latent

meanings of the data (Birks et al., 2008). Initially, these memos were free-flowing reflections but gradually evolved into concrete ideas about concepts and their connection with overarching themes. Collaboration with a research assistant from a different religious and cultural background further helped me to address any implicit biases, especially during the creation of the codebook.

To ensure rigour and trustworthiness throughout the data collection and interpretation process, the cultural context of research and knowledge production was carefully considered. Given the positivist views of stakeholders, such as psychiatrists, Muslim physicians, and researchers in the Muslim mental health field who primarily operate within a quantitative paradigm, both procedural ethics and ethics in practice were incorporated. This approach ensured an accurate understanding of participants' experiences.

Interpretative Analysis

Three conceptual categories were derived from the analysis: 1. Qur'ānic Learning and Spirituality; 2. Qur'ānic Learning and Well-Being; 3. Qur'ānic Learning and Identity. These were in turn used to generate a model grounded in the data, exploring how Muslim women students of knowledge make meaning of the Qur'ān, despite a conservative reading of the Qur'ān, in ways that empower them to define empowerment on their own terms, take charge of their mental and spiritual wellness, and overall contribute to their sense of identity as a Muslim women living in Canada.

The following section will outline each conceptual category separately, and will be further divided by themes:

Conceptual Category I: Qur'ān and Spirituality

The link between the Qur'ān and spirituality was the most common code co-occurrence. Participants quotes within this category discussed personal practice of their Islamic faith, conviction within the heart, and the emotional and spiritual connection they had with Allah, particularly as it relates to their understanding of the Scripture.

Understandably, participants felt that even as born Muslims, understanding the Qur'ān in their own language (i.e. primarily English for most participants) was the most intimate experience they have had with the Qur'ān in their lives thus far.

Within this category, the most common sub-codes were “Spirituality and Well-being” and “Spirituality and Religious education”. For the purposes of analysis and interpretation, religion was defined as organized beliefs and practices of a group, including traditions, rituals, doctrines, and ethical codes connecting people to a divine or other supernatural power (Gross & John, 2003). Furthermore, religion encompasses psycho-spiritual actions that individuals go through to find religious truth and meaning in life. While it can be difficult to entirely disentangle religiosity and spirituality, religion tends to be more collective and about adherence to a structured belief system, whereas spirituality is defined more as an individual pursuit of the sacred and meaning making (Koenig et al., 2001). However, defining religiosity is more complicated and due to the diverse nature of religious practices and beliefs, there is no single definition (Tsitsigkos, 2012). Religiosity also reflects the intensity and nature of one's relationship with the Divine, including the ways in which individuals engage with and live out their faith.

Moreover, spirituality has been described as the "search for the sacred" (Pargament 2013), and a journey toward truth (Barber 2012). Spirituality puts

emphasis on individual development, personal peace, and the discovery of transcendent moments (Koenig et al., 2001). The concept of "faith," as discussed in this chapter, is used in its religious sense, referring to a profound belief or trust in someone or something. Faith can manifest as religious faith, personal trust in individuals or institutions, or as a philosophical disposition towards certain beliefs.

For example, one participant suggested, using her personal copy of the Qur'ān as the chosen artifact as a starting point for discussion:

What we say is about this book is that after Qur'ān, it's the most authentic book in our religion and the Qur'ān and Hadith go hand in hand. To understand what Qur'ān is saying we have to understand what Hadith is telling us. So I guess after reading the Qur'ān, after the recitation and the everything, I guess this book is something which even I recommend to my siblings, my friends. The people around me that this book is such a miracle. It's a beautiful book. So I guess that's how it is related for me being a Muslim woman, I guess (Participant 6).

In this regard, the Qur'ān is seen as both a religious text as well as a spiritual exercise; it represents the laws and regulations for Muslims around the world but serves a deep spiritual purpose as well in terms of its prose, recitation, and an immediate connection with God.

The type of religious education must also be taken into consideration and might explain these results. One study observed the differences between Knowledge-based religious education and Faith-based religious education (Katz, 2012). Knowledge-based education includes memorizing the facts about a religion, timelines of historical events and the propagation of a religious system whereas faith-based education in addition, to

the above, also encourages its students to engage in worship and prayer with the use of external examples such as nature or scientific inquiry, as well as follow the commandments of a particular religion (Katz, 2012). The data suggest that it is this type of education that the Muslim women participants in my study experienced during their Qur'ānic experiences that led them to feeling more spiritually inclined as well as grateful for their faith:

And so she would all often use examples from the natural world in the lessons. And I think that's why I really connected with her as a teacher. And I really connected with the Institute and my studies because I was able to connect to like how deeply spiritual she was as a person. And so she often would mention things like the changing of the seasons, reflecting that to the different seasons of a moment's life and how there are going to be times where there is turbulence or there is difficulty and there aren't any fruits. Even in that case, the trees still have their roots and they still, don't lose their identity. Then the changing of the seas, autumn how beautiful the colors are and how a-- springs with color and gives beauty to all that is around him or her. So I guess in terms of wellbeing I've always been connected to like trees and like that nature. And so using the leaf really symbolized, how we can be more grateful (Participant 3).

The women also contrasted this engagement with religious learning and education, with the highly knowledge-based education that they received in childhood or from their families of origin and its impact on their spirituality and even identity as Muslim women:

Okay. So basically, being a Muslim, being born in a Muslim family. So the basic education was obviously from school, through the Islamic studies we learned at school and back home. So that was only the basic education I got. I completed the Qur'ān recitation and memorized some of the surahs and some of the part of the Qur'ān as we do back home. So yeah, basically that was it. Before I came to Al Huda, it was as I mentioned earlier, it was like a very granted kind of thing, which we get from our parents and our forefathers. I didn't see the way I do it now. What Islam is, what being Muslim is. And definitely, I was taking it as granted (Participant 6).

Interestingly, some participants mentioned being Muslim for cultural reasons only and following the ritualistic practices of Islam because “everyone else was doing it”:

“...our family was not always very religiously inclined. I think we kind of took that turn when I was in middle school before we wouldn't even pray and fasting was just kind of more of a cultural thing. And so my mom was kind of that person that changed our family. so she would basically use the dinner table as an example or, she would give her own mini Halakhah and that dinner table talks kind of changed us as a family and throughout her talks, she would just be mentioning how different Āyahs of the Qur'ān and like how they were so full of hope how and there was always light at the end of the tunnel” (Participant 3).

Overall, participants felt an increased sense of spiritual connection to the Qur'ān through exposure to a faith-based system of acquiring knowledge and practicing their faith, leading to an increased appreciation of their faith.

1A) Spirituality & Religious (Qur'ānic) Education

The first thematic sub-code within the Qur'ān and Spirituality conceptual category related to the high correlation between spirituality and formally learning the Qur'ān in a way that was relatable and that provided a personal connection with *Allah* (God). Several participants expressed increased vulnerability and an emotion-focused attachment with Allah during difficult times, thereby increasing them in their emotional strength and optimism:

So, things can be difficult, He'll change them, I can make dua, there are things that I can do. So, identifying as a Muslim, it's a huge part and it gives me the source of strength and it gives me the source of hope... (Participant 24).

In addition, another participant mentioned that during turbulent situations, she can always reach out to God and express her authentic self while invoking for peace and guidance:

I like that when I'm in a stressful situation, I can always like just cry to God, and He'll know why I'm crying. Like, that's something that gives me a lot of like, peace of mind. That and I'm always grateful, like...how we can't imagine a lifestyle as mom and because we can always just turn to God cry and not have to explain anything in detail because He'll know (Participant 16).

Although most participants had basic knowledge of their Islamic faith, acquired through initial religious education at home, this did not lead to a deeper spiritual understanding or an emotional connection to their faith. As one participant mentioned:

Before coming to Al Huda, it was just like learning recitation beforehand with my mom. Other than that, there was not that much learning going on, just learning the basics that you learn at home (Participant 1).

This cursory understanding of the faith also led some participants to feel guilt and shame as they embarked on this newfound knowledge of the Qur'ān:

Oh my God, I didn't know this. We didn't know this...I felt annoyed in the heart; I feel like but I realized, like people having the knowledge, not just in religion, or the other one, even having the knowledge if it did not apply it, it has no value, or it didn't change anybody. That's what I feel, I always felt that application was the main part of the thing. And I love being in the reflection classes and reflecting, that made me the person who I am right now I could feel that because we never have thought of pondering, we've never thought of reflecting (Participant 38).

An important theme that emerged from reflecting on how studying the Qur'ān impacted their spirituality was one of reflecting on the past, perhaps with some shame and guilt. Many participants pointed to the overall culture of studying Islam, especially during childhood growing up “back home” as one that was repressed, mysterious and kept in the dark, whereas the Allah describes the Qur'ān, as Nur, a source of light.

So as I'm taking the classes, I remember my very first lecture of the first chapter of the Qur'ān, Surah Al-Fatiha [trans. The Opening Chapter]. And being a regular Muslim, we know this surah. But never really knew what I meant. Yeah, I remember I'm sitting on my dining table, and I am bawling. I felt like I was not educated enough. And I was just crying because I was like, where was this on my life? It was there, but I never really studied it. So I was actually living independently taking care of myself, paying the rent, I was responsible for everything I was living a proper adult life. And the answers are all there. I think I had a lot of weakness in relationships, like, between people (Participant 35).

Another participant mentioned how learning not only how to recite the Qur'ān (which most Muslim children around the world are expected to do) but also its translation had a beneficial impact on her emotional well-being:

Learning translation kind of affected everything because as said, when I turned to the Qur'ān because I'm down and I can kind of understand what I'm reciting. So that actually does help because not only am I just calming down because of the words or how it sounds is because of translation (Participant 2).

Interestingly, spirituality and faith-based religious education started to go hand in hand for many of the participants in that women started to adorn and decorate their refrigerators, pencil cases, and phones with reminders from the Qur'ān, the verses they were learning and the spiritual impact of these reminders, instead of relegating the Qur'ān or learning to a specific time or place, such as the classroom.

So... in some parts I have sticky notes of the translation where it was hard for me to learn that time. So, like for me to be as a reminder, when I was studying for tests, so I still have it because sometimes I still struggle with those words. So that still reminds me, there'll be like drawings I put sticky notes on the edges of the pages. On like the front cover and the back cover and they'll have like friends stuff written on it too so there's all that (Participant 1).

Other participants felt that their religious Qur'ānic education led to a more collective sense of spirituality with other cultures, faiths, and ways of being and thinking:

And I think that enriches the experience. Somehow I feel that brings this kind of holistic and this kind of tolerance as well, to understand the other, not just kind of force your own kind of understanding upon others, but to see a broader picture.

And I love that Allah says that He created people in such varieties so that you may know each other...I'm taking a course learning about the indigenous people in Turtle Island, in Canada, and it's heavy... but it's beautiful. And I think it's just so beautiful to understand who other people are and learn their perspective and their understanding and how sort of it relates and intersects with your own kind of tradition... (Participant 2).

Interestingly, one participant mentioned that religious education and whether a student can memorize the lesson or not, or their struggle with learning Arabic, should not be an indicator for their spiritual well-being and state:

Oh, it was wonderful. It was deeper. It was harder before but still was when I was learning new words...And I would also say that because I went at Al-Huda in my 30's, it was easier for me to handle the stress. Like, the way Al-Huda curriculum is constructed, it might be very hard for some students who come in with like, zero background on Islamic knowledge. So yeah, and then also some students have developmental delays, either on Autism Spectrum Disorder, so autism spectrum, so it might not be easy...And it's not defining their spirituality. Gotta respect that (Participant 10).

Likewise, another participant noted that studying the Qur'ān in an academic setting enhanced her sense of intelligence and intellectual growth.

Just being in that atmosphere and listening to the Qur'ān and then reading it and then the word-by-word translation helped me as well. Because now when I look back, there are a lot of words in the Qur'ān that as I read, I know that this word means this in English. So, it did affect my well-being very positively it made me

grow as a Muslim woman and kind of broadened my span of knowledge and it helped me to think more, I guess because when you study the Qur'ān it just maybe makes you smarter...now I want to think I want to pursue it more or just continue or become better or just maybe go a level up. So, I think it has opened doors and the person I was before joining this class I'm very changed after finishing this class (Participant 5).

Religious education as mentioned by several participants also resulted in a change in spirituality both in terms of faith as well as outward religiosity and religious garb (donning of the *hijab*, praying regularly). However, sometimes the outward expression of religion by some students and teachers was a source of tension who choose to express their faith in different ways, or stop certain ritualistic acts. For example, one participant summarized her experience as:

I know some of my friends that were in the class, they took off their hijab, they don't identify themselves to be completely Muslim. And this is a few girls, but, they felt it was, so stringent how things were presented. And I guess everyone's experience is different. That wasn't my experience. Because these girls specifically, they didn't pray even before coming to Al Huda. So it feels like their introduction to the faith. And then they were in this [beautiful] bubble... everybody supporting each other..And then when you leave that bubble and you see the real world, and then you think that I cannot meet this ideal, then I must not be good enough (Participant 3). This quote touches on the tension between religious ideals and personal lived experiences, offering a critical lens into how Islamic education—specifically in women-only Qur'ānic settings—can shape, but also sometimes alienate its students.

Other participants, with regards to certain lessons and verses, also described their rigidity which contrasted sharply with the complexity of the “real world” once participants leave the institution. Such a dissonance for some of the women in this study caused them to either become more practising in their faith or leave certain parts of the faith all together.

Finally, several participants experienced the Qur’ān in an entirely different way after learning the translation and context of its verses. They began to look to it for tangible solutions to their problems and life circumstances:

...for me it’s a special book that holds answers to my problem as well. So I had a spiritual connection with this book that whenever I had a problem after school I’d just come home and just open it and make this prayer before opening it...the answer to this problem that I just faced, I would always find an answer...Up till this day I do this, spiritual exercise...sometimes the answers are not what I like sometimes answers what I really like. It’s an honest book (Participant 10).

1B) Islamic Religion vs Muslim Culture

This code identifies instances where participants differentiate between the principles and practices of the Islamic religion and the customs and traditions associated with Muslim culture. It includes discussions on how religious beliefs and practices are distinct from cultural norms, behaviours, and social practices. For the purposes of this dissertation, I am defining religion as a system of beliefs, practices, and ethical values that are a process of revelation (Bonney, 2004). These beliefs and practises that connect individuals with a higher power or a set of spiritual principles, often guiding moral behavior and community belonging (McKay & Whitehouse, 2015). In

contrast, culture is defined as the collective customs, traditions, social norms, language, and shared values that shape and are shaped by the social behavior and identity of a group or society (Bonney, 2004). However, it is important to recognize that often, the line between culture and religion is blurred, as cultural customs are infused with religious significance and religious concepts and environments are woven into the fabric of culture (Abdulla, 2018).

Several participants demonstrated disdain and a negative attitude towards the Muslim culture, especially when it becomes “Islamized” with certain Qur’ānic injunctions, literal interpretations, or an impractical application of Qur’ānic laws without consideration of historical and present-day context. One participant mentioned an example of such a perspective:

I knew there were a lot of cultural perspectives on what the Qur’ān may or may not say. And one of the things that I had heard was that a lot allow women to be beaten. And I was like, what? Come on, that cannot be true. Like, this is, we're talking about God here. I can imagine some saying that, but I cannot imagine God saying that. A second thing that I would say is a lot of Muslim women grow up with many misconceptions about Islam because of the cultural practices where we are coming from different parts of the world, we are raised to be Islam in a very strict, almost in a very demeaning manner that disparages women (Participant 7).

In addition to the discussions on the influence of cultural context on religious interpretation and practice, especially around women’s rights, several participants felt that learning the Qur’ān provided them with the freedom to set healthy boundaries,

promoted self-development as a Muslim woman in terms of their wellness and mental health, and to not succumb to the pressures of their respective communities, especially if they were following the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* and not cultural practices. For example, one participant mentioned:

So it's very interesting because I think that we're fed with a lot of culture in our upbringings. And it's very much mixed to religion. And so there's a lot of theories or ideologies or values even that we carry...However, when I came through what I learned through my studies of the Qur'ān was that a lot of that was not true. So I actually learned the pure religion that it was not construed by people's expectations or wishes. So I learned to take care of myself. And I've learned to set boundaries for myself and I've learned to be stronger in so many different realms, and not to feel the guilt that my community would put on me (Participant 2).

Conceptual Category II: Qur'ān and Well-Being

This code refers to the interconnectedness between the Qur'ān (including Islamic scripture, Islamic law, stories in the Qur'ān, metaphors, imagery, and its lessons) and its influence on the mental well-being of Muslim women, particularly in terms of coping during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were first asked to define what well-being meant to them. Interestingly, one participant linked her well-being to her newfound Canadian identity. She felt that this identity gave her a sense of purpose, which she then wanted to share with others in her community:

My identity would be recognized. Especially from, because from India...Muslim women who was living in Canada...even my kids would ask, "Did you have any

goals?" We were like, what [are] goals? We were like, goal was only to finish the studies and get married and go, right. Well-being means to me is like, in every area, being like, educated, in wealth wise, health wise, whatever the greater part of Canada, that is giving us all of these things, the wellbeing is very important as of my identity from there, to this part of the world we moved, why? There should be reasoning, that should be that. Allah chose us to be here to do something so well- being is like, even giving back to the community, what I got, it's all like mixture of everything means to me, because of my identity, especially, because I was given this chance, which I would have never been able to do that if I was in India...(Participant 12).

Many participants described well-being as a sense of peace, and included physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of good health:

I define well-being as peace to have peace of mind, feel content to feel safe physically and emotionally. And I define peace as not that it's the absence of difficulty or the absence of pain or the absence of suffering, but peace in knowing what my purpose is peace in knowing that there is a higher power who's looking after me or that whatever that I'm experiencing has meant it's meant to be good for me and that I will come out of it. And contentment and just having lots of gratitude feeling that there are a lot of blessings in my life that I am privileged by whatever the law has given me, and that helps me stay positive (Participant 7).

Moreover, several participants described well-being as a general measure of overall health, and taking care of one's body as a form worship:

Well-being so I guess... If I'm healthy is that you can worship. So, just being healthy, being happy and you have family, you're surrounded by people that love you I think that's a form of well-being (Participant 5).

In addition, several participants mentioned the link between their faith, the Qur'ān and coping with stressful life circumstances:

I like that when I'm in a stressful situation, I can always like just cry to God, and he'll know why I'm crying. Like, that's something that gives me a lot of like, peace of mind. That and I'm always grateful, like, I'm glad I was born was like, I always say that to my friends, too. We're always like talking about that. How we can't imagine a lifestyle as mom and because we can always just turn to God cry and not have to explain anything in detail because He'll know (Participant 31).

Similarly, participants portrayed a close connection to God as a source of comfort during difficult situations which affected their sense of well-being:

The faith. It touches my well-being because just feeling that I have my Lord to cover me. Whatever I'm going through, just makes me feel better, as if a burden is taken out of my shoulder. I don't I can't imagine not knowing that I don't have somebody to cover me or to hold on to how my life would be (Participant 29).

Another significant aspect of well-being was the ability to recite, understand the reflect on the Qur'ān, to mitigate feelings of sadness:

So I think, for me, I rely heavily on the Qur'ān in those times. So sometimes when I'm just feeling really down or just upset I looking at the Qur'ān and just reading over the Qur'ān and the fact that I'm able to understand the verses, it helps me to really uplift you, because it's almost like a message that I'm being

given. And the fact that it's coming from my Lord, it's more powerful, and it's more impactful for me (Participant 15).

Although not a common sentiment, one participant depicted her connection with the Qur'ān as replacing medical intervention for her depression:

Yeah, I didn't, because I actually came in just thinking I want to say the Qur'ān because it's something that I should know, it's an obligation I need to live by the Qur'ān, but I didn't make that connection that is actually going to alleviate my depression and help with the symptoms. Because I know, if I had gone to the doctor, they would have put me on antidepressants. And while there's nothing wrong with that, some people do need that. But the fact that I was, it almost acted like spiritual medical intervention for me (Participant 15).

In a more vulnerable example, one participant mentioned:

I would say that studying the Qur'ān has helped my well-being in some ways. But just a disclaimer, I wasn't the best student at that time at Al-Huda so I can't really, because of my experience, I was in and out kind of sometimes in Al-Huda, so I haven't fully experienced it, I just want to let you know, honestly. But it has helped me with just knowing my purpose, understanding, being prepared that Allah will test us and that's part of life, you're going through ups and downs. And that kind of helped me prepare mentally and learning about the Ayat's as well. Allah gives us hope helps me, or learning about what the companions, what the prophets went through and kind of gave me that hope when I'm going through something. In terms of mental health, in all, honestly. I don't know. For me, it has

helped me in some ways, but it hasn't helped me to a certain extent.

Because, I don't know how to say it. I remember, we were learning certain ideas. And we were learning about depression. And that's where I got my idea of like, "Basically, as a Muslim or not, we don't get depressed." And I learned that from there. And I took that with me, and because my mum was also going through clinical depression. Al-Huda made it harder for me to understand her because at that time, I thought I understood the deen and I was like, but we're not supposed to be depressed.

Researcher: And just one quick clarifying question based on... Thank you for sharing this is definitely more of a personal and vulnerable example.

Did you feel that it was, like the teachings from like, a particular teacher, or was it the recordings? Or was it the being Ayat's specifically or just the way it was interpreted, or presented perhaps?

I think it was the way it was interpreted. It was a teacher. I loved her classes, it was just that one thing that I took from it, where it was just emphasized that Muslims are not like... it's like when you turn away from God, you have a depressing life. I think it was around that. So, that's where it was hard for me to observe that and then relate it back to my mom, which was difficult

(Participant 26).

Overall, participants identified two key aspects of faith that impacted their well-being. First, their connection with God, which involved relying on God, accepting His Decree, and knowing that God is protecting their well-being. Second, their connection

with the Qur'ān, particularly the ability to understand its verses, served as both a protective factor and a form of healing. The following sections will outline further how studying and reflecting on the Qur'ān impacted participants' well-being during the COVID-19 lockdowns, as well as served as a source of peer support for their overall well-being.

2A) Qur'ānic Learning and COVID-19

Several women reported a reduction of symptoms in specific mental health challenges, during the time of quarantine and lockdowns, attributing this to their connection with the Qur'ān. As one participant mentioned:

To be very honest I don't want to sound trivial. And I don't in no way want to show any disrespect or undermine the value of mental health professionals and treatment. I volunteer as like a peer counselor at the helpline. So, this is very important to me. At the same time, I feel my faith gives me a lot of solace and comfort when it comes to mental health and well-being that I'm able to fall back on my faith and find some form of assurance, some sort of pat on the back end and belief that yes, things are going to be okay. Things are going to work out, just keep going, keep pushing. I feel that my faith does not let me dip into severe depression or anxiety. Whenever I'm having these thoughts, I always have a prayer to go back to. I always have like a prophetic story or a narration or a verse from the Qur'ān to rely upon, to find strength in. I believe the Qur'ān is a big part of me have a peace of mind, like I said before, I didn't have that, but now because Qur'ān gave me such a positive perspective in life, I look at life in a positive way. So, even if I have problems in life, I know there is a reason why I'm

going through this tough time. And all of that goes back to Qur'ān, what Qur'ān taught me and that makes me see things in a positive way and also that keeps me going and peaceful internally (Participant 9).

Similarly, other participants expressed how specific life circumstances such as pregnancy, compounded with COVID-19 impacted their well-being. For example, one participant discussed her experience with postpartum depression, and that after understanding and studying the Qur'ān, she was able to cope better:

The most important thing that I felt the difference, which I felt during these two pregnancies. I have so much peace inside that I didn't even feel that postpartum depression, not even for a second. It says the Qur'ān is the book which gives peace to your hearts... Whatever is happening in my life. I get answers from the Qur'ān. And I feel like, Allah opened that thought process for me. And it was like actually the best year, I would say for me (Participant 15).

2B) Qur'ān and Peer Support

This code encompasses the ways in which participants interact, share experiences, and provide emotional, spiritual, and educational support to one another, both within the class setting and outside, while engaging with the teachings of the Qur'ān. Any quotes highlighting the significance of communal learning and support in enhancing the well-being and resilience of Muslim women were coded under peer support.

Participants described peer support as an avenue to increasing their well-being through its element of socialization, as well as a reminder of the teachings of the Qur'ān during times of hardship:

Meeting with other sisters had definitely a positive impact on wellbeing. Because that social aspect is there. And we experienced that firsthand when everything went into lockdown in Sri Lanka, for three months we were at home, it was very difficult because we didn't have that... We were online. Until today, we're online. In the middle, we did open up for two or three months. And it was such a nice feeling being back with all the sisters seeing them, meeting them. But then when we're back online, even though the sisters are there, but you don't have that same connection that physical connection where they're in front of you. Sometimes you would open up with your challenges, your problems, they will listen. And since they're coming from the same mind frame. They're also saying in the Qur'ān. Sometimes when you miss a certain point or you miss-understand something, they bring you back. And they'll tell you. Okay, just be patient or do this or do that. So that helps" (Participant 33).

Interestingly, one participant mentioned that during her time in the Taleem ul Qur'ān diploma course, a group of students volunteered their time specifically to provide their peers with emotional support:

And we had some volunteers also for that, if anybody is going through hard time, they used to actually go really go out of the way to help any of the sisters SubhanAllah (trans. Glory be to God). I find Al-Huda was my second home, I always find comfort there, I always find comfort there. It was always taking my stress away, any stress I had, you name it. So I was always feeling whenever I had stress in Canada, I used to go Al-Huda sit in the class and my stress was gone (Participant 17).

Other participants felt that offering help to other “sisters” was a religious obligation and a natural progression from learning the Qur’ān:

Well, you see, our Deen [trans. religion/way of life] is like that we share everything, isn't it? We share our feelings, we share our food, we share everything, this is a part of our deal. So yeah, they do share and whoever can help tries to help them. I think it's a very healthy environment and it should be that way. Because it's part of our religion. If we don't share and if we don't help, then what are we learning? What are we there for? The Qur'ān teaches us to have a big heart. So it's very healthy. It's very good Alhamdulillah (Participant 22).

Although not necessarily peers, participants also felt that their teachers and other staff members would also hold space for sharing and would offer an empathetic ear when students were struggling with personal or academic challenges, generally without judgment:

I really feel like there are a lot of women that I know, there are a lot of girls, I've dealt with teenagers to the older or whoever it is, I really felt that they felt this is the place to, they can share, they can talk about because everybody's in the same level, right? They don't think they're like people here to they're judging, because we know that we are connected with Qur'ān, right? So they don't feel that we...even within our house or our friends or family, we fear the judging part of it. Now that we are all in this group, we all feel the same, we all have that. I feel we are free, because we all are connecting through Allah and we think that you know, we all care about each other. That caring is we feel that we don't even

feel that with our friends, even with our own family members, right? But we all have this real, we can feel like I can say this, they really gonna make... at least they will make dua for me, they're gonna really find some help, you know, that kind of feeling that we give this, Everyone's sharing or talking about their family, they will come and say things that you know, is one of you be like, all I didn't even know this girl went through this thing, this person went through to say, they'll open up to us like that. Because they know that, something that we are going to help them with because as a teacher, as even like a student, because Alhamdulillah I felt that, I even now I feel like I always share with whatever, even when I'm teaching I share my stories what happened to me, because I want everybody to be able to relate to it. Like, we're all normal people. This is how it opens up. I don't know, I generally I am like that. But if this feels like even more like, you feel that true love, we like really they all care about us, they want good for us that feeling, that vibe comes in the class. Right? So it's that, I definitely think that and they feel like we understand, no one else understands. They think that we can all... they all understand each other. Right? That feeling we get
(Participant 38).

Interestingly, women who chose not to share anything personal still reported finding value in an environment where peers listened to each other's stories and reflections. This setting was beneficial for their well-being as it provided a sense of community and support:

I didn't I personally I never had anything meaningful to share whenever we had post tafseer (trans. Qur'ānic exegesis/explanation) questions, but I like

listening to other people's stories and their reflections. That was something that made me feel wholesome. I guess. I liked listening to their reflections. And whenever it was, like a more emotional topic, I would I like that all of us would cry with the person or have sympathy and relate, I guess. I've seen other students like other women seek support. And those times and I don't know, I kind of, I felt good for them, because they're seeking help for themselves. And they're being proactive about their mental health but I haven't. And I did see, Al-Huda as a space for that. Because it is somewhere we were learning about and it's, I feel like wherever you are learning the Qur'ān, it should be a safe space for those kinds of things. And a lot of students built really good relationships with their teachers. So, I was happy that you know, they have someone they can share their concerns with (Participant 31).

Even though they did not actively participate in sharing, the act of listening and witnessing others seek help and express emotions fostered a wholesome and supportive atmosphere.

Finally, younger participants also felt a sense of comfort receiving advice from their teachers during especially stressful life situations:

It'll be like, wow, this answers everything that just happened. So there was that and then we also had teachers right there for you to take advice from, so there was that benefit from it. So, the thing I'm referring to at home is that my parents were going to go through a divorce, that was a major thing for me that time, especially as a teenager. And then I have a younger brother, so I have to deal

with those two as well during that time. And so with that the Qur'ān would just come in, if I was crying already, then the Qur'ān just calm me down or if I just had to talk to a teacher or sometimes the elder teachers would notice me and they wouldn't ask me what it is, but they'll just, show me some sympathy and just let me be so that kind of helped us all that time (Participant 1).

In contrast, it is important to note that being of similar ethnicity and also doing a similar activity (i.e. learning religious scripture) became a barrier for one participant:

I think maybe it has to do with personality of people, right. So I'm very reserved. And at that time, I think I wasn't as open, sharing my vulnerability with others. So I was mostly quiet in that sense. But I would say, I hope it doesn't sound wrong saying it. I think maybe because there's a lot of South Asians. So sometimes it was I found the trouble connecting so much, if that makes sense. Yes, I don't think I've had vulnerable moments that I can think of to be honest (Participant 26).

Conceptual Category III - Qur'ān & Identity

Within the theme of identity, I delved deeper to understand how Muslim women participants define their own identities and whether ideologies such as feminism emerge during their spiritual journeys of studying the Qur'ān.

3A) Qur'ānic Learning and Identity

Before delving into how participants described their identities in relation to learning the Qur'ān, it is important to note that an intriguing aspect of data collection

was understanding how participants interpreted certain questions. The question that caused the most confusion and did not translate well from the literature to real-world experiences was the one regarding identity. While most participants identified primarily as 'Muslim,' others preferred 'Canadian Muslim woman. However, a few participants were perplexed by this question and the concept of identity. The following exchange demonstrates this confusion:

Researcher – So in what ways does your identity and your faith as being a Muslim, play a role in your sense of well-being so you did talk about faith and your well-being. But are there any ways in how you identify and how that helps you with your well-being and mental health?

Participant 17 – I didn't get this question.

Interviewer (KQ): So basically, we're interested in seeing the ways that you identify yourself, and if and how that impacts your well-being...

Participant 17: Well, to be honest with you, I believe and we all believe that we cannot move to any place without the permission of Allah (SWT), God Almighty, so Allah moved me from, I was Indian citizen, so moved me to Canada. So Canada has changed my life, my region Alhamdulillah and I identify myself as a very proud Canadian Muslim woman. Because Canada has given me courage. Canada has given me more faith. And Canada has given me strength, education. A lot of things which really I cannot explain in really words. I'm so proud Canadian Muslim woman. I always identify I traveled so many countries. I'm in Dubai right now, but I always tell people I am Canadian Muslim woman. That's my identity."

Similarly, another participant explained:

And on the identity part, I don't know if there is a specific connection that I can think of. I mean, it's everything, you know, my whole life is like determined according to the Qur'ān or according to my faith, like everything I do. Like when I go out, we have to kind of organize our day according to prayer times, or we have to organize our day according to when to break our fast. Like my whole life depends on this. So it's kind of hard for me to pinpoint something that's related to the identity when like my whole life is kind of like this and it doesn't feel different. You know, it's just how my life is. It's a difficult to explain, difficult question (Participant 4).

Despite some confusion, for the most part, participants attributed their identity to overall Islamic values:

No, I feel it's very connected, for example, just training some my stuff when I'm studying for it reminds me, this is who I am, I'm supposed the patient, I'm supposed to be of the, those who trust the law that kind of, as I said was things like around me. So that, it tells me my attributes kind of, I should have, and I should be practicing. Other things like a job, for example, the usual, every time I go out, I cover myself. So, that a usual identity and that is from the Qur'ān and then just lifestyles based from the friends and it's just about learning Islam in general. So, my entire lifestyle in the morning, the moment I wake up to the moment I sleep from again, that also is like a whole Islamic lifestyle you can say (Participant 1).

Similarly, another participant mentioned how her identity is wrapped up

with her faith especially when she is in public view, and feels that she is representing her faith:

That's a really good question. So I think different phases of my life that your identity becomes a lot more evolved and the core of who you are is the same, but you tend to evolve as a human being. In terms of identity and faith, I think that faith for me growing up gave me a strengthened sense of identity, especially living in this states where you are kind of considered the minority and you are considered-- you always have to kind of be on the defensive, especially because I went to public school. And my public school was like 99% white and it was a very big school. And so, and there were a lot-- most of my teachers were like Republicans and students as well. I always kind of grew up being very, I felt I had to carry myself a certain way because I knew that people were watching and they knew that this is what Islam represented in the human form. And so I kind of grew up with that. That faith became my identity and how I talked, how I spoke, how I carried myself. I was always aware, oh, they're watching me. And they're thinking this is Islam. And that kind of became, I became very conscientious of that. And yeah, so even now when I go out, even though Canada is a melting pot and especially when I was in Mississauga there are Muslims everywhere
(Participant 3).

Some participants discussed their identity in terms of the local and global, almost a cosmopolitan identity which has shaped their perspectives:

Identity is a bit more complicated because I have, like my identities made up of so many different things. Obviously, there's the faith part, then

there's being British, then there's being Western, then there's coming from immigrant parents, the child of immigrant parents, like there's so many parts of my identity, that affect it. And I would say, maybe my experiences, like the identity, or the identity I've have comes from, like the experiences of being raised in one part of the world. And then, coming to North America, like being raised in Europe, coming to North America, having lived in the South Asia for a while as well, like all those things, kind of influenced my identity, and how I look at things. And I think it broadens your perspective. So if that makes sense (Participant 13).

Some participants also correlated the hijab to identity; however, they expressed some mistrust around the language of identity:

Oh, the hijab is a huge part of me, I think, huge part of me. I think the way I see myself, I think being very, very visibly Muslim. It's like if somebody sees me, they have immediate kind of connections that they make about me and my faith, and I'm just fulfilling what I've been asked to do by my Creator. And also just as a - I don't want to say identity because recently I've been hearing a lot about identity, so yeah, sure, I stand out as a Muslim, but I think I just do it as a form of expressing myself that this is who I am (Participant 2).

Although this participant acknowledged the *hijab* as a significant part of her identity, she expressed some hesitation around the term "identity" itself, preferring to view her practices as expressions of her faith and self. This sentiment underscores the diverse ways in which Muslim women interpret and internalize their religious practices.

In addition to the visible aspects of being a Muslim woman, such as modest dress—where the interpretation of modesty varies among different Muslim communities for both men and women—and an Islamic lifestyle that includes practices like the five daily prayers and annual fasting, participants also shared their views on how their identity as Muslim women, religious education, well-being, and empowerment are intricately connected:

So for me, it's directly related to my identity as a Muslim woman, my assertion of being a Muslim woman. And it's like contrary to the narrative, that currently exists on hijab specifically. And also, like, it extends to like, when you talk about well-being, it's also like your body image. It's kind of empowering to choose what you keep to show and keep to stay hidden (Participant 27).

In summary, participants consistently attribute their sense of identity to the overarching Islamic values derived from the Qur'ān. For instance, one participant highlighted how learning the Qur'ān and adhering to its teachings shape her daily life and behaviour, reinforcing attributes such as patience and trust in Allah, alongside practices like wearing the hijab, which visibly marks her Muslim identity.

In conclusion, the exploration of how Muslim women navigate and integrate their faith with feminist principles illuminates the complex interplay between Islamic teachings and gender equality. The diverse responses from participants reveal a rich tapestry of perspectives on identity, mental well-being, and self-perception. While some find their identity firmly rooted in their faith and national context, others struggle with the abstract nature of identity questions, highlighting the nuanced ways in which personal and cultural elements intersect. The confusion surrounding the concept of identity

underscores the need for more precise and contextually relevant questions in future research. Overall, the theme underscores the significant role that both faith and national identity play in shaping the mental well-being and self-concept of Muslim women, offering valuable insights into their unique experiences and perspectives.

3B) Qur'ān in a Women's Only Environment

According to the women in this study, the Qur'ān's teachings within a women-only learning environment had profound impacts on students of knowledge, fostering a unique sense of peace, belonging, and personal growth. For example, several participants described learning in such settings as deeply transformative, providing a sanctuary where they can openly share their reflections, emotions, and personal journeys. For example, one participant shared:

It isn't very like a dry type of a learning where you just learned a text, it was very much applicable to your life. I think that just coming together was just such a beautiful feeling, like the peace you feel when you are just sitting in my class. I don't think I've ever felt like that in any other type of an experience, like, just the sense of calm and tranquility and peace, it's like a blessing. And, in our religion, we say, we have the presence of angels, and you actually feel that sense of peace and presence. It's like, you walk into that room. And, you use automatically feeling, and you just feel like the sense of like, you've had like, 100 years of therapy, and you feel so light, like when you walk out of there...the feeling is just indescribable. And that's what I think keeps us coming back, weekend after weekend for five years, it's that feeling, honestly (Participant 9).

Interestingly, the code "Women only environment" often co-occurred with "Peer support" in various contexts. This co-occurrence suggests that many women find significant value in environments that are exclusive to women, as these spaces facilitate a sense of community and understanding that might be harder to achieve in mixed-gender settings.

Theoretically, an environment geared primarily for women provides a safe space for sharing experiences and challenges unique to women. It allows for open discussions without the fear of judgment or misunderstanding from those who may not share the same experiences. This exclusivity fosters trust and openness, which are crucial for effective peer support. As one participant, who did not have any family support in Canada, explained:

We all most of the females, they are with their spouses or their immediate families, they are living back home, my parents are back home all my family's back home, just me and my husband are here. So it feels so comfortable going to Al-Huda and talk to them. It's like they're all my sisters. Yeah, it feels like home already. And of course, more of them from the same background. Not all of them, but it helps understand each other and of course, when there is no one around to listen you hear you so there you can go and at least they console you comfort you (Participant 19).

A tension appears however, with the ideals of Cosmopolitanism. The participant's statement reflects a sense of belonging and comfort in a community where members share similar backgrounds, experiences, and cultural understandings. This sense of closeness contrasts with the ideals of cosmopolitanism, which emphasize openness to

diverse cultures and an embrace of global citizenship beyond one's immediate or familiar social group. The participant's preference for a community where shared cultural and familial experiences are prevalent suggests a comfort in cultural homogeneity, which can create tensions with the cosmopolitan ideal of embracing and engaging with a broader diversity of people and ideas. This inclination towards a familiar, culturally specific community may inadvertently limit the openness and inclusivity that cosmopolitanism advocates, as it emphasizes the comfort found in shared backgrounds over the broader inclusiveness of diverse, global perspectives. In addition, peer support in women only environments are often more effective due to the shared gender-specific experiences, which can lead to stronger bonds and more personalized support:

... the teachers are very approachable. And I think the fact that they're all women. And so sometimes, it helps a lot when you can talk to a woman who has the knowledge of the Qur'ān, who has experience, she has the wisdom as well. Because there's more of a connection there, I find a woman is able to understand another woman's problems a little bit more on a deeper level. And people are very, like, the teachers are very understanding. They're very, very welcoming and warm (Participant 15).

Another participant narrated a medical emergency that occurred during one of the Qur'ān classes, where her fellow classmates jumped in to assist her and her young child:

When I was pregnant with my last child...but I just got fainted in class. Two of my classmates they took me to the hospital. They stayed there with me until my

husband came and they were so supportive. They were so nice. They were so kind. I couldn't thank them like enough, the way they did with me at that time. So yes, definitely. It is a space where we connect to each other and we share our experiences with each other, obviously. And even after I came home, a few of my classmates, they brought the food for the family because they knew that she's on the bed now. And so like obviously I guess this is the connection of Islam, or maybe this is the connection of Qur'ān (Participant 4).

Being in a women's only environment helped to also foster a shared sense of purpose and goal setting for some participants:

Oh, I like knowing that I'm surrounded by women that we all have like the same goal, and that learning the Qur'ān, even if our journeys look different, because all of us are alike, and I liked that we all came from different backgrounds and different walks of life (Participant 31).

Similarly, another participant mentioned how learning the Qur'ān identified not only her purpose in life, but also a sense of responsibility to humanity, which then had a positive impact on her well-being:

Well, Qur'ān is giving us hope and the purpose of our life. If you just pray five times and not serving the purpose of your well-being with other human beings. Then you are not good Muslim in Islam, you have to serve humanity... So it is our well-being so Islam tells us to serve humanity to serving humanity is more important in Islam because Allah says in Qur'ān... those Muslims who pray to whom Muslim who does not feed others who are not taking care of the neighbors or the sick around you (Participant 17).

Many participants mentioned the long-lasting friendships they created through learning the Qur'ān with other women, regardless of social status, education, or ethnicity:

After I went to Al Huda, the friendship that I made with people was based on who the person was, not material world. And now that the friends that I made then, or my friends until this day that was like eight, nine years ago and I still am friends with them because we love each other for who we are as a person, opposed to what they have, what education. So, I have friends that are, I don't know if this is helping with the question it's brought back. I have friends that are Ph.D while I don't have a Ph.D, I have friends that are like millionaires, I'm not a millionaire we're still friends, we still love each other for who we are as a person (Participant 8).

Other participants likened their time to studying the Qur'ān as their self-care or “me time”. For example, one participant mentioned:

... just going there gives me a different feeling about myself. And I feel like it's actually the me time, is the surrounding these days in [20:17 inaudible]. So that's what I feel when I go to class, I feel like this is my me time. So that's how I feel my connection with Qur'ān or with specifically Al Huda that's what I think (Participant 6).

Furthermore, participants reported looking to other women within a women only environment, including fellow students and senior teachers as their role models. As a note, the following participant is speaking about my own mother-in-law as being a role model in her zest for learning:

...every woman in Al-Huda is a role model for me. And, by the way, your mother in-law at that time, she was older than me, and I was very young at that time, it's now 15 years back, we were in the same class, and I was looking at your mother in-law, Auntie Amna, and I was just sometime in here, she was quite senior citizen that time, and how she had that desire to learn more...I was 35 that time, all of us we had a kind of bond sisterhood, and if anyone used to get sick, they used to take care of us, getting the food or asking, calling, visiting, or helping in homework and calling us for, did you miss this if you miss lecture, and so many people were telling, giving me the or those times we had those CDs, so everybody. It's a very community stance in Al-Huda, very close bond and they help everybody Muslim, non-Muslim, they help everybody, they go out of their way to help others (Participant 17).

Finally, studying the Qur'ān in a women-only environment provided an opportunity for gender-specific teachings and content that were traditionally taught to men by men, and only later relayed to women at home:

In terms of that I would say that because it was women teaching it so when they gave examples in their lessons, it would be more woman relatable. Versus like when I listen to lectures or when my husband's taking classes and he tells me something like, but what about this case for women? He didn't mention it, but his class had women too so I don't understand why they weren't taught it. But in our classes we were given women specific examples. For lifestyle advice, I guess you can say I came to do the Qur'ān in any other class and I was mainly focused on women education because everywhere else even when I lecture and all, all I

hear is, okay, this is what men have to do. And then when I learned to those like, okay, this is how women pray, which is exactly the same thing as men

(Participant 1).

The quote highlights the value of gender-specific teachings in a women-only environment where the Qur'ān is studied. It suggests that having women as instructors made the lessons more relatable and relevant to the female students, as these instructors provided examples and teachings directly applicable to women's experiences. This contrasts with coeducational settings or traditional methods where men taught the Qur'ān and may not have addressed women's perspectives as thoroughly. The participant noted that her husband's classes, which included both men and women, often lacked these specific examples relevant to women, underscoring the unique benefits of the women-only learning environment.

Overall, learning and reflecting on the Qur'ān in a women-only environment served several purposes and led to outcomes of positive well-being. Participants reported feeling safe sharing their struggles within a supportive environment, often looking to other women as role models, as well as inspiration for their own purpose in life. In addition, the intimate and supportive atmosphere of these classes, characterized by the presence of empathetic and knowledgeable female teachers, also enhanced the learning experience for the participants. This environment not only reinforced the participants' faith but also cultivated a strong sense of sisterhood and community, offering both spiritual and emotional support.

3C) Qur'ānic Learning and Personal Empowerment

The following segment highlights how learning the Qur'ān in a women-only environment is associated with feelings of agency and empowerment. It's important to note that the word "empowerment" was not specifically used during our data collection; participants were encouraged to express themselves in terms they felt comfortable with. Consequently, "empowerment" was not a prominent theme, being mentioned by only three of the 38 participants throughout the extensive data interpretation process, which involved analyzing hundreds of pages of transcripts. Interestingly, most discussions about empowerment emerged during the concluding question, "Do you have any questions for me?" Participants frequently inquired about the research's hypothesis, its objectives, and whether it aimed to test a specific theory. This is where I introduced the concepts of well-being and identity, discussing their potential connections to empowerment. One participant offered her viewpoint on empowerment once it was mentioned:

Well, empowerment to me as a Muslim woman is just not to be treated any differently from anybody else. Like, regardless of them being a man or a woman or a Muslim or not Muslim, just being treated the same way and being not reprimanded if you can't do certain things or if you do certain things and just letting people do what they want to do, that's empowerment. Obviously to a certain degree, like, you know, don't go crazy, like killing people and stuff like that. But yeah, that's what I think empowerment is. And I don't think once again, Al Huda don't necessarily give me the resources to be empowered. And I don't know if that's just because I was so young then, or just because they didn't really

focus on those type of qualities there. Like, the Qur'ān empowers; I'm just saying like the environment didn't focus on things like that (Participant 4).

Other participants discussed how their journey into becoming a better Muslim, as well as being a role model for her children provided her with a sense of autonomy, agency and empowerment:

So, as a Muslim woman, I feel empowered because I feel good, and I feel like I have what it takes and it's like the form of just feeling good and that I have the power to make a change like I have the power to become a better Muslim than I was yesterday. So, I think in that sense, it's a very positive approach and attitude, to becoming a better Muslim...I think by taking that I feel empowered, and I want to just be able to continue going up the ladder, like spiritually, religiously and be able, I just feel like I'm capable of doing more and learning more and it's like utilizing my skills. Especially like, being a mother now, I feel like I have more to give to society. And, because now I have a child to take care of, I've to be a role model for it, I have to make sure I have a good role model (Participant 5).

Similarly, another participant mentioned stories and lessons from their classes that alluded to empowerment but did not remember the word being used or Muslim women of the past being labelled as “empowered”:

No, it's because the way I viewed empowerment is very different to if it has come up without the word...But because the word isn't ever used, I've never connected it. Like you have the example of Hind and how she came to Prophet (PBUH) and was, remember when she was like, okay, but I'm not going to be okay with this. And he's like, that's fine. And like, that's empowerment. Or Ayesha the way

some of the things that she did, like, it's clearly empowerment of women. And then the Qur'ān the way it talks about Mariam, or it talks about Asiyah, or it talks about the equality you whatever you do, whether you're male or female, it's exactly the same before Allah. So that is empowerment. That's interesting, because the word is never used. I've never connected that I'm being empowered (Participant 13).

Another participant, again through teachings of the Qur'ān and Prophetic tradition felt empowered, and chose this word organically when asked about Qur'ānic learning and well-being:

It was super empowering when I learned about the options especially for Muslim women about abuse. Before I thought Islam oppresses women but it was empowering to learn that Allah gives us so many options and we have to see what works best for us (Participant 35).

One of the coders wrote in her memo regarding her perspectives of empowerment as informed through the participants:

That could affect your mental health. And what helps you is the knowledge of the Qur'ān, which really empowers you, then you have aspirations. You have great goals, and you're able to pursue that when you have a purpose in your life. I think that really affects your health positively. Otherwise, when there's a lack of purpose, when you don't know what you're doing, then you're stumbling about in the dark. When that ray of light, that hope is not there, then it gets difficult. And you're confused. You're just sulking. So that's why this knowledge, which is represented by that light is very important I feel (A.K.).

Participants also expressed the importance of learning their faith to unlearn some of their own misconceptions about the status of women in Islam, which provided them with confidence and clarity about women's roles:

So, there may be a lot of misconceptions, a lot of pressures and burdens that women carry and to think it's from their faith and to have a very tense relationship with their faith because of that...I feel that benefits them, even if they were to study it as a secular book a subjective book, and come to it and say, what does Islam really say? I'm curious to know in that sense, I feel like it's very clarifying. It gives them a whole new recognition of who God is and what God wants from them, and how God sees them. So, in a way, they're able to take off the societal lens, whatever that their society or community may be...so, it's very anchoring. I feel it really gives them lots of confidence. I feel because when I came to the Qur'ān, I believed in a God, but I had no idea who or what God was that I had just gone through four years, a very rigorous Catholic study...(Participant 7).

Participants highlighted that their identity as Muslim women, their engagement in religious education, and the impact on their well-being and sense of empowerment are closely interconnected. One participant mentioned that wearing the *hijab* and practicing modesty gave her control over her body image, allowing her to counter dominant narratives and empowering her through the conscious choice of what to reveal or conceal:

Yes, as a Muslim woman, we think it's more like a stigma in the society that Muslim women are like isolated women, oppressed women, they cannot take off a job they cannot go out like in the clothing. But I personally, the females, we feel

more comfortable and more safe in the society to move in a hijab or move in an abayah. And whatever we want to do, there are choices we can make for our marriage, make choices for our work, as we read in the Qur'ān, and by the examples of our Sahaba even Khadija (RA) or the Allah, she was a businesswoman, she sent the marriage proposal to Prophet (PBUH) herself (Participant 19).

While most participants did not explicitly mention feminist ideals, these concepts were evident throughout the interviews. For many, their understanding of feminist identity and the roles and choices available to women were rooted in the Qur'ān and considered Divinely provided. However, as one participant noted, patriarchal structures have altered these roles and choices:

There's a huge contrast now, it's like, the Muslim woman is technically free because of all the rights given to her as a Muslim by Allah, that's her freedom. But then the contrast in this, like the men on pulling the strings and tainted with the rules of extreme ideologies of men (Participant 23).

Interestingly, participants found feminist ideals through the classical interpretation of the Qur'ān, without choosing certain verses or having a revisionist approach:

I would like focus on the whole object..It's not like I'm picking or choosing like specific Ayah (verse) or something, but it's like, on the whole how it helped the Muslim women to work like outside home. And to not feel like, as a Muslim we women will feel more like in the society like oppressed women or isolated women but we are not like that there is more than that. There is lot more than that when we study in the Qur'ān (Participant 19).

These insights collectively demonstrate how the Qur'ān fosters a comprehensive sense of identity and empowerment among Muslim women, affecting both their spiritual and daily lives. Although there was a collective journey, there was also a personal and very private journey for many of the participants. For example, when verses about hijab were discussed during class, some participants felt judgment for not immediately acting upon the verses and dressing differently:

I think that was my own personal, experience and my personal journey. If you came to class with a necklace and then everybody was, oh, but we studied the Āyah (verse) last week. And what are you doing wearing a necklace? You're beautifying yourself. And then I think that kind of became a source of tension a little bit...I don't think I'm ready right now to accept wearing Abaya (long outer garment) for myself. Yeah. But I know for some of my roommates and some of my friends who had taken the course later...the tone for them was a little bit different (Participant 3).

Overall, without using terminology and the popular vernacular such as feminist and empowerment, learning in women's only environment seemed to foster an identity of both personal and communal empowerment, as participants mentioned feelings of being free, liberated and the ability to make choices.

3D) Qur'ānic Learning and Community Empowerment

This subcode refers to the process of using teachings from the Qur'ān to foster personal and communal development. This approach leverages the spiritual, ethical, and educational principles found in the Qur'ān to promote empowerment in various aspects of community life, including social, economic, and cultural dimensions. Through

Qur'ānic education, individuals gain knowledge, moral guidance, and skills that contribute to their personal growth and enable them to actively participate in and uplift their communities. This code was utilized when participants spoke about collective empowerment to improve the overall well-being of their class peers, or the larger community, as well as foster a sense of purpose, and social cohesion among community members.

Several members emphasized the unique nature of this faith-based knowledge system, where women, previously strangers and coming from diverse backgrounds, came together to study the Qur'ān. This collective learning experience fostered a strong sense of group empowerment. As one participant mentioned:

...there were women because we were all in this class together and different women from different ages, different ethnicity, they were able to make friends there...just like that they were able to kind of destress and seek support from each other...on the weekends, when I would go to class or just kind of be very uplifting and just seeing my friends, everybody just wearing our uniform and just doing the study was very empowering. So, as a Muslim woman... I have the power to make a change like I have the power to become a better Muslim than I was yesterday (Participant 5).

Interestingly, many participants expressed that after learning the Qur'ān, and the Prophetic tradition, they were able to set boundaries and stand up against community pressure. For example, one participant mentioned regarding her experience with divorce:

And even being a divorced woman, like, I'm just gonna be very open about this, even being a divorced woman in our culture is a very shun thing. But when you read the Qur'ān, it's like women are valued in so many ways, like, we have a whole chapter about women, and how a man has to take care of her, and we have to provide for her. And the stories of like, previous generations, getting divorced at that time was a very normal thing, and people would get divorced, and they would get remarried. And women would just come to the Prophet and just be like, "I want a divorce, because I don't like my husband." And he'd be like, "Okay!" It was a very normal thing. And society has stigmatized it. So he gave me a sense of empowerment, because I was like, "I'm not going to let my community or society to determine my sense of self-worth, based on manmade ideologies, like God Himself has permitted this thing. And in front of God, I'm still the same human being in front of Him, whether or not I'm married, I'm single, I'm divorced. My relationship to God is very independent, and my sense of personhood and who I am and identity is not anything less just because I'm a divorced woman... (Participant 9).

Additionally, participants provided examples of female leadership in Islamic history to allude to the ability to make choices, and have flexibility within gender roles that stood apart from cultural practices of the time:

So, let's just keep Muslim women as people, people who have family roles, work related roles, roles as mothers, daughters, wives, all those based on gender-based roles. Now, gender-based roles are different for different cultures. So, keeping all that in mind then and so for example, in Qur'ān, there are guidelines

or directions for women to find, find ways to live a healthy life. Like chapter four, Surah An-Nisa...there are stories of great role models in Qur'ān like Maryam mother of Isa mother of Jesus. There are many stories that reflect how women can take on leadership roles, entrepreneurial. They're intelligent people like the and there are many stories of leadership, intelligence, consistency, resiliency, good character, patience...And the thing is, the special thing about these stories is that they're not reflective of cultural practices. They're reflective of spiritual lessons and religious lessons, which are, if you look at the cultural norms, you're gonna find them in conflict with each other. So it's an eye opener, provides freedom to Muslim women, in the sense that they have role models to break away from cultural norms and gender roles are defined by them that are not healthy for them (Participant 10).

Overall, participants shared a collective experience of growth and empowerment through their Qur'ānic education. It was interesting also to observe empowerment described as being a communal experience, rather than an individualistic one, in that individual empowerment through Qur'ānic education contributes to the collective empowerment of the community, especially for Muslim women. Participants consistently highlight the tranquility and empowerment they feel in these classes, underscoring the significance of such spaces in their religious and personal lives.

Moreover, the artifacts that participants shared during the interview to express the emotional, symbolic, and spiritual connection of their study of the Qur'ān, expanded on the interview findings. This reflection underscores the profound emotional and spiritual connection participants feel towards the Qur'ān, where their study is not only a

religious duty but also a means of strengthening their identity and well-being in a Western context. These experiences highlight the intersectionality of faith, culture, and identity, making the study of the Qur'ān a pivotal element in their personal and communal lives.

Overall, learning in women's only environment seemed to foster an identity of both personal and communal empowerment.

Additional Analyses: Thank you Notes and Dua's (Supplications)

One final point of analysis that was not necessarily coded for in the grounded theory was the appreciation of the participants at the end of the interviews. Several participants expressed thanks to myself, as a doctoral student and researcher, as well as the University as an institution and finally my supervisor for supporting this kind of work. My surprised yet teary reaction to quotes such as the following were captured in memos, and I felt a deep sense of honour and humility as I conducted this study:

I think this is really amazing, to be honest. And I want to take the time to thank you. And I know there's a professor somewhere that it's so great that we finally have something that looks at women of faith in a very positive way. Usually, women of faith are seen as somebody who are caged, and they need to be emancipated and they need to be liberated. And it's never considered those women of faith are never given a voice to ask why you are, first of all, a woman of faith and what faith means to you, and what are the positive contributions of your faith because it is you're holding onto it or you're practicing it. And you carry yourself with this. So, thank you so much for doing that. I feel like this is a new

voice that has never been heard before, not frequently heard. And it's important that voices like these are given a chance to express themselves. Thank you so much. So, this will be so amazing regardless of whatever that you choose to do with this, I'm sure it's going to be incredible. But just having that as a resource for people to fall back and say, look, these are women who are living in, you know, the first world countries and they still find meaning in faith, and faith empowers them it's so, so amazing that you're doing that (Participant 7).

Finally, several participants ended off the interview with well-wishes and supplications for the success of this research project and all my academic endeavors:

And I'm kind of sad that if we didn't know each other before, but just so happy that you're doing this. I pray that, you know, you become successful, that you do great things just as a Muslim, for Muslim community, for larger humanity, and a lot of good comes out of your project and for you, you know, from your research-a lot of wows for you (Participant 2).

Researcher KQ Memo:

Wow, this is so nice to hear! I had no idea that participants (or are they my colleagues and friends because I knew some of them from Al Huda?) would appreciate this research so much. But this is just scratching the surface...I felt that a win for me as a Muslim woman is a win for them/other Muslim women – but what would failure mean? Talk about pressure!

Discussion: Overview of the Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model

This dissertation examined the complex relationship between Qur'ānic learning, spirituality, well-being, and identity formation among Muslim women in Canada. The

findings highlight that Qur'ānic study in women-only settings plays a pivotal role in fostering empowerment, spiritual healing, and personal identity. Participants frequently described their experience of this religious engagement as transformative, with some equating the sense of relief and tranquility gained to going for years of therapy.

Faith-based coping has been widely recognized in the literature for its role in promoting psychological well-being, especially during times of stress or crisis (Ai et al., 2003; Fallot & Heckman, 2005; Koenig et al., 2020; Pargament, 1997; Smith et al., 2003). Research consistently shows that religious beliefs and practices provide a sense of meaning, purpose, and social support, contributing to reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, particularly among marginalized or minority groups (Abrams, 2023; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Greasley & Chiu, 2014). Specifically, for Muslims, Islamic practices like prayer and reciting the Qur'ān have been shown to alleviate distress and offer a framework for interpreting life challenges as part of divine wisdom (Ali, 2020; Hassan, 2021; Isgandarova, 2024).

Religious texts, such as the Qur'ān, are seen as protective factors in fostering emotional resilience. Participants in this study echoed research findings that reflect on the calming effects of scripture memorization and repetition, emphasizing how these practices offer comfort during hardship (Isgandarova, 2024). This aligns with studies showing that religious rituals, including prayer and Qur'ānic recitation, help individuals feel a sense of control and predictability during uncertain times, which is critical for mental well-being (Hassan, 2021).

The women I interviewed in this study overwhelmingly benefitted from increased personal spirituality, re-learning of the Qur'ān in a formalized setting that catered

primarily to women, and a communal sense of responsibility and giving back. This led to the development of the Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model, which underscores how Qur'ānic study deeply influenced participants' identity, well-being, and empowerment. It fostered a holistic transformation in faith, strengthening emotional resilience and coping strategies, while also refining their sense of purpose. Qur'ānic education also impacted family interactions and community engagement, reinforcing Islamic values and social responsibility.

The link between Qur'ānic learning and coping became more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several women reported that their deepened relationship with the Qur'ān reduced mental health symptoms during lockdown. Overall, faith emerged as a key source of strength, providing mental health support and resilience in facing life's challenges, especially while taking classes virtually during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

For many, well-being encompassed spiritual, psychological, and physical health, with a focus on peace of mind and contentment reflecting Koenig's (2012) argument that religious faith fosters resilience by providing a sense of purpose and trust in a higher power. Several participants also shared how faith helped them manage stress. This echoes the literature on religious coping, where prayer and reliance on God provide comfort during emotional distress (Pargament, 1997), echoing Ano and Vasconcelles' (2005) findings that religious faith can buffer anxiety and stress.

Participants also highlighted their connection to the Qur'ān as a source of well-being. One shared how reciting and reflecting on the Qur'ān eased her sadness, illustrating how religious practices can complement traditional mental health care (Fallot & Heckman, 2005). The influence of personal religiosity and learning the Qur'ān on well-

being is further complicated by peer support which played a significant role in the well-being of participants. Many found comfort in discussing their struggles with others who shared their faith. Faith-based social support is crucial, as it reinforces religious teachings while offering emotional and spiritual backing (Smith et al., 2003). Although not assessed in this study, the effects of learning the Qur'ān asynchronously or simply through pre-recorded lessons on well-being might have been different.

However, the literature also notes that challenges arise when religious teachings intersect with mental health. Religious interpretations that oversimplify mental illness, suggesting it results from spiritual deficiency, can lead to feelings of guilt in individuals suffering from mental health issues (Pargament & Lomax, 2013). Furthermore, growing literature suggests that religious stigma surrounding mental health, particularly in conservative communities, may prevent individuals from seeking professional help, relying instead on spiritual solutions that may not fully address their condition (Khan, 2021).

Participants also described their well-being as linked to her newfound Canadian identity, suggesting that her sense of purpose and well-being came from being in a country where she could contribute to her community. This aligns with research that shows personal identity and faith-based coping are critical in managing stress, especially when cultural and religious identities merge (George et al., 2002).

Finally, teachers and staff at Al Huda Institute were also seen as emotional supports, creating environments where participants felt safe to share their struggles without judgment. This reflects the importance of both peer support as well as "holding

space" in religious settings, where individuals are encouraged to express vulnerabilities within a supportive faith framework (Pargament, 1997)

Understanding Muslim Women's Perceptions of Identity through the Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model

The findings emphasize the critical role of women-only Qur'ānic study spaces in shaping a shared Muslim identity. Participants frequently highlighted the solidarity and collective purpose that emerged from studying the Qur'ān with other women. This unity transcended individual cultural differences, creating a collective identity rooted in faith. This aligns with Haslam et al. (2009), who argue that social identity—the sense of belonging to a group and the emotional importance of membership—fosters personal security, emotional bonds, and intellectual engagement. Group identity not only improves well-being but also builds resilience in the face of challenges. This was particularly evident among participants from Al Huda Institute, where women learned Qur'ānic translation and recitation in a collective setting over 18 months. The shared religious journey strengthened both personal and communal resilience. Further research by Haslam and colleagues reinforces the influence of social identity on well-being, particularly in religious and cultural contexts. By integrating their religious community into their core identity, participants experienced notable mental and physical health benefits. This suggests that enhancing social identity in vulnerable populations can significantly improve well-being.

Similarly, Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman (2010) explore how religious identity functions both as a belief system and a form of social identity, contributing to psychological resilience. Religious identity offers a unique sense of belonging through a

sacred worldview, unlike other social groups. Interacting with teachers and students online helped her feel connected to others facing similar challenges. This shared experience reinforced the collective purpose of engaging with the Qur'ān and highlighted how participants supported one another through learning, managing responsibilities, and navigating life's challenges. However, when this identity is threatened, it can have detrimental psychological effects, especially during intergroup conflicts. Thus, understanding religion's dual role as both personal belief and social identity is essential to grasp its diverse impacts.

The concept of social and religious identity can also be viewed through the lens of Cosmopolitanism within an Islamic context. The women in this study, from diverse ethnic, cultural, and national backgrounds, formed a collective identity that transcended individual differences. This identity was not merely a result of religious engagement but was actively constructed through mutual support and interaction, deepening their sense of belonging to a global Muslim community.

Identity is fluid and shaped by different spaces. The concept of third spaces, as discussed by Lefebvre (1991), Soja (1996), and Bhabha (1994), provides insight into how Muslim women navigate and construct their identities within and outside traditional religious settings. Third spaces, hybrid environments where new identities can emerge beyond public and private spheres, are vital for Muslim women reconciling their religious identity with the secular demands of society.

Al Huda Institute represents such a third space, where Muslim women engage in Qur'ānic study and develop both personal and communal religious identities. This space offers a refuge from patriarchal structures often found in both religious and secular

contexts. Within Al Huda, women challenge and reinterpret traditional gender roles, fostering a sense of empowerment that extends beyond the private sphere into broader social contexts. Understanding third spaces as sites of resistance and transformation, especially with regards to faith, is essential to appreciating how these women navigate their identities in a complex and often contradictory world.

Understanding Muslim Women's Perceptions of Empowerment through the Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model and Standpoint Feminist Theory

The Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model also emphasizes supportive ecosystems and engagement with gender dynamics, aligning with research on Muslim women's mental health. It highlights the importance of community support in addressing gender-specific challenges, recognizing the interconnectedness of individual and collective empowerment.

Standpoint feminist theory shares common ground with the Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model, as both emphasize empowering women through transformative processes. Standpoint feminism posits that women's experiences, shaped by their social locations, should be central in understanding social structures. Similarly, the Qur'ānic Empowerment Model asserts that Qur'ānic education empowers women across intellectual, spiritual, and emotional dimensions, making their experiences central to understanding empowerment.

Considering the perspectives of early Muslim scholars, scholars argue that cultural contexts influenced their interpretations of women's roles. However, I contend that a revisionist approach to Qur'ānic learning is unnecessary. Many Muslim women, including those in my study, view their religious identity as a source of empowerment

and a tool against gender oppression, rather than as an aspect needing Western liberal reinterpretation (Al Wazni, 2015; Haddad, 2007). The Qur'ān and Prophetic traditions offered innovative perspectives on women's roles, emphasizing justice and rights, which continue to be central to Muslim women's struggles for justice today. As a result, this approach challenges Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed, presenting them instead as empowered agents. By acknowledging the emotional and symbolic aspects of empowerment, this framework disrupts reductive narratives that fail to capture the richness of Muslim women's experiences.

In Canada's diverse Muslim population, emphasizing a strong Muslim identity can counter pervasive stereotypes and foster connections across cultural and national lines. For instance, Ruby (2006) highlights the sense of insecurity experienced by Canadian Muslim women due to negative perceptions of Islam, which impacts their sense of belonging. These women construct their identities in response to these perceptions, creating a sense of 'home' within multiple interconnected social spaces. For Canadian Muslim women deeply engaged in Qur'ānic studies, identity negotiation is particularly complex. Their religious studies help construct a Muslim identity that is both deeply rooted in faith and open to Canada's multicultural environment (Omar, 2011). This identity transcends stereotypes and embodies a cosmopolitan ethos, where religious, cultural, and national identities coexist. Similarly, Afshar, Aitken, and Franks (2005) and Sirin and Fine (2007) observe that post-9/11, Muslim identities, particularly among youth, are increasingly defined by religion rather than nationality. This shift is also evident among Canadian Muslim women studying the Qur'ān, who assert a strong Muslim identity in response to global discourses seeking to marginalize them (Akram,

2023). The Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model emphasizes relationships with God and other women as key components of empowerment, resonating with standpoint feminist theory. Standpoint feminism argues that marginalized groups, including women, offer unique insights into societal structures and power dynamics. The model highlights the importance of spiritual and communal connections in fostering empowerment, aligning with standpoint feminist principles. Both perspectives recognize education's role in empowerment. Standpoint feminism advocates for educational practices that challenge traditional power structures, while the Qur'ānic Empowerment Model focuses on Qur'ānic education as a transformative force. This connection reinforces the idea that education, whether secular or religious, plays a crucial role in empowering women and challenging oppressive structures. By linking the Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model with standpoint feminist theory, scholars can enrich their understanding of empowerment, well-being and identity by considering the unique experiences and perspectives of Muslim women within the broader feminist discourse.

Problematizing the Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model

While this study fosters a sense of global Muslim unity, it also introduces challenges concerning Cosmopolitanism, which encourages engagement across diverse religious and cultural boundaries. For instance, some participants referenced an oft-recited Qur'ānic verse promoting inclusivity:

“O people, indeed, We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another... Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted” (49:13).

Yet, the focus on a unified Muslim identity might be seen as retreating from the complexities of navigating multiple identities in a multicultural society (Davids, 2013). Cosmopolitanism calls for the integration of various cultural and religious influences, which can sometimes conflict with the formation of a singular religious identity (Ernst & Martin, 2010).

Gender can be seen to play both a divisive and unifying role. The women-only environment provides a necessary space for participants to express themselves, learn, and support each other, free from the pressures of mixed-gender settings. This space, as participants expressed, was essential for their spiritual and psychological well-being. However, it also raises questions about its impact on broader Cosmopolitan engagement. While the women in this study found empowerment in their shared gender identity, this separation may inadvertently exclude men and limit opportunities for mixed-gender spaces that could promote a more inclusive form of engagement, learning and dialogue within the Muslim community.

Despite these challenges, the Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model has strengths that align with Cosmopolitan ideals. Qur'ānic learning plays a significant role in shaping the identity of Muslim women, fostering a strong sense of community and shared purpose. While this identity is primarily formed within the Muslim community, it does not exclude engagement with broader societal structures (Edmunds, 2013). In fact, by cultivating a strong foundation in their religious identity, Muslim women may be better positioned to engage confidently in multicultural contexts, contributing to a more pluralistic and inclusive environment (Davids, 2013).

While the Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model presents tensions with Cosmopolitanism, it also offers opportunities for a more inclusive approach. By valuing shared religious practice while fostering dialogue across cultural and religious lines, a more nuanced Cosmopolitanism can emerge—one that respects religious particularities while embracing global diversity (Davids, 2013). Addressing these tensions requires balancing strong religious identities with meaningful engagement in the diverse society in which these women live (Edmunds, 2013).

Haslam et al. (2009) identify five key themes in research on social identity and health: symptom appraisal, health-related behaviors, social support, coping mechanisms, and clinical outcomes. These themes aligned with my findings. For instance, Qur'ānic knowledge shaped how women interpreted their stress, often viewing it as part of a spiritual test that required patience and resilience. Qur'ānic recitation and prayer also became regular coping strategies, deeply intertwined with their religious identity. Furthermore, social support was referenced by several participants as a source of strength and belonging to a community of “students of knowledge”, where shared religious identity fostered emotional support and resilience. For example, several participants described the exercise of academically learning the knowledge and inform strategies to promote the well-being of Muslim women through a framework that integrates religious identity into broader health and social policies.

Faith, religious identity, and peer support however, were complicated by the fact that some participants in this study felt that belonging to a close-knit religious community and then switching to the “real world” was culture shock. For some, this bubble of intense religious adherence fosters a strong sense of belonging and faith.

However, for others, particularly those who may not have had a strong foundation in religious practice beforehand, this immersive experience can backfire when they feel unable to live up to the religious ideals presented. This dissonance between the idealized version of faith taught in the institution and the individual's ability to live it out day-to-day can lead to feelings of inadequacy, or worse, a rejection of those ideals altogether.

The Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in clinical settings, where faith-based identity and community-driven support are recognized as essential in improving mental health outcomes for Muslim women. My study found that Qur'ānic learning cultivated a nuanced sense of empowerment rooted in faith, which might not align with the broader feminist discourse, yet still positively impacted women's mental and emotional well-being. Religious identity emerged as a crucial factor, providing a framework for coping with stress and adversity, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings suggest that integrating religious identity into broader health and social policies can play a significant role in promoting the well-being of Canadian Muslim women.

Methodological Tensions and Limitations

While this study offers meaningful insights into the ways Qur'ānic learning impacts well-being, identity, and empowerment, it's important to acknowledge the potential limitations that could have shaped the results.

Firstly, there's the possibility of self-selection bias. Participants were all engaged in Qur'ānic study at a particular religious education school, and those who found the program to be beneficial would have more likely responded to participate in this study,

whereas those with more critical views were perhaps less inclined to participate. This would have inherently made the findings skewed toward positive experiences. While the stories shared are powerful, this limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of Muslim women who may have different experiences with Qur'ānic education or who do not engage in such formalized study settings.

Another consideration is my own positionality. Being part of the same religious community, specifically connected to Al Huda Institute, may have unintentionally influenced the data. Participants might have felt less comfortable expressing negative experiences or may have highlighted the positive aspects of their learning journey to align with what they thought I was expecting as an appropriate response. Although efforts were made to maintain a safe and non-judgement space, my close connection to the institution as both an active alumnus, and a former teaching assistant may have introduced response bias.

Participant roles and life stages were not explicitly analyzed in terms of their relation to Qur'ānic learning, well-being and identity. For example, married participants with children may find it challenging to balance family and religious education but view these studies as crucial for spiritual growth and embedding Islamic values in their homes, especially when homeschooling or guiding their children's religious education.

In addition, participants reported occupying various roles at the institute, including alumni and staff. Notably, 29% are alumni who now serve as staff, showing a deep, enduring connection to the institute. Many alumni who were participants in the study can also represent a more positive bias towards the institution.

Finally, virtual interviews, though convenient and necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic, may have lacked the depth of face-to-face interaction, where nuances of body language could enrich the conversation. Also, while the artifacts provided a unique way to explore personal connections to Qur'ānic learning, participants might have chosen items that reflected what they aspired to feel, or even objects that were easier to describe rather than their actual, everyday experiences.

Despite these limitations, the findings from this study are valuable in understanding the complex nature of discourses around faith, well-being and feminist ideals especially in Canadian Muslim women, contextualized within an Islamic Psychology and Cosmopolitan framework. This also suggests the need for further research by engaging women from more diverse ethnic and age backgrounds and using a range of methods to expand our understanding of how Qur'ānic learning affects well-being and identity in different settings.

Artifact Elicitation

The following section will delve into secondary data collection from the interviews with Muslim women, looking specifically at artifact elicitation. Artifact elicitation draws from a constructivist approach and is aimed to understand the physical representation of individuals' experiences and interpretations of how their study of the Qur'ān is linked with their mental well-being and perceptions of empowerment (Douglas et al., 2015). Table 4 outlines the three objectives of artifact elicitation in this study including 1. Connection of the artifact to the study of the Qur'ān; 2. Symbolic /Spiritual Connection and 3. Emotional/Well-Being Connection. The following section represents a sample of some of the photos that were shared by participants either during or after the interview,

along with the explanation from the participants about their chosen object, word, or drawing. The analysis was done across three lines of exploration: 1. Attitudes & Perceptions (connection of object to study of the Qur'ān, well-being, and identity), 2. In Depth Reflection (symbolic connection with the object to Qur'ānic studies) and 3. Emotional Significance of the Object to Qur'ānic Studies (exploring the emotional depth associated with these objects and how they serve as conduits for spiritual connection).

Additionally, constructivism focuses on the individual meaning making process, and individuals are viewed as active agents gaining knowledge about social context through their experiences with the environment. However, some thoughts important to meaning making may be unconscious and thus inaccessible to both the interviewer and the interviewee. While some authors suggest methods to encourage greater disclosure and self-awareness during interviews, techniques that remind interviewees of different contexts can be particularly effective in prompting new insights.

Furthermore, elicitation interviews use some type of artifact, usually visual, to help gain a direct understanding of the participant on an abstract topic. Artifacts used can include diagrams, relational maps, photographs, drawings and arts, writings, scrapbooks, maps, television programs, and video diaries (Douglas et al., 2015). Graphic elicitation is common to help visualize and simplify a complex and abstract idea. Both graphic and media-based elicitation interviews are often used for children and younger participants. The photo elicitation method has been used successfully in engineering education as both a research and pedagogical method (Douglas et al., 2015).

There were three themes that were constructed during artifact: 1. Connection of the artifact to the study of the Qur'ān; 2. Symbolic/Spiritual Connection of the Artifact to the Study of the Qur'ān; and 3. Emotional/Well-Being Connection to the Study of the Qur'ān. Each of these will be discussed below with reference to participant quotes as well as images shared by the participants.

Connection of the Artifact to the Study of the Qur'ān

All participants felt that their chosen object, whether tangible like a book or abstract, like a word, was related directly to their journey of studying and reflecting on the Qur'ān. This is also in alignment with the conceptual categories and codes that were constructed from the data, in that learning the Qur'ān had an impact on the students' academic understanding of their religion, their identity as Muslim women, their level of spirituality as well as their overall emotional and mental well-being. For example, one participant explained the direct connection of the *Mushaf* (Figure 6) that she used for her studies at Al Huda with being reminded to turn back to the Qur'ān, for her daily recitation:

So this might be basic, but I chose my mushaf for the object. It's my very first one...It's like, kind of special to me, because it's, like, all worn out now...I turned to it whenever I feel, well, not necessarily when I feel sad but whenever I remember it, I'm like, okay, I need to recite Qur'ān today (Participant 31).

Further probing revealed a latent connection for many of the participants about their relationship with the object and how it related to the Qur'ān, and in return impacted their views on community and collective learning. For example, Participant 26 chose the benches (Figure 7) where the students sat in during the classes; these benches are not

unique to Al Huda Institute but are a common sight amongst Mosques and *Madrassahs* (education centers) for children and adults to sit on the floor to read the Qur'ān. The participant mentioned her reasoning for choosing benches as something more symbolic:

When you said an object the first thing I thought about is the benches. That's what I thought of because it was a very comfortable place for me to just sit there and there were sisters around me, but I loved the corner... I think what the benches... because when I close my eyes, I picture sisterhood around me... So you feel like you're not alone. Yeah, I think that part of and just being connected with sisters from different parts that maybe I wouldn't have met if it wasn't for Al-Huda, just that connection helps with my well-being as well
(Participant 26).

Symbolic/Spiritual Connection of the Artifact to the Study of the Qur'ān

Further probing revealed a latent connection for many of the participants about their relationship with the object and how it related to the Qur'ān, and in return impacted their level of spirituality. The following artifacts represent a symbolic connection for the participants between their Qur'ānic learning and the chosen object. For example, one participant explored her connection with learning the Qur'ān and how it was deeply intertwined with her experiences in nature (Figure 8):

...like it would be a leaf. Because whenever I would be at Al Huda, like, I was very like, adamant about taking like nature walks, like after my studies. And I would use that time to like, reflect on like the lesson. And like, sometimes I would go with my roommates and we would just kind of talk and like build that sisterhood. And it was always like, I was always like, so odd by like the beauty of

like the nature in Canada ...just beautiful the surroundings were. I always found like that solace in like nature and kind of being, immersed in that natural environment and kind of seeing the signs behind certain things. And so sometimes it would be leaves that would be falling or different things in nature that I would be observing. And I guess that natural element was very connected to me (Participant 3).

Similarly, a few participants referred to their white *hijab* (the one wore as a uniform where the women in this study were learning the Qur'ān) as a unique and symbolic connection of unity while studying the Qur'ān (Figure 9):

I chose a white scarf as a symbol of Al-Huda for me. It was basically we had a uniform and part of the uniform was the white scarf and for me, what it represented was unity for Al-Huda, it was unity. So basically, no matter what, like, initially, I would actually hate wearing the uniform. But actually, like, when I look back at it, it actually made so much sense. And I believe that it actually enhanced my ability to like really focus on my studying when I was there, and also the fact that it demonstrated a sense of unity and cohesiveness with the community or the students that were there. And it represents the fact that, no matter who we are, no matter educational status, no matter our social economic status, no matter any of those things, at the end of the day, we're all one. We're all of His creation, and we were all there to, with one purpose and which was to study His Book...just the fact that it was white, it symbolizes like, a sense of like,

purity and it's like a clean slate, like, come to this class, where you come with an open mind (Participant 9).

Another participant was reminded of her time learning the Qur'ān whenever she saw her white *hijab*:

.. the white hijab specifically. White hijab is not a common color for hijab as you know, it's always a black hijab, right? So, when I look at it specifically, it reminds me of my journey as a student and Al-Huda and because of their uniform color. But when I look at it, it also reminds me of all the days that I spent with the Qur'ān. And the time I spent like pouring over my notes and [unclear 9:05]. And I did it with a lot of zeal...(Participant 27).

The participant describes the white *hijab* as a meaningful symbol of her time as a student at Al-Huda, where the *hijab*'s color, distinct from the more common black one wore in traditional *madrassahs* (Islamic schools), evokes memories of her dedication and enthusiasm in studying the Qur'ān. The *hijab* represents the commitment and effort she invested in her studies, serving as a personal reminder of those intense and devoted days.

As a memo I had written my own reflection upon hearing the explanation of the symbolic meaning of white as part of the otherwise standard uniform:

White can symbolize peace – peace that you get from finally understanding your faith tradition and why you believe in what you do; it's also different from other traditional Islamic women's clothing especially in the Emirates where black is preferred for cultural reasons – white looks present, fresh, and a source of light...(KQ).

Emotional/Well-Being Connection to the Study of the Qur'ān

Several artifacts were explored for the emotional depth associated with these objects and how they serve as conduits for spiritual connection. For example, in Figure 10, the participant shared how a ring profoundly connected her to her overall well-being through the emotions it evoked:

And I remember the year that, this was actually an anniversary gift. So this was a gift that my husband gave me. And that's the year when I reconnected or in 2011, when I started continuing with Al-Huda, and I feel like I started breathing again. So I just remember, I would be wearing this all the time. And it was with his support and Alhamdulillah, that I was able to do any of it like with two little kids going with me to class all the time. And I just remember, every time I'd be sitting in making my notes, my ring would always be in my view. So, just like my Al-Huda whole past 10 years' experience, this ring has been with me and it's just this constant reminder that, I can't do well in life, unless I'm connected to the Qur'ān and my Muslim community. Yeah, so, for me it's just a symbol, it just reminds me...I have a lot of other rings but, when I go through my jewelry tray, and I see this one, like it just solidifies that and it's a huge sigh of relief that like Allah blessed me with the ability to be connected with the Qur'ān and a community of people who will constantly remind me to continue on this journey. Because without it, I was suffocating (Participant 18).

When asked about if and how the ring was connected to her emotional well-being, the participant replied:

I think for me, it's so intertwined; And that affected my daily mood, it affected my interaction with my spouse with my children, very little children, I think studying the Qur'ān, and constantly just being in touch with it, really helped me stabilize myself a little bit. And it also really helped me every step of the way, put things into perspective and be like, "Okay, this is okay, this is going to be fine." So, for me, it is literally, my well-being is 100% dependent on this. Like my husband would even tell me, when we would have a break. Like if I would go visit family in Calgary, I would be gone for like a month. And I didn't have class. And then when I would come back, he would notice a huge difference in my ability to like cope with basic things in the day. And for me, it really was like oxygen (Participant 18).

When asked about the connection of their study of the Qur'ān to their identity, two themes emerged. The first observation, like the results of the interview, was that of confusion and asking for clarity about what is meant by identity and how identity was so pervasive that it was not seen as a separate factor, in their overall Canadian Muslim female identity. As one participant mentioned after probing about how her chosen artifact, was related to her identity, she replied with:

My identity - I don't know if it has a lot to do with my identity, but I guess you could tell a lot about the type of person I am. I rely on it for a sense of protection. I rely on it for a sense of connection with God, with the Qur'ān. And I guess, it just more so identifies my characteristics rather than... like it's not

really something that shows my identity to other people, you know, it's like for myself (Participant 4).

Several participants shared the aforementioned sentiments about defining their in relation to the *Qur'ān*. Interestingly, several participants felt the same about the identity question during the semi-structured interview, demonstrating the pervasiveness of the Islamic faith on the overall identity of this participant, and according to the data, many others in this study:

And on the identity part, I don't know if there is a specific connection that I can think of. I mean, it's everything, you know, my whole life is like determined according to the Qur'ān or according to my faith, like everything I do. Like when I go out, we have to kind of organize our day according to prayer times, or we have to organize our day according to when to break our fast. You know, it's just how my life is. It's a difficult to explain, difficult question (Participant 4).

Another participant expressed similar sentiments regarding her white hijab and how it related to her identity. The following quote is in fact a representation of how several participants, who chose to bring in the *hijab* as their artifact, felt about wearing it:

So a hijab is, is very much part of the identity of a Muslim woman, is a part of, for me, when I chose to wear it, till today, it reminds me every single day, when I go out, it reminds me that I am a Muslim, that I have to follow a certain code of ethics, and morals and values. But the main thing for me is just reminding me of my identity of who I am, what my purpose of being in this world is...And that's to worship God. So, it's a reminder, every single day of that, and the importance of

pursuing knowledge, even because you start to focus, I mean, obviously, we were supposed to take care of our physical appearance and well-being, and we're supposed to think it's a very important part like hygiene, cleanliness, and taking care of our bodies and ourselves is very important part of our religion as well. But the hijab represents the fact that there's more to life than just complying with like beauty centers out there, and it's ery much connected to gaining knowledge. Not even just knowledge, I'm just focusing on your internal development and your internal sense of person as opposed to just the external. And so the hijab represents that because that's what you're focusing on when you're choosing, you're liberating yourself, people think of it as an oppression, but you're actually liberating yourself from the chains of society and the expectations of society in terms of what they expect you to be like...(Participant 9).

The response (from more than one participant) highlights the profound integration of Islamic faith into their daily life, making it challenging to distinguish between faith and identity. This difficulty in pinpointing a specific connection between identity and faith suggests that, for this participant and many others in the study, faith is not just a component of identity but the foundation of it. The pervasiveness of religious practices, such as organizing the day around the five daily prayer times or fasting for the month of Ramadan, demonstrates that faith shapes every aspect of life, blurring the lines between where faith ends, and identity begins. This response reflects a holistic understanding of identity, where faith is not seen as an isolated element but as an all-encompassing force that defines one's entire existence. The difficulty in articulating this

connection might indicate that for deeply religious individuals, identity is so intertwined with faith that separating the two feels unnatural or even impossible, reinforcing the idea that faith is the core of their self-concept.

Reflections on Artifact Elicitation as a Form of Data Collection

Artifact elicitation proved effective in studying nuanced concepts like empowerment through an intersectional and faith-based approach. Objects served as prompts, enabling participants to explore and articulate their experiences. Some artifacts, deeply personal, presented challenges when participants were unable to provide a holistic picture, emphasizing the need for skillful interviewing in the semi-structured nature of this method.

For example, Participant 32 chose the Qur'ān in its entirety, however, she mentioned a direct emotional connection with its recitation and remembrance:

... whenever I read the Qur'ān, it makes me happy. It makes me feel like this is my purpose.

The participant interestingly, did not bring in a physical copy of the Qur'ān, and instead described the visual imagery in her mind as her artifact. When asked about what Qur'ān means to her, she explained:

Because whenever I think of the Qur'ān, it's just light.. light just represents this guidance from Allah (SWT). And it represents knowledge as well. And knowledge, I feel empowers us, especially as women. Knowledge makes us cross barriers that we never even thought of crossing. And I personally feel every woman should gain the knowledge of the Qur'ān. And the men should support her because... Alhamdulillah! I see that the society is... Day-by-day women are

doing this. They're coming forward. It's just scares you sometimes find the two extremes. That's the sad part where one extreme is where women jump to one end, it's just me, myself, I don't need anybody. Or the other end, where they're oppressed. And they're not allowed to pursue their goals (Participant 32).

Another example of artifact elicitation is demonstrated by Participant 24, who shared her bookmark (Figure 11). She described it as a constant reminder of self-control, illustrating the challenges faced as a student and the need for *sabr* (patience):

So, it had the words...self-control, steadfastness in doing good deeds, restraint in doing evil and the third one... And it's one of the bookmarks I use, it disappears, and then it comes back again. Alhamdulillah (All Praise to Allah) it strengthens you or gives you hope or it solidifies or helps you make a decision. But it just a reminder, that helps the nafs (behavioural inclinations). We had to have self-control as students (Participant 24).

One of my own memos from this conversation around the bookmark stated:

This quote to me reflects the symbolic significance of a bookmark as a tangible reminder of self-control, steadfastness, and patience. The bookmark showing up now and then is a reminder of those important values in her life, giving her strength and hope just when she needs it. The way it "disappears and comes back" reflects the ebb and flows of a spiritual journey, showing how even small things can carry deep personal meaning and keep her connected to her faith. (KQ).

Many artifacts presented during Zoom-based interviews (Figures 13-16) were concrete, such as the *mushaf*, prayer beads, and *hijab*, yet the meaning-making process revealed abstract concepts and clarified research questions.

In Figure 12, Participant 12 demonstrates her choice of a personal drawing of the heart illustrates the depth achieved through artifact elicitation. She realized alternative and deeper meanings in her chosen object, describing how her understanding of the heart expanded, connecting with Allah and providing a sense of calmness and liberation:

... the heart is getting like, it feels like it's extending and stretching and you know, ...I'm thinking like many arrows can be placed from that and put multiple words to those things, and is thinking like SubhanAllah (Glory be to Allah)..it gives you that peace and calm knowing that the existence of Allah...I felt like you know liberating, feeling like, knowing aware of yourself...the connection with Allah was like that through the heart...it feels like everything is with that I felt like even calmness whatever the situation that we are dealing with (Participant 12).

However, certain challenges in artifact elicitation were noted. Some participants provided limited information, either due to the interviewer's inability to see the artifact in-person or offering superficial explanations (Douglas et al., 2015). Probing questions were asked to unveil deeper layers of understanding and achieve rich descriptions. One disadvantage of artifact elicitation is that it requires more skill than conducting a stand-alone semi-structured interview due to probing questions, the dynamic nature of an artifact, and whether the participant shows a physical object, a drawing, or something imagined.

Connection between Artifact Elicitation and Standpoint Feminist Theory

Through artifact analysis research methods qualitative studies gain access to profound comprehension by analyzing physical items that represent participant experiences. This analytical method demonstrates appropriate adherence to standpoint feminist theory through multiple crucial aspects. The research method focuses on performance-based knowledge creation processes through which knowledge emerges dynamically based on the creation context instead of viewing knowledge as fixed information (Brooks, 2007). The social location of women creates unique experiences which allow them to bring important perspectives to understand social phenomena according to feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004). Scientific processes demonstrate partial objectivity because they contain systematic blinkers that overlook or discount the views of marginalized populations particularly women.

According to feminist theory we should acknowledge multiple human requirements because suppressing oppression cannot serve as one-size-fits-all solution. Such an approach understands that the numerous aspects of oppression require thorough examination and debate. Feminist standpoint theory supports the destructive process of established perspectives to establish space for unheard and marginalized voices. The theory demonstrates concern about fixed ontologies since these systems of reality belief restrict the capability to investigate and critique active power structures. When researchers apply artifact analysis together with standpoint feminist theory they gain enhanced capabilities to understand the particular context-based experiences of their participants.

Conclusion

Overall, a person's well-being consists of multiple interconnected elements which combine physical, mental and social aspects of their life. Faith-based belief systems positively affect well-being according to research studies because they offer purpose and resilience together with contextual empowerment. In Canada Muslim women experience how their entire well-being takes shape from the connection of personal identity to religious belief and environmental social settings despite facing distinctive barriers along the way. The increase of Islamophobic hate against Muslim women wearing hijab and the misrepresentations they receive demand immediate understanding of Muslim women whose faith practice includes studying the Qur'ān.

I conducted this study for my doctoral work to address the dearth of academic and empirical voices within feminist investigations about Muslim women's roles and identities alongside their study of the Qur'an. This research investigated Canadian Muslim women's use of Islamic faith to handle Canadian identity along with everyday life challenges and well-being promotion by integrating Islamic principles.

The research included 38 in-depth virtual discussions with Muslim women operating within a female Islamic school at any level of Qur'ān learning based in the Greater Toronto Area. Participating students used arts-informed research methods to choose between photographing or drawing artifacts depicting their experiences in Qur'ān studies. The research method improved the depth of gathered qualitative information. Analysis of the transcribed interviews using constructivist grounded theory on Dedoose software demonstrated three main categories: Spiritual Dimensions of the Qur'ān, Well-being Relations of the Qur'ān and Knowledge of Self through Qur'ānic

Study. A faith-based interpretation of the study enabled the analysis of Qur'ānic study effects on *qalb* (heart) and *ruh* (spiritual life force) as well as *nafs* (behavioural inclination) through Standpoint Feminist Theory together with Islamic psychology models that explored overall mental well-being.

The Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model was established through analyzing participant quotes (Figure 5) into a complete framework that integrates all empowering elements for Muslim females (Figure 5). The model functions as an intermediary between feminist and faith beliefs particularly for Muslim women who seek religious knowledge while residing in Western societies. The grounded theory analysis revealed that Qur'ānic education conducted by female learners in women-only spaces contributes transformative power to faith and faith-based learning which integrates naturally with daily activities. The Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model establishes a method to comprehend the various features of Qur'ānic education and its transformative effects on personal and communal empowerment.

Empirical evidence strongly suggests that spirituality promotes well-being through the development of physical and psychological resilience, as well as a connection to the Divine. Studies about refugee populations coming from Syria confirm that faith-based coping practices appear often among diverse newcomers (Qasim & Hynie, 2019). Religion also provides a framework and resource for Buddhist and Muslim newcomers, as it enables them to confront resettlement challenges (Bunn et al., 2022; Yeager, 2021). Academic research of Somali and Kosovar refugees depicts how faith supports their adaptation process while reducing depressive symptoms. The participants in this study adopted similar Qur'ānic religious teachings for addressing

financial insecurity throughout their resettlement process as previous research subjects did. Women participating in this research help develop the Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment model because they used the Qur'ān to gain empowerment and wellness while showing that faith remains essential for building resilience and mental health.

Qur'ānic study salved people as a complete source for solace along with moral direction despite the interpretive intricacies and internal community stress around mental health acceptance and perceptions. Qur'ānic Studies needs decay of its established epistemological concepts while embracing multidimensional research techniques for true diversification (Lumbard, 2024). Recognizing multiple epistemologies permits us to build a field of Qur'ān scholarship which reflects the vast understanding and interpretation methods (Lumbard, 2024). The creation of such intellectual paradigms demands the elimination of Euro-American hegemony while maintaining opportunities for various epistemological perspectives to interact with one another especially because Muslim women are starting their faith studies (Shaikh, 2022).

Artifact elicitation delivered efficient insights about the empirical subject of empowerment by combining intersectionality with religious studies. Participants used physical objects during the research to help them unfold their life experiences through exploration and verbalization. Personal artifacts became difficult investigation subjects due to participant shortcomings that made them provide unclear pictures of their experiences. This situation clarified the significance of skilled interviewing in semi-structured studies.

The discussion evaluated the unique difficulties and advantages alongside weaknesses as members of both the Muslim community and visible minorities who identify as female. The participants relied on Islam and Qur'ānic study as unifying forces which formed their welfare while defining their identity through prayer as a response to obstacles from the COVID-19 pandemic and other difficulties. The continuous immigration of people to Canada necessitates immediate attention to mental health support gaps according to both religious groups and healthcare providers.

Future Directions and Recommendations

Throughout my doctoral dissertation, I sought to understand how learning the Qur'an in a female-only environment influenced Muslim women's perceptions of well-being, identity, and empowerment. Future research could take a more comprehensive approach to track the longitudinal effects of these educational experiences on spiritual and psychological well-being. By observing participants longitudinally, with varying backgrounds and developments, researchers can gain insight into how Muslim women's spiritual practices change over time and their impact on their mental health and of their sense of self.

Furthermore, although this study only highlights the benefits of women's contexts, it would be interesting to compare these experiences with experiences in co-ed settings and religious education contexts. Comparative research may reveal important differences in academic outcomes, perceived empowerment, and the relevance of education to well-being between the two settings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how male-segregated settings and between women influences religious teaching.

Considering that this research focuses on Muslim women in Canada, there is also a need to explore how these findings translate across different cultural contexts. Studies conducted in countries with varying levels of gender equality and religious freedom, such as Pakistan, where Al Huda Institute was founded, could uncover how cultural and societal factors shape the experiences of Muslim women in similar educational settings. Future research could also investigate how the intersection of cultural identity and religious practice influence perceptions of empowerment and well-being of Muslim women on a global scale.

The important role of peer support for Muslim women studying the Qur'an in this study points to another important area for further research. Because participants identified the nuanced nature of peer support, it would also be useful to problematize peer support and explore the potential challenges that arise when relying heavily on these peer networks for emotional and in spiritual help. This could include issues such as exploring group consciousness, reinforcing traditional gender roles, or possibly excluding certain groups of women based on their level of religiosity. Understanding these challenges can lead to religious awareness developing inclusive and safe education programs for women.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine how women's participation in Qur'an-focused programs influences the religious and spiritual development of their children and families, including its relation with their well-being and identity. This might help to broaden the scope of women's religious education on communal and societal perceptions of faith, family and well-being.

Future studies should also consider the intersectionality of participants' identities, including factors such as, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and migration history by how these identities intersect with how Qur'ānic learning is taken up. Another possibility is to look at personality factors and which personality types might be more interested in learning the Qur'ān in a way that is relevant to their daily lives versus relegating it simply to the Mosque or for special religious occasions.

Some participants in this study reported using Qur'ānic learning as a coping mechanism for personal trauma, such as divorce or postpartum depression. Future research could focus specifically on the therapeutic aspects of Qur'ānic study, exploring how religious education helps women manage various forms of trauma and adversity. This could include investigating the effectiveness of Qur'ānic learning as a form of mental health support for Muslim women.

The decision to use constructivist grounded theory in this study was both methodologically and epistemologically sound. The limitations of classical grounded theory, particularly its requirement for theoretical neutrality, were incompatible with the context and objectives of this research. Constructivist grounded theory, by contrast, provided a robust framework that allowed for the integration of existing knowledge with new data, resulting in a richer and more complex understanding of how Qur'ānic study influences the identity, empowerment, and mental well-being of Muslim women in Canada. This approach not only ensured the rigor of the analysis but also contributed valuable insights to the broader discourse on faith, identity, and mental health.

A future recommendation for analysis might be to compare the responses between younger and older participants, as well as those currently studying the Qur'ān

versus graduates of the Qur'ānic institute. It could be insightful to explore how current students compared to graduates of the Qur'ān course discuss their connections to specific artifacts and their views on identity and well-being through faith. Noting any differences in how various demographics of students describe their learning journeys and how these experiences impact their mental well-being, sense of identity, and empowerment through different life phases could provide valuable insights. The potential differences in mental health, peer support, and views on spirituality and religion based on marital status and parenthood were not assessed in this study. Specifically, the variations in responses between married and unmarried participants, as well as between those with and without children, were not explored.

By pursuing these future research directions, scholars can build upon the findings of this study to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the role of Qur'ānic education in the lives of Muslim women. Such research would not only enrich the academic literature but also inform the development of educational practices and policies that support the spiritual, psychological, and social well-being of Muslim women worldwide.

Tables

Table 1

Assumptions Underlying a Critical Feminist Framework (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019)

Intersectionality	Emphasizes the interconnectedness of identities, recognizing individuals' experiences are shaped by diverse social categories such as gender, race, and class.
Power Dynamics	Being sensitive to power dynamics in the research context, exploring how power interacts with gender and other social categories, shaping both the research process and outcomes.
Participatory Research	Involving participants in the research process. This could mean collaborating with the community being studied, valuing their perspectives, addressing their concerns and needs and disrupting the power hierarchy in research.
Language Representation	Being inclusive and using non-biased language, as well as being cautious of perpetuating stereotypes.
Ethical Considerations	Ensuring that consent is conducted in a culturally appropriate way, confidentiality is paramount, and care is taken not to re-traumatize participants and that marginalized communities are not taken advantage of in the realm of research.
Deconstruction of Gender Norms	Deconstruct and problematize gender norms and understanding how societal expectations inform certain gender norms and stereotypes.
Policy Implications	Aim to inform policy change and advocate for social justice. Dismantling oppressive systems and promoting gender equality.

Table 2*Participant Demographics and Roles at Qur'ānic Institute*

Participant Number	Age	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Children	Role at Qur'ānic institute
1	38	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni, Current Staff
2	30	South Asian	Divorced	Y	Alumni
3	23	South Asian	Single	N	Current in-person student, Current Staff
4	42	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni, Current Staff
5	31	East African	Single	N	Current online student
6	38	South Asian	Married	N	Alumni
7	26	South Asian	Single	N	Current in-person student
8	31	South Asian	Married	Y	Current in-person student
9	31	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni
10	27	East African	Single	N	Current in-person student
11	24	South Asian	Single	N	Current in-person student
12	26	South Asian	Single	N	Alumni
13	25	South Asian	Single	N	Current virtual student
14	29	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni, Current Staff
15	29	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni, Current Staff

16	34	South Asian	Divorced	Y	Alumni
17	62	South Asian	Widowed	Y	Current in-person student
18	28	South Asian	Single	N	Alumni
19	38	East African	Divorced	Y	Alumni
20	24	South Asian	Single	N	Alumni, Current Staff
21	29	East African	Single	N	Current in-person student
22	41	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni, Current Staff
23	43	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni
24	36	South Asian	Married	N	Alumni, Current Staff
25	33	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni
26	25	South Asian	Single	N	Alumni, Current Staff
27	38	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni
28	30	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni, Current Staff
29	33	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni
30	31	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni, Current Staff
31	28	South Asian	Single	N	Current in-person student
32	45	South Asian	Married	Y	Current in-person student
33	34	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni, Current Staff
34	27	South Asian	Married	Y	Current online student
35	26	South Asian	Married	Y	Alumni
36	29	South Asian	Married	Y	Current online student
37	34	South Asian	Divorced	Y	Alumni
38	30	East African	Married	Y	Alumni, Current Staff

Table 3*Creation of conceptual categories through Axial Coding*

Conceptual Category	Definition	Thematic Sub Codes
Qur'ānic Learning, Spirituality and Mental Well-Being	Looking at patterns amongst the codes relating to Qur'ān, it made sense to include our four main conceptual categories as aligned with the Qur'ān; Inner Spiritual Awakening: Participants describe a profound inner transformation that goes beyond mere academic learning, leading to a spiritual awakening.	- Spirituality and Religious Education - Islamic Religion vs Muslim Culture - Spirituality and Identity
Qur'ānic Learning, Empowerment and Well-Being	The interconnectedness between the Qur'ān (Islamic scripture, Islamic law, stories in the Qur'ān, metaphors, imagery, and lessons drawn) and its influence on the mental well-being of Muslim women, including coping during the COVID pandemic; Integration of Qur'ānic Teachings: The process of integrating Qur'ānic teachings into daily life, impacting personal beliefs and actions; also included themes related to COVID.	- Qur'ān and COVID-19 - Qur'ān and Peer Support
Qur'ānic Learning, Identity and Well-Being	An exploration of how Muslim women perceive and reconcile the teachings of the Qur'ān with feminist principles, shedding light on the intersection of Islamic beliefs and gender equality in the context of mental well-being; Intersectionality of Faith and Identity: Intersectional nature of identity. Exploration of how faith intersects with other aspects of identity, such as gender, contributing to a nuanced understanding of self.	- Qur'ānic Learning and Identity - Qur'ānic Learning and Muslim Women's Environment - Qur'ānic Learning and Personal Empowerment - Qur'ānic Learning and Community Empowerment

Table 4*Key Themes and Categories of the Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Theory*

Theme	Category	Definition
Personal Empowerment	Integration of Qur'ānic Teachings:	Participants emphasized that the teachings of the Qur'ān are fundamental to their spiritual awakening and identity formation. This integration is not just about following religious practices but is deeply tied to personal growth and self-understanding.
	Emotional Significance of Qur'ānic Objects:	The Qur'ān offers lessons that are spiritual and ethical, which go beyond mere cultural practices. This distinction allows women to redefine their roles outside cultural constraints, empowering them to question and resist societal norms that limit their potential. The symbolic connection to Qur'ānic objects contributes to an emotional depth, reinforcing participants' spiritual journeys and sense of identity.
Identity Formation	Communal empowerment	The educational environment fosters a sense of community among women from diverse backgrounds. This shared experience not only enhances

		religious knowledge but also builds a supportive network, contributing to communal empowerment. Participants often describe how their personal growth contributes to the broader empowerment of their families and community. For some participants, practices like wearing the <i>hijab</i> and maintaining modesty were empowering. These practices offer control over their body image and challenge societal stereotypes about Muslim women, providing a means to assert their identity and beliefs
Educational Ecosystem	Knowledge and skills development	Qur'ānic education is seen to acquire not only religious knowledge but also practical skills, such as leadership and entrepreneurship. This educational foundation contributes to the participants' overall empowerment
	Mental and emotional well-being	The educational experience provides participants with a sense of peace, purpose, and confidence. It equips them with the tools to navigate life's challenges and make informed choices, enhancing their mental and emotional well-being.

Table 5*Artifact Elicitation Probing Questions and Objectives*

Question	Objective
1. What does this object mean to you in terms of your study of the Qur'ān?	A) Connection of object to study of the Qur'ān, well-being, and identity
2. In what ways does this object relate to your identity as a Muslim woman?	B) In-depth reflection: Symbolic connection with the object to Qur'ānic studies
3. In what ways does this object relate to your well-being as a Muslim woman?	C) Abstraction from concrete questions; Exploring the emotional depth associated with these objects and how they serve as conduits for spiritual connection

Figures

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Traditional Islamically Integrated Psychotherapy (Reproduced with permission from Khalil Center).

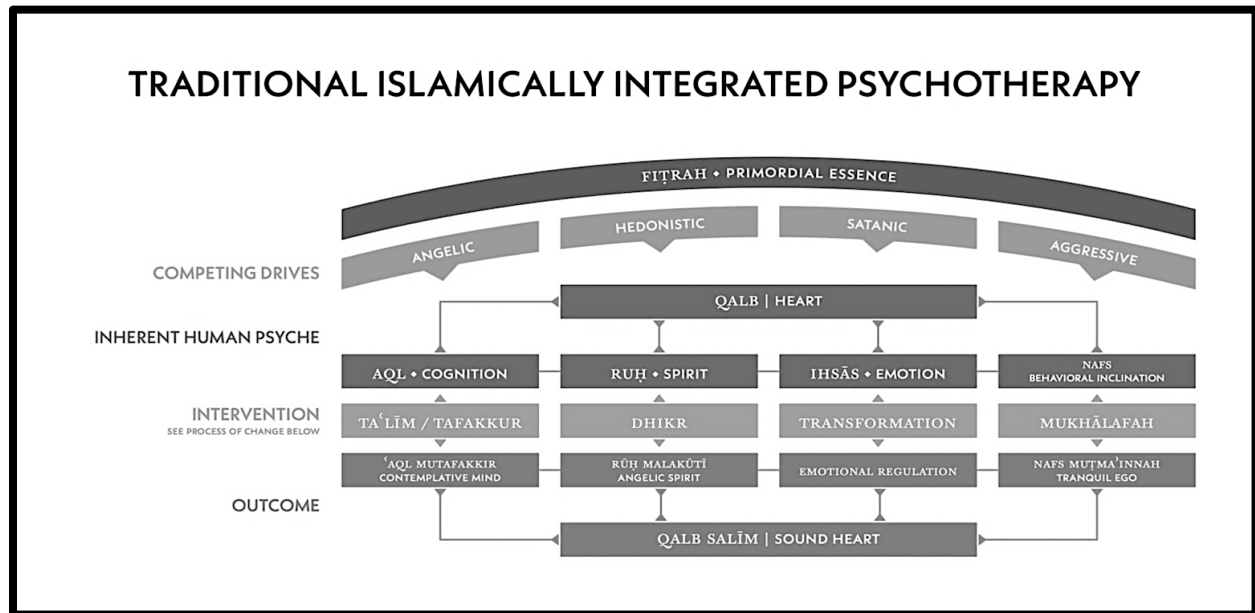


Figure 2

Process of Change within the Traditional Islamically Integrated Psychotherapy

(Reproduced with permission from Khalil Center).

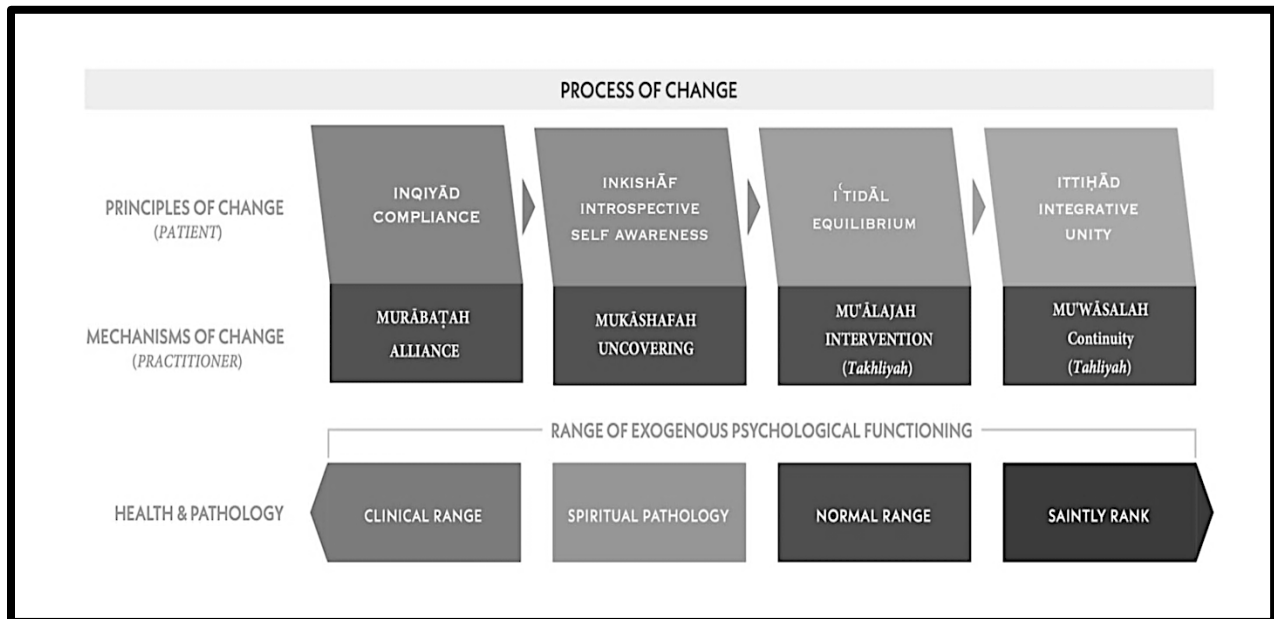


Figure 3

Code Cloud (exported from Dedoose)



Figure 4

Axial Codes and Their Relationships in Qur'ānic Learning and Well-Being Among Women

Axial Codes: Well-Being; Spirituality; Qur'an; Women's Only Environment; Peer support; Education; Women's Identity

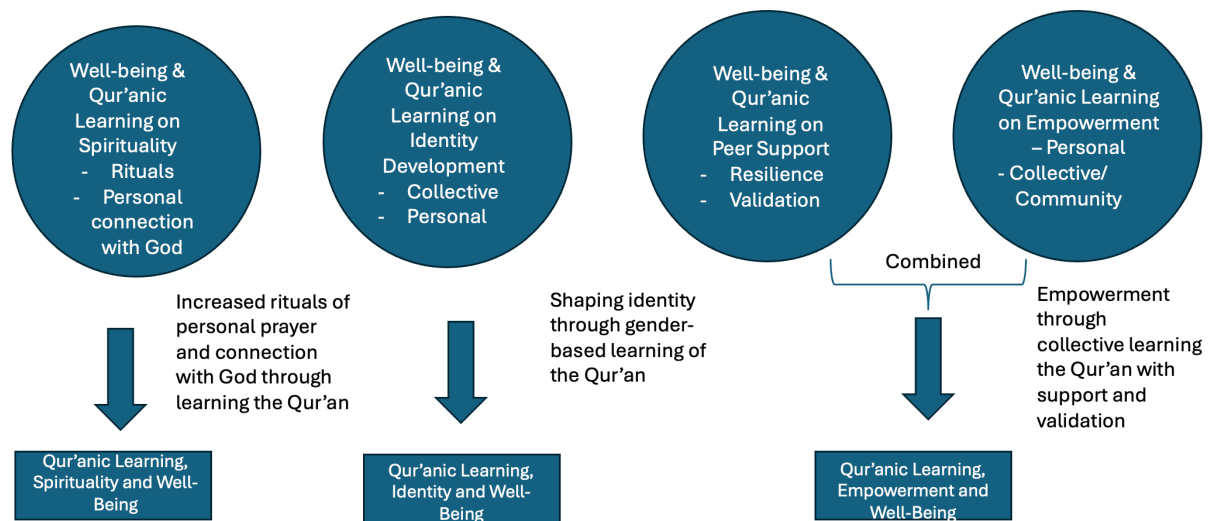


Figure 5

Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model

“I feel at peace” – Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Framework

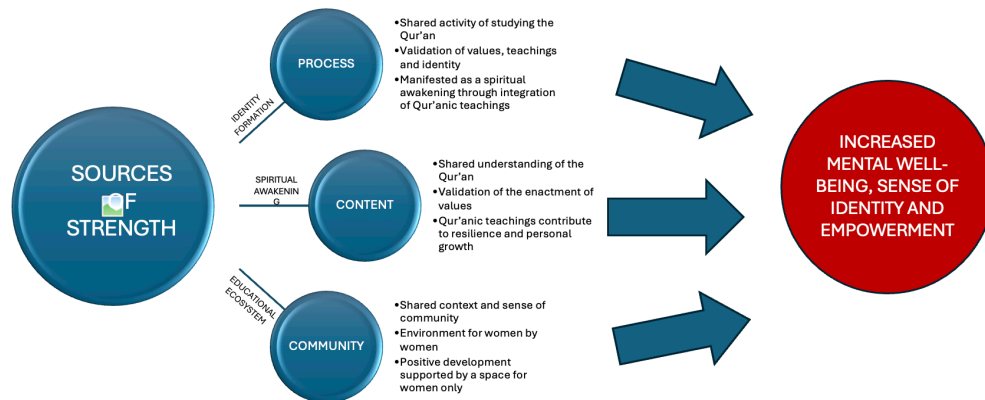


Figure 6

An annotated *mushaf* (A bound copy of the Arabic Qur'ān)

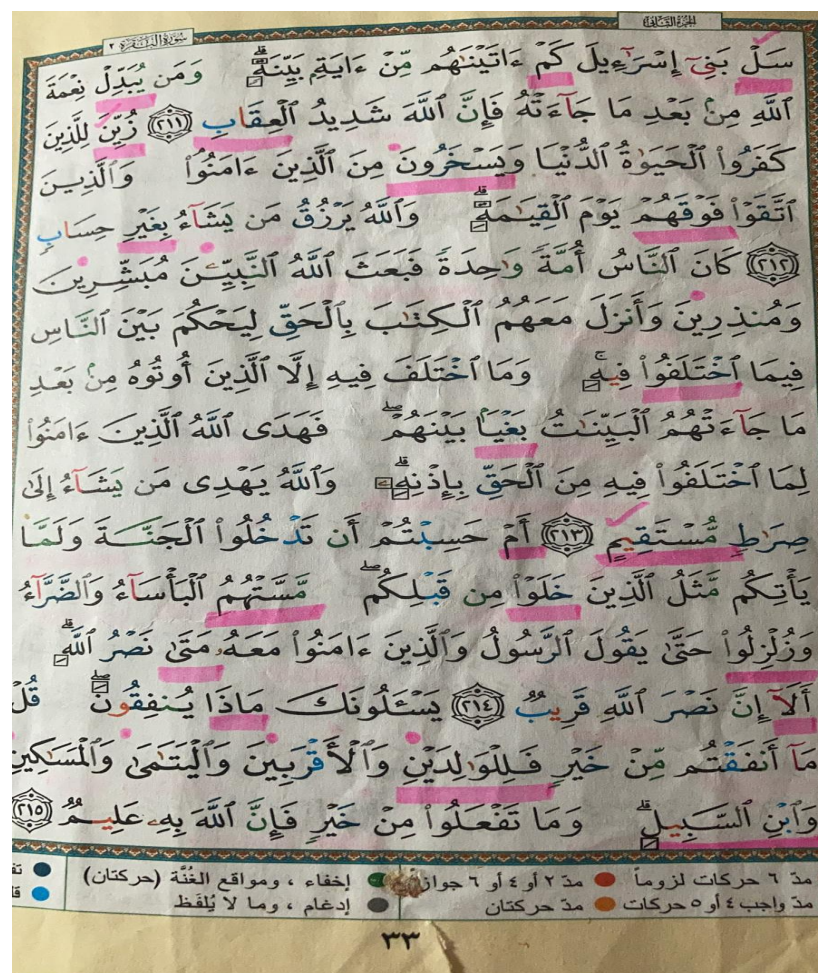


Figure 7

Students sitting on a bench; a representation of sisterhood and importance of collective activity



Figure 8

A student's nature-based reflection on studying the Qur'ān



"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."
--Robert Frost

Figure 9

A student's white uniform hijab



Figure 10

A student's ring gifted from a significant other



Figure 11

A student's handmade bookmark



Figure 12

A student's drawing to conceptualize the impact of the Qur'an on the spiritual heart

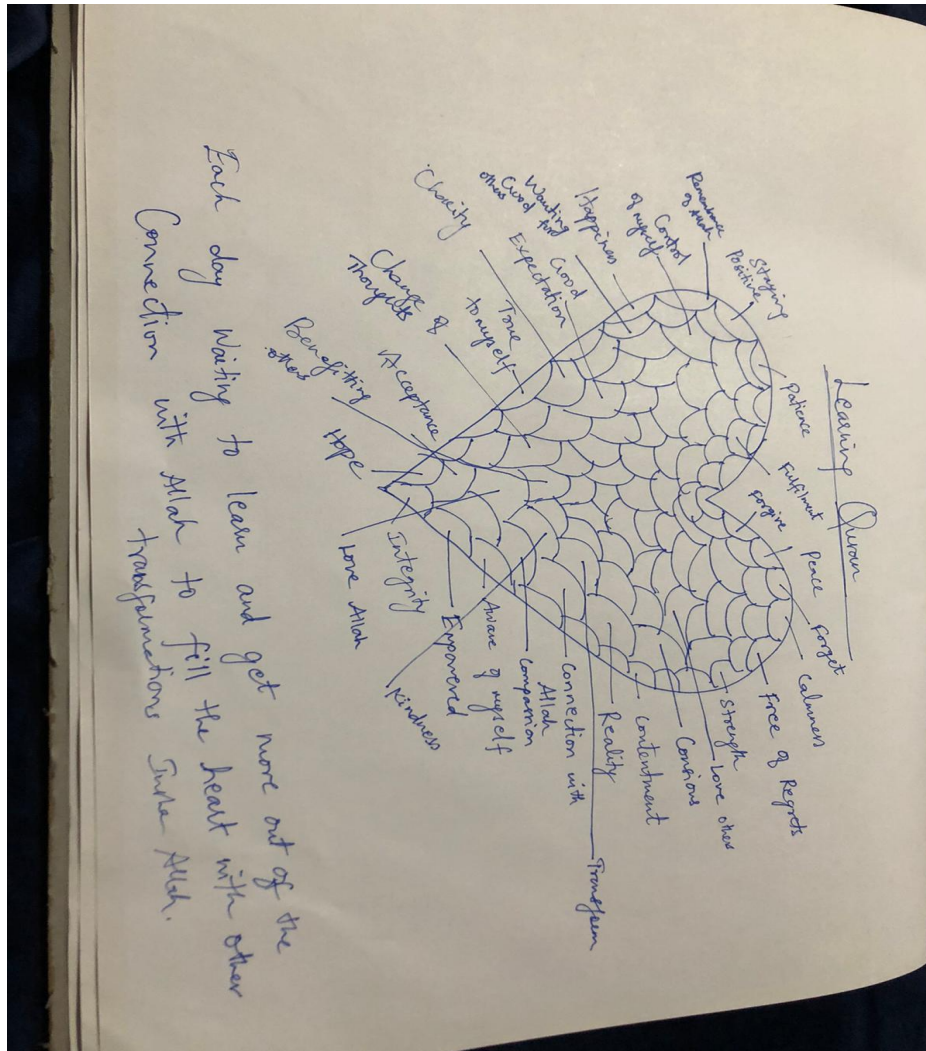


Figure 13

A student's copy of an Al Huda publication dua'a book (We seek help from You)



Figure 14

Mini Library: A student's bookshelf/with course books and other Islamic reading material



Figure 15

A student's diary for reflections on the chapter of the Qur'ān covered

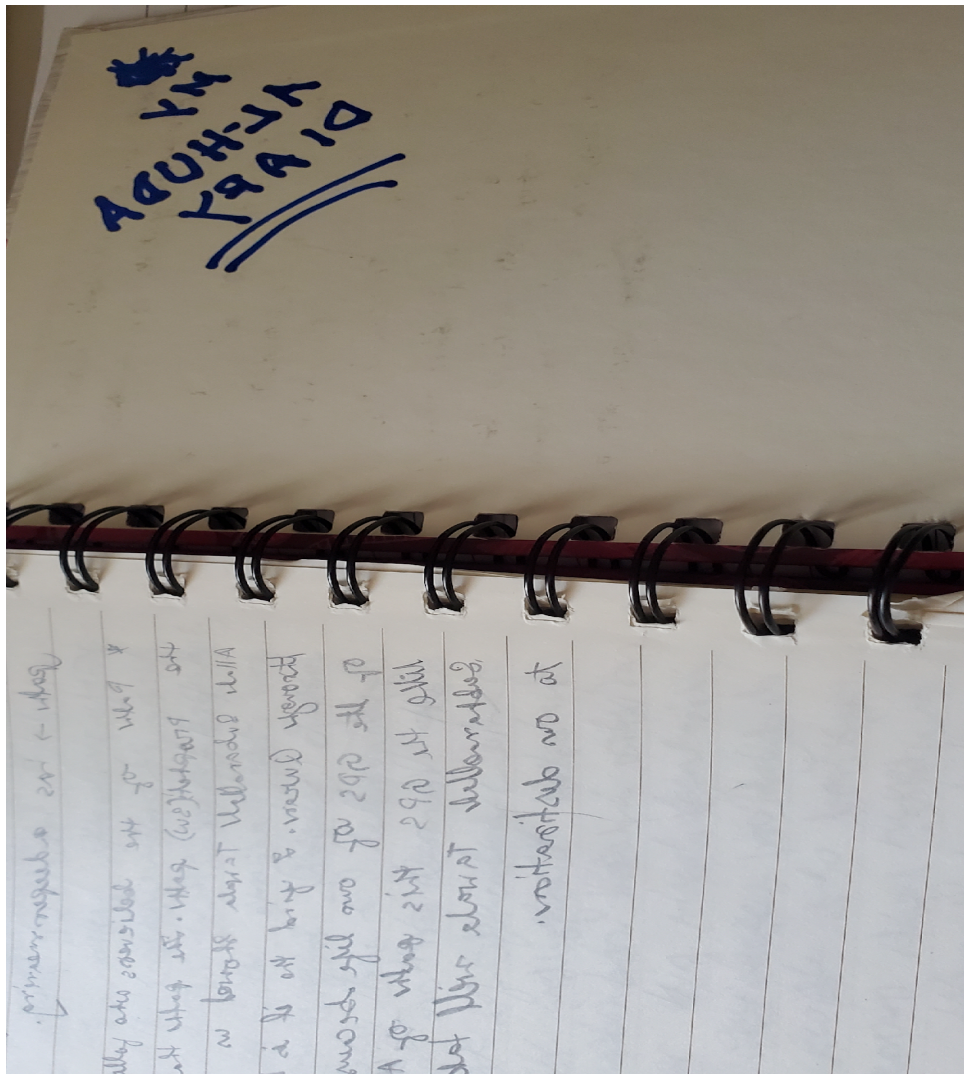


Figure 16

A student's pencil case



Appendix I

Please refer to Dissertation Codebook for a comprehensive breakdown of the following:

1. Open order coding
2. Second order coding
3. Axial coding (categories)
4. Themes
5. Theoretical Coding
6. Emerging Grounded Theories

Appendix II

Holistic Qur'ānic Empowerment Model

Definition: Peace, personal and collective power through Qur'ānic Study and Spiritual

Interpretation: A transformational process of spiritual, emotional and personality dimensions through Qur'ānic study brings about overall well-being.

4 Conceptual Categories

1. Spiritual Awakening:

Definition: A change in us that leads to a deep spiritual awakening.

Example: Go beyond academic study and incorporate Qur'ānic teachings into daily life.

2. Symbolic Integration:

Definition: Emotional connection through symbolism associated with the study of the Qur'ān.

Example: The narrative of the participants that focuses on the emotional significance of personal items.

3. Personal Identity:

Definition: The Qur'ān serving as the anchor shaping the identity of Muslim women.

Example: The impact of Qur'ānic teachings on values, attitudes and resilience.

4. Impact of Educational Environment:

Description: Positive impact of the Al Huda education program on personal and emotional development.

Example: Supportive relationships with teachers and peers as a priority.

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